

Home in a Foreign Land?

Jeremiah 29:1-7

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Church of the New Covenant

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Situation

After first deportation (597 BCE)

- Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, but spared Jerusalem.
- Deported all the leading citizens: King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans – all the ablest and most experienced leaders

Jeremiah writing to exiles ~594

- Well before the disastrous events we read last week
- Zedekiah, puppet king installed by Nebuchadnezzar, influenced by stirrings of nationalists; foolish attempt to assert independence
- Similar rumblings in Babylon fomented by prophets making outlandish promises
 - Their rantings in preceding and succeeding passages
- Jeremiah knew this to be worse than foolish: suicidal, like sneaking up on a lion and poking it with a stick just to hear it roar
- Listen carefully to what he tells them

Seek the welfare of the city

Here are the conditions under which the Israelites are living in Babylon. Although they were not locked in dungeons, they were being held captive. Though they could own homes and run businesses, and though they could raise their families without harassment and even get together for their own forms of worship, they were not free to move about the country, or out of it. Although they could live in that foreign land in relative comfort, the pain in their hearts never abated.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

The people ached for their homeland and for their holy city. Babylon could never be home to them.

So it seems quite odd to be told not to agitate for rebellion, not to spew continual curses upon their enemy. It is puzzling to hear this from Jeremiah, who knows viscerally the depth of their anguish.

He tells them:

Build houses

Plant gardens

Raise families – even to the next generation: multiply there

Do not rebel. Settle in. Don't sit around and mope. Make your home in that foreign land.

How can we do that? These are not our rivers. These are not our mountains. These are not our pastures and fields. These are not our city walls or our streets. These are not our people.

Nevertheless, said Jeremiah, God is asking you to make your home there.

And then Jeremiah instructed them to do one more thing. This was more than odd; it was unconscionable. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." The enemy who had killed so many and destroyed so much of their land; the enemy whose bootheel had crushed their once proud nation and who now heavily oppressed the people of God – "Pray to the Lord on its behalf," said Jeremiah, "for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

I hope all of us are listening closely. As you all know, the ethnic makeup of our surroundings is much different from our own. In a way we, too, are foreigners here. Of course, we are not a conquered, captive people – thank God. We are not forced to be here, in this building, on this hill. We come and go freely. And that's just it: most of us come and go, myself included.

This passage is exerting a powerful pull on my spirit, and, I hope, upon yours. "Make your *home* here. Seek the welfare of this city."

We are being challenged by God's Holy Spirit to build new ways of welcoming and serving our neighbors. We are being called to plant new gardens of ministry that will nourish our neighbors and ourselves. We have been given the task to pray to the Lord on behalf of this city and its surroundings, for in its welfare we will find our welfare.

There are many things we can do. Some opportunities are beginning to take shape, one of which is an exciting possibility for a healthcare ministry on these premises. We are taking steps to go about the streets of this area to get to know who lives here. We are learning better ways to publicize our activities to attract our neighbors. We are conscientiously shaping our worship so that people of many cultures and varied family configurations hear something familiar and welcoming.

All of these efforts are important – vital to be exact. They mean life or death – not just to us, but to the people of our neighborhood. For there is something we possess inside these walls, inside our family of faith, that is vital to the welfare of this city.

The Long Night

In his story “Long Night,” Reynolds Price (from *The Collected Stories*, 1995, adapted) tells about an American architect, traveling in Israel, who has some time on his hands before he has to catch his plane home. He decides to take one more short trip to Bethlehem, where he has been writing a magazine story about the architecture of the Church of the Nativity, built above the cave where it is said the Christ Child was born.

There he sees Kamil, a sort of freelance parking attendant in the streets of the crowded little town. Kamil is mute, but he has helped this traveler – and many, many tourists – find scarce parking spots with a few grunts and “a hand ballet as good as any cop’s.” It is late in the day, so he invites Kamil for a cup of coffee, with a plan to give him his few remaining shekels, the leftover Israeli money the American won’t need back home.

Their silent but companionable time together is interrupted by the arrival of a bus, and Kamil dashes off to find it a place to park. Though it is nearly dusk, at which time the Church of the Nativity would surely close its doors, the traveler gets it into his head to go into it anyway. Here is what happened next.

“The church was open, but the inside was dark and looked utterly empty. I’d walked a good halfway up the nave before I thought I might get locked in. By then I was reckless and pushed ahead. And the farther I went, the darker things got, till, up near the altar, I was feeling the air itself for directions. ... And then the precipitous stairs were at me – slick stone, no railing – and I almost fell [down them].

“The cave, though, was lighted, the usual candles and hanging oil lamps secreting a moist enfolding heat. Still no other human in sight. ...

“I stood there, alone, for maybe ten minutes. Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me.

“[I was afraid it would be an angry monk with flaming eyes, coming to drag me out by the collar.] Instead it was Kamil. ... He came right toward me. He took my hand. Then his face came down; and with lips so dry they scraped my skin, he kissed the heel of my hand by the thumb.

“I thought this was more than a fair return on one cup of coffee. [I then took out my intended] gift and pressed it into his hand and shut his fingers on it.

“He looked down slowly and carefully opened the dingy wad of shekels. ... Then, grinning wide, he folded them back and thrust them into my breast pocket.

‘When I reached into my pocket and tried to insist, Kamil raised a hushing finger to his lips. ‘Please,’ I said, but his eyes went fierce and his dry right hand came up and covered my offensive mouth. Now he’d muted *me*. Then a sudden idea lit in his eyes. The hand came down and he moved past me toward the end of the cave, waving me on like a [tourist] bus. By the time I joined him, he’d shouldered aside a leather curtain and pointed to a low door set in the rock.

“It looked as old as the smoky stone. But closer by, I saw it was wood with and ancient iron latch and lock. ...

“Kamil paused to test the silence. ... Then he fished in his trousers and brought out a key, four inches long, as black as the door and older looking. It turned the lock, and the door crept open at its own slow rate into a blacker space than I have [ever] seen.

“When Kamil took my elbow to guide me, I didn’t resist at first, although the cave was country as strange as the back of Tibet. In three short steps we were in the deep dark, and the door shut behind us.

“We stood there awhile. Kamil kept a strong grip on my arm. ... As long as we waited, maybe two minutes, my eyes never widened enough to find light.

“Then Kamil nudged me forward again and brought my hand down onto something. Dry wood apparently, the edge of something that felt man-made, maybe two feet long. I did not want to feel past the edge to explore. My hand must have stiffened; and still, pitch-dark, in a voice that resembled the grunts he used while directing cars into parking spaces, Kamil said something. Some way, this time, I thought it was a word. I said, ‘Beg your pardon?’

“He waited in place and again repeated what was surely a word, though I still failed to hear it. Then he turned my arm loose and fumbled in his clothes.

“That was when I balked. What in God’s name would come down next? I wouldn’t stay to watch. I turned back toward what I thought was the door.

“But a quick light flared. Kamil had struck a long kitchen match and was holding it out. We were in a walled-off, deeper niche of the same birth cave. It had raw stone walls and a random huddle of junk on the ground. I could make out oil lamps, a stack of icons, and whatever thing I’d just now touched on a shelf at waist level. I walked back toward it.

“It was coated with an even layer of dust except where Kamil and I had disturbed it. But at first I could only think of a boat. It looked like an antique child’s canoe, roughly gouged from a straight tree-trunk and a good deal larger than my hand had guessed.

“The match burned down. Kamil lit a second.

“In the moment of dark between them, I managed to guess this was a model of a manger, something the monks kept hid away for processions upstairs.

“Again he took my hand and thrust it to the scooped-out bottom of the trough. The second match went dead.

“The voice that had made Kamil’s grunts now said a word.

“It sounded like . . . *real*. He had said the word *real*, and he somehow meant this wood trough here. We were back in absolute dark again; and the trough was not glowing or pulsing, nothing my eyes could read as uncanny. But too much was coming at me too fast – this changing man and this awful place, the thick taste of dark and whatever wooden worn old thing my fingers touched. I only knew I must not ask Kamil to speak again. I must leave here now. I tried to slide my hand from his grip.

“Strong as anyone I’d ever known, the man that held me wrung my wrist with a huge warm hand and said again “*Real*” – the same one word, many times through the night.”

Real. Real. Real.

There was something hidden in that place, well beyond what the eye can see or common knowledge can discover. There was something deeply and mysteriously Real, something this traveler had an unexpected and singular opportunity to touch. Something the parking attendant urgently wanted him to know about. The Real.

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Consider this place. This white, cylindrical edifice on the hill. There is something real here, too. Something terribly, wonderfully, powerfully Real. All of us know this secret. God is calling us to bring the next stranger in, and the next, and the next, and take their hands in ours to reach toward what is Real.