

“SEEK THE WELL-BEING OF THE CITY”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, October 14, 2007
Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC*

Text: Jeremiah 29:1-7

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¹These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There is something important you need to know about me, especially at this time of year. I am a lifelong baseball fan. Growing up in Springfield, Massachusetts, I wasn't much of a baseball player; but I can remember the joy of going to Pynchon Park to watch the minor league Springfield Giants. I can remember the thrill of going to Fenway Park in Boston to watch the Red Sox play. Having grown up in New England, I am by birth and persuasion a lifelong citizen of Red Sox Nation.

The Boston Red Sox are defined not only as the team currently playing in the ALCS, but also through a narrative that reaches back to 1918, the end of World War I. A central strand in that narrative is the time of 86 years between World Series championships, from 1918 to 2004. Given that narrative, that history, we Red Sox fans are possessed of a kind of original sin: we live with a congenital fear that disaster is always lurking around the corner. Last night's, or should I say this morning's, extra-inning loss to Cleveland in Game 2 of the ALCS is a case in point. To adapt a theological term, the narrative of Red Sox Nation is the story of God's **not**-chosen people.

As with baseball, so also with the Bible. Our sense of identity and vocation as Christians, as followers of Jesus and members of the discipleship community of equals, is shaped in profound ways by narrative, by story-telling and story-hearing. The overarching narrative of the Bible is the story of a chosen and covenanted people. This overarching narrative is woven from three strands of story, what Marcus Borg and others have called the "macro-stories" or the "meta-narratives" of scripture.

These macro-stories or meta-narratives are: the story of the Exodus, the story of the Exile, and the story of Jesus. This morning's reading from Jeremiah is from the context of the Exile narrative. It also happens to be one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday, which turns out to be quite fitting for the beginning of our interim journey together.

In the grand sweep of human history—marked as it is by human sin—individuals as well as entire peoples have time and again been forced to live in exile. Think of the two million Iraqis who have been forced to flee their country because of the devastation caused by our country's invasion and occupation of Iraq. These two million refugees are living in exile, most of them in Jordan and Syria.

The meta-narrative of what we know as the Babylonian Exile or the Babylonian Captivity stretched over more than half a century in the sixth century BCE. During this period, following the conquest of Judah by the Babylonian military under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, many of the inhabitants of Judah were forcibly resettled in Babylon, which was located about 80 km south of what is now Baghdad. Those who remained in

Judah (Jeremiah among them) lived under the firm yoke of an occupation force.

Not long after the first deportation, “there was a measure of political unrest in Babylon that may have encouraged premature expectations of a return”¹ among those who had been living in exile for only a few years. Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles to discourage those expectations and to encourage a different attitude toward the experience of exile. Acting as God’s “press secretary,” he wrote:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the well-being of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its well-being you will find your well-being.²

What is unusual about the biblical narrative of exile is its theological interpretation. Typically, exile is caused by human conditions such as conflict or injustice. In the biblical narrative, however, it is God who causes the exile of God’s chosen people. We may say that the proximate cause of the exile was the military might of Babylon. But in Jeremiah’s theological reflection, it is God who is the ultimate cause of the exile.

The same God who had liberated the slaves from oppression in Egypt, who had been present with them throughout the forty years in the wilderness, who had brought them into the Promised Land, had now taken the descendants of those liberated slaves from the Promised Land and resettled them in a ghetto by the rivers of Babylon, where they sat down and wept (Psalm 137:1). To some, this must have seemed as if God had violated the terms of God’s covenant that they and their descendants would always live in the land flowing with milk and honey.

The time of exile—which lasted longer than the forty years of wandering in the wilderness—wasn’t the best of times, but it wasn’t the worst of times either. The Jewish ghetto in Babylon became a kind of immigrant neighborhood. In the midst of dislocation, Jews in Babylon were permitted to practice their religion, and they developed their own networks of homes and gardens and shops and social services.

We can get a feeling for what this exile might have been like by reading some of the “exile literature” that has been written in our time.

¹ Robert Clements, *Jeremiah. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) p. 170.

² Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NRSV, adapted). The Hebrew word rendered in English by “well-being” is *shalom*.

One of the best-known authors of exile is Isabel Allende, both in her novels and in her memoirs. As a niece of former Chilean president Salvador Allende, Isabel Allende left her native Chile after the military coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet. What I have learned from reading Isabel Allende's memoir *Paula* is that exile is "not only the political condition of being forced from one's homeland," but also a "social, cultural, [emotional, and spiritual displacement] or dislocation."³ In this kind of context, "works of exile literature often seek to create a sense of identity out of [this] feeling of displacement" and dislocation.⁴

From conversations I've had with some of you recently, it's my sense that both the narrative and the metaphor of exile resonate with the current experience of this congregation. Though your physical displacement has been only a few city blocks, and the time of your worship service has changed by only a few hours, these changes have created for you a strong sense of emotional and spiritual displacement. Not only have you lost your pastors John and Barbara through their retirement, and your music director Patrick through his resignation, you've lost your home as well. Any one of these losses would loom large in the life of a congregation; taken together, they can easily create a sense of emotional and spiritual exile.

There are, of course, significant ways in which your experience of dislocation is quite different from that of the recipients of Jeremiah's letter. For one thing, you've chosen to make this move—it hasn't been forcibly imposed on you. For another thing, this time of exile is projected to last only a couple of years. But regardless of how long this time of transition may last, Jeremiah's pastoral letter will continue to speak to you, much as it spoke to the Jews living in exile in Babylon more than two and one-half millennia ago. As much as you are able, Jeremiah counsels, live as you would live as if you were still at home. Live as ordinary a life as possible.

From what I've been told so far, this is pretty much what you've been doing since your move from 10th and G to 4th and E. Your leaders, both staff and members, have given you continuity and confidence as you've waited for an interim pastor to arrive and help guide you through this time of transition. I'm also aware that the arrival of your interim pastor has led to a few sighs of relief—at least on the part of the transition team! In any event, I think we all are grateful and appreciative for the ministries of the leaders of this congregation these past few months.

Not only did Jeremiah counsel the exiles to live as ordinary a life as possible during their time of displacement and dislocation. He also exhorted them to seek the well-being of the city where God had sent them

³ Emily C. Brady, "Identity and Exile in Isabel Allende's Trilogy" (English Honors Thesis, Boston College, 2004). Accessed online at <http://dissertations.bc.edu/ashonors/200404/> on October 13, 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

into exile, and to pray to God on behalf of the city, for in its well-being they would find their well-being. I know that you as a congregation have been taking Jeremiah's counsel to heart long before you moved to First Trinity Lutheran. I know this is one of the reasons you have chosen to remain in the city rather than move to the suburbs—as did your forebears in this congregation in the 1950's.

From a theological point of view, we can say that this time of dislocation and displacement, this time of exile if you will, is not something that God has caused. This time of transition is the result of your intention to remain faithful to the calling to which God has called you. And God's intention for you is that this time of transition will be rich in possibility and opportunity. It will be a time for discernment, a time for holy conversations among ourselves. It will be a time for hearing in and through these holy conversations how God is calling us to seek the well-being of this city in the twenty-first century.