

## “Life in Exile”

First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: 1 John 2:15-17**

**Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

Just before entering Seminary to become a pastor, I was in exile, so to speak. I had resigned from my job as Communications Director for a federally funded agency and set off in an uncertain direction. My plan was to develop and present seminars and workshops on spirituality in the workplace.

Along the way, I volunteered for a start-up group called the Forum for Faith in the Workplace. I also enrolled in a non-religious workshop and seminar designed to help people have breakthroughs in life, accessing an inner source of power and inspiration they didn't know they had.

Eventually, I got hired by the company that was offering those workshops and seminars. This meant moving from Columbus to Cincinnati all by myself and working for next to nothing; it wasn't about the money. Because it wasn't about the money, all I could afford was a tiny, one-room apartment with bed, kitchenette and bathroom.

And there I sat, in exile. Far from any family and friends, in a strange city, working 12-hour days, and searching for what God would want for me, how God would use me. I know this was exile because it was a lot like what Bible commentator Andrew W. Blackwood, Jr., wrote in his “Commentary on Jeremiah.” In describing conditions for the Israelites in exile in Babylon, Blackwood says:

“The Hebrews were settled in little communities on the fringe of the great city, presumably not on the best land.” (Check – I was in a shabby suburb of Cincinnati.) “Probably,” says Blackwood, “their first houses were miserable hovels.” (Check and double check.) “Probably they who had been masters in Jerusalem had to work with spade and hoe, repairing the irrigation ditches and planting their pathetic gardens.” (Yup, a similar transition for me – from manager of the Communications staff to lowest possible man on the organizational chart, from federally-funded agency to a bootstrap company that paid next to nothing). Blackwood continues, “The worst hardship – for many exiles was the physical separation from the Temple and all that they had known of spiritual life in Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, I certainly felt adrift spiritually during those days, and weeks and months.

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<sup>1</sup> Blackwood, Andrew W., Jr., *Commentary on Jeremiah*, (Word Books, Publisher, Waco, Texas, 1977), 204.

What's a person to do when it feels like your whole world has been pulled out from under you? That was a tough question to face for the Israelites being held captive in Babylon. It was a tough question to face for the Israelites who got to stay in Jerusalem, a captured city that had fallen to the pagan armies of Babylon. And it's a tough question to face for anyone – any of you – who has ever felt like your life was just taken over by cancer, job insecurity, an abusive relationship, a marriage that isn't working, a schoolyard or online bully, a brother or sister who undermines your best efforts.

How do we live under such conditions? How do we live in exile? In today's Old Testament lesson, the Israelites in Babylon are struggling with this question. Some did not want to hear what Jeremiah had to say. In fact, there was a certain exile named Shemaiah who started a war of letter, going back and forth between Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Shemaiah in Babylon.

Jeremiah wanted the Israelites in both Jerusalem and Babylon to get along with the Babylonians. But Shemaiah wasn't having it. According to Blackwood, Shemaiah sent a letter saying that Jeremiah should be locked up (quote) "like any other madman who dared to prophesy falsely in God's name."<sup>2</sup> Who to listen to? Jeremiah or Shemaiah? One is a prophet of God and the other is not, the other is a false prophet foolishly leading God's people astray. But which one? Who do you follow?

Not an easy question to struggle with, not a simple decision to make. Life is not simple, is it? We are faced with tough questions all the time. Fight the cancer with chemo or let nature take its course, find another job or stick it out, end the friendship or continue trying, divorce or stay the course, tattle on the bully or suck it up, write off a family member or swallow your pride, and for the Israelites, live under pagan rule or risk certain death in a brave and ill-fated revolt.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to do nothing, to make the best of it, to accept a new normal, keep the faith – day by day – and just do the next right thing. And yet, sometimes that's just what God would have us do. We know that our lives are sometimes out of whack, that things just aren't working, that someone or something is fighting our best efforts, that we're not where we're supposed to be.

When the Israelites were in that uncomfortable position, Jeremiah – speaking on God's behalf – told them to make the best of it. Jeremiah told them to not throw away their lives on principle. He told them to build (houses), plant (gardens) and eat what they grow.

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<sup>2</sup> Blackwood, 208-9.

He told them to get on with life – having sons and daughters, and let their children marry and have their own children. Jeremiah is taking the long view of things, a generational view that foresees the Israelites' future as God's faithful people for eons to come, no matter what today looks like.

Imagine, you're living in a shack on some dusty patch of ground, surrounded by heathens, and God tells you to make the best of it. Uhg. And yet, that's often just what God would have us do, assuring us that whatever the struggle is, things will get better, with the Lord's help.

Of course, the only way to gain the Lord's help is to turn that struggle over to the Lord. Place that cancer, that crappy job, that disappointing friendship, lifeless marriage, classroom bully or do-nothing sibling – or whatever it is that knocks you off your feet – just place that in God's hands, lay it at the feet of Jesus, entrust it to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever we are faced with insurmountable odds, this is the course God would choose for us. You know why? Because the struggle is insurmountable, because we can't win. All we can do is persevere and make the best of it. In such situations, God wants you to make the best of it because that is the only way God can make the best of it. God is here for you, ready to come alongside you, raise you up and bring you from today's dead end to tomorrow's blessed future.

As you know, I went on to become a pastor after my time of exile. Turns out my exile was a time of transition. And boy, it's not easy being in transition, letting go of what is in order to embrace what will be. But that is part of life. Everyone is in some transition or another almost all the time. Seldom are we happily planted where we're meant to be. There's always something new coming around the bend.

The way to prepare for that new thing is to continue investing your time and energy, your heart and soul into making the world a better place, wherever you find yourself, and don't let (today's) struggles side track you, on the way to tomorrow's blessings. In other words, don't pull away from your faith, from your church, and certainly not from God.

If the Israelites had resisted the Babylonians, they would have been wiped off the face of the earth. If I had given up on my faith and stayed in Cincinnati, I would not be a preacher today.

And you know this. You've all had to endure terrible situations where all you could do was wait it out and keep things moving as best you could. At times like that, rest assured, waiting it out and keeping things moving is sometimes the most faithful thing we can do.

Those who trust in the Lord and pledge their lives to God – we live in a different reality than those who don't. Those who don't truly have nowhere to turn, no promise to cling to. But we have God to turn to and God's promise to cling to. The reassurance God gave to Jeremiah for the Israelites was that they should multiply and be fruitful. God was reminding them – and us – of his promise to Abraham, that Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants – us included – will live forever in the favor of God, the blessing of the Lord.

And so we do. Regardless of what struggle you have or what setback you encounter, God has not and will not abandon you. God continues to bless you, even in the midst of your struggles. God takes our faithful actions, our spirit-filled hearts, our divine and godly intentions and uses them to bless our lives – your life – and through you bless the lives of others. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious God, you have enriched and enlightened us by the revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Comfort us in our mortality and strengthen us to walk the path of your desire, so that by word and deed we may show forth the gracious news of your faithfulness and love.

Holy Father, Father of Christ who asked the disciples, "What are you looking for," and who offered the invitation to "Come and See," open our hearts to what you reveal, and give us the courage to follow.

And for those who are suffering, O God, let us point to Christ through expressions of comfort.

For those who are hungry, let us point to Christ through the provision of bread for all.

For those in the grip of despair, let us point to Christ through the eternal hope of your Spirit.

Almighty God, whose Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, is the Light of the World: Grant that your people may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped and obeyed to the ends of the earth.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, as we continue to pray saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**