

Wesley United Methodist Church
September 22, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Title: Build Houses

Between this week and last week, at least on the surface, Jeremiah seems focused on real estate. Last week, he was purchasing a field as a sign of hope, even though he was in prison and didn't know if he would ever be free again. This week, a couple of chapters earlier in the book, he is telling people to build houses, plant gardens, get married and have children. There is a big difference though.

Israel was under attack by Babylon and residents of Jerusalem had been sent into exile in Babylonia. Families were separated and people were frantic wanting to know when they would be able to return to their home. Hananiah and some other prophets told them not to worry that they would be back home within two years. In reality, it would be closer to 70 years before people would be allowed to return to their homeland.

The field that Jeremiah purchased was in Israel and was an image of hope that one day people would once again live on their own land in their own country. But his letter telling people to build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children was not that same kind of hope. He was writing to people who were already in exile, already living far from their home, and he was telling them to settle down, build their houses, plant their gardens, get married and have children in the land belonging to their enemy – not their homeland.

As if to add insult to injury, he was also telling them to promote the welfare of the city where they were living and to pray to the Lord for it because their future depended upon its welfare. This was definitely not a

message that these people being forced to live there wanted to hear. They probably wanted to fight against Babylon, resist in whatever way they could, and do everything they could to get back home.

In many respects this is like the “bloom where you are planted” approach. The message from God is not to simply exist, put their lives on hold and wait for the time when they could return. Instead they were being told to live fully during the forced exile. They could not have known it at the time, but this forced exile would help create the spread of Israelites far and wide as they grew and prospered right where they found themselves.ⁱ Indeed, when they were finally able to return to their homeland, many people decided to stay right where they were and to live in what had become a new homeland for some of them.

Unless we are Native Americans, our ancestors left their homelands at some point to move to this country. For most of us, that emigration was likely voluntary although there were likely a variety of reasons for that. Some may have come seeking a “better life” or different opportunities. Others may have come because family members were already living here.

Most of us have not been driven from our homelands by violence and forced to live in the land of those who drove us out as the Israelites were. However there are many people who still come to this country (or others) to escape violence in their own country.

One of our Methodist Churches in Portland Maine is very involved with people who have come to the states seeking asylum. They have dealt with large numbers of refugees from Somalia; people who have been forced from their homes by fighting between government factions, drought and poverty. They also connect with refugees from Berundi and other places. Some of these people are professionals who are not initially

allowed to work here. Hope Gate Way has a home where some live during this time. While waiting for their cases to be heard and the legal process to work its way through, they are taught about American customs, and how to navigate the legal asylum and immigration process.

Our country is full of people who have come here as immigrants, who had to learn the language, customs, and how to navigate our culture. For many the progress is slow but if we look around, we find new businesses that prosper, people becoming vital contributing members of our society and often becoming citizens of their adopted country. I have the privilege of being the mentor for a Korean woman who is pastoring one of the churches in our district. This summer, she and her husband, who is also a pastor, were finally able to become citizens.

It was notable that the stage at the last Democratic presidential debate was filled with people who represented an ethnic diversity. Regardless of what we might think about any particular one of them, they are examples of Jeremiah's message that they should seek the prosperity of the country where they find themselves living, and that they would find their welfare and prosperity in the welfare of our country.

As I said, most of us have not been forced to leave our country and move to a new one because of violence, but still there are times when we may find ourselves in a symbolic exile. We may find ourselves living estranged from family members or "deported from good health into a foreign land of illness and pain."ⁱⁱ

We may find ourselves in what seems like a strange country when we lose a job, or experience the death of someone we love, or retire from a lifetime of employment. We find ourselves at loose ends, not knowing how to navigate this new place where we find ourselves living. We may find

ourselves dealing with changes in our financial security and in our relationships. We may find ourselves trying to figure out who we are in this new reality or trying to find meaning and purpose in our new lives.

The good news during these times is that we are not alone. Even in what feels like exile, God is with us even in the middle of our anxiety, loneliness, confusion or worry.

This week, my granddaughter recommended a book called, “Walking with Miss Millie”. It is designed primarily for middle school students, but I heard echoes of Jeremiah. An elderly woman – Miss Millie – is trying to comfort the young girl in the story – a girl named Alice. Alice has just come to understand that her father will never be coming back and that she will be living in a town where she really doesn’t want to be. ⁱⁱⁱ

Miss Millie says to her, “Alice-girl, ya know one thing I learned with all my disappointment and loss? I learned it’s okay to get mad. It’s okay to get sad, but after all that getting’ mad and sad, ya gotta get smart. Ya gotta take a step back, away from all your hurtin’ and figure out what ya can change and what ya can’t. ... We’re all in this great big world just bumpin’ around each other trying to do the best we can.”

Miss Millie at 90+ years of life has been through a lot and has learned a lot. She has persevered despite some pretty horrible things happening in her life and her advice to young Alice is good, as far as it goes. When we find ourselves in this strange land of exile, it is okay to get sad, or get mad, but as she says, then we have to get smart, take a step back and identify what we can change and what we can’t and then go on from there.

Like Jeremiah’s word to the exiles, we cannot put our lives on hold. We cannot spend all our energy wishing that things were different. But while we are getting smart and figuring out what we can change and what

we can't, there is one place where Miss Millie's advice stopped short. We can remember that we are not alone and that God is with us. While we are trying to find meaning and purpose in our new reality, God walks with us helping us.

Because of this we can find hope even in the most difficult times of life. We can figuratively build houses, plant gardens, and know that our ability to do that – our ability to live in the new reality will make a difference not only in our lives, but in the lives of others.

Yvonne Dilling is a Roman Catholic sister, and an American Human Rights worker in Central America. She is a founding member of Witness for Peace. In 1992, when she was in her 20's, she spent an afternoon crossing the Rio Lempa under fire of Salvadoran army helicopters. She was ferrying on her back Salvadoran infants fleeing with their parents to Honduras. She then joined the refugees as a Caritas worker for 18 months at Mesa Grande, a U.N. protected camp in Honduras.^{iv}

She tells the story that the refugees immediately began to build a camp. "The first task was to form three committees: a construction committee, an education committee and the "comite de alegria" – the committee of joy. Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read. Even in exile, they remembered to build and plant – and to dance."^v

Jeremiah's message to the exiles probably didn't seem like a message of hope to them at the time, but when we dig deeper, it really is a message of hope. The sad reality was that they were not going to be allowed to return to their homeland for many many years, but they did not need to put their lives on hold. They did not need to just wait it out, wishing that things would be different.

Instead, even in the land of exile, even in a place they didn't want to be, they could flourish. They could build houses. They could plant gardens and eat the crops that they produced. They could fall in love and get married and have children. They could live life to its fullest.

For them and for us, "Our experience of faith in the midst of despair is just as important as in the midst of joy."^{vi} Jeremiah's message to the exiles begs them to trust that God will deliver them from exile and to persist with life as an act of faith, even when they are strangers in a strange land.^{vii}

The Upper Room Disciplines sums it up this way. "Jeremiah speaks of God's desire for exiles to flourish even in the most confusing and alien of circumstances. We, who have been sustained during times of exile and have been surprised by gifts of support when we were overwhelmed by pain or loneliness, are called to nurture others torn from their refuges of safety. God bids us to offer abundant hospitality even when that assistance is costly for us, even when it is unpopular or misunderstood. Our brothers and sisters ministered to us with God's comfort when we lived in exile. Can we do less?"^{viii}

ⁱ McFee, Marcia, Worship Design Studio, notes from "Prophecies & Pottery: Journey with Jeremiah"

ⁱⁱ Upper Room Disciplines 2019, October 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bundy, Tamara. "Walking with Miss Millie". Pp 191-2

^{iv} National Catholic Reporter. April 14, 2000. http://www.seniorreligion.com/new_page_255.htm

^v Hollyday, Joyce. "A Joyful Noise" in Sojourner's Preaching the Word. Hollyday tells this story from Dilling.

^{vi} Bruzzese, Michaela "Led to Refreshment" in Sojourner's Preaching the Word

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Upper Room Disciplines 2019, October 8.