

The Rock: 12-27-2020

First reading: Hebrews 11:13-16

Title: A letter to the exiles

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1-9

Theme:

How are we to live in a world that is increasing in hostility toward the Church and the things of God?

Jeremiah has a lot to say about that for us by way of application, as we understand the exile of the people of Israel. We will always find, that Israel's story is our story.

Introduction:

As we come to the end of 2020, many are thankful to see this first year of a new decade depart from us. Be gone, and haunt me no longer, as Scrooge would like to say.

But perspective being everything, what did we learn this past year? How has God been moving in your heart, your family and your personal growth?

I personally have been challenged more this year than ever, and some days I am glad and see that I am growing, and others, well, I wonder if I know Jesus at all.

But grace is awesome and the Bible is and has been the settling place for me and I pray for you and for us as a community of believers.

Life is not always what we want it to be, but I have found that it will always be what we need. Most especially if we look to find God in all that is happening.

When all that is normal and steady and comfortable is taken away, how do we respond? The Church in this world has a primary role to play in the continuing story of God in His world.

The need to truly understand the Church's (Big C) task in time, and her priorities as has been given them in our local communities (Little C), and then how to stay focused and joyful in "exile".

The Story:

As unsettling as it can be for us to read, I think one of the most important statements Jeremiah writes in chapter 29, is the header right at the beginning of his letter:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:"

-Jeremiah 29:4 ESV

What? God put them into exile? But I thought they were His people, and that they were supposed to be the head of nations and not the tail.

I thought they were God's chosen? Why then would He send them away? I think that the prior chapter is very telling.

You see Hananiah the "prophet" was telling the people what they wanted to hear, not what they needed.

They were God's people, and because of that God would never let a pagan king or kingdom to have victory over them. Say nothing of taking them from their homes and into exile.

Afterall, it was the promised land -and He was their God.

"In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says

the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, declares the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon."

-Jeremiah 28:1-4 ESV

Declaring in front of Jeremiah and the kings court false hopes, most especially for those already living in exile. In essence, accusing Jeremiah of lying, even though what Jeremiah had said already partially come to pass:

"This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste."

-Jeremiah 25:11-12 ESV

Quite the downer isn't it? We want happy things said to us and victorious things

prophesied to us. This was and is why God's people find themselves so ill prepared when things go wrong.

For whenever God's people find or have found themselves being "pushed to the side", or persecuted, there was and still is always, an ear-tickler.

Someone who in that triumphalist way tells the people - "God will deliver you, simply because you are His people."

Never looking at, or speaking of the purposefulness of an exile. You see, the people of Israel were not living as they should have. They exchanged the God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt, for idols and their own self-gratifying ways.

Constantly ignoring the true prophets sent by God, who then told them to repent or exile would happen. So much for the unloving and mean God.

No, what we always find, if we read it for what it actually says, is a loving Father who wants His children to be all they are supposed to be for the glory of His name and the edification of God's people.

That ultimately impacts the world around us, but I am getting ahead of myself. Part of what is hard to read here in Jeremiah, especially chapter 25, is that

God allows nations and people who are more wicked, to be used as His instruments for punishment.

Read Jonah, read Habakkuk and others. This was their prime complaint. We know we are bad, but you are going to use someone worse than us to chastise us?

But, when we really look at our Bibles, we find that it is always punishment which is purposeful. God in His love, justice, and mercy always seeks restoration.

But never before His people learn to worship Him and Him alone, correctly.

Well, how is that to be? What does it look like? Well, I'm glad you asked because God had Jeremiah write to His people already in exile.

A fact we really can't overlook in light of Hananiah denying this very truth as he claims God won't do this and people will be home very soon.

I leave that for us all to ponder in looking at our present time and world. For far too often, in spite of the facts, we push on and believe whatever we want...

So, I believe we need to, for us, frame things out around three principles. I've circled my thoughts around them and

that's where we're going to spend the rest of our time this morning.

1-Be salt and light

2-Be the best citizens you can be

3-Preach the Gospel

Each one in turn, so here we go:

1-Being salt and light

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their 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."

-Jeremiah 29:5-6 ESV

We really need to learn to balance this one. Being salt and light in our world can quickly become: "Be ye separate and come out from among them."

I would add to that: "Be the biggest judgmental jerk you can along the way also."

Separating in such a way that we have no real impact on those around us, and among whom God has actually set us down.

Fearful of being contaminated by the world -we really have nothing to do with it or those who live there.

That "salt and light", becomes judge of everything wrong as compared to your or my "everything right."

BUT -at the same time, we have to be very careful not to overcompensate the other way. Salt and light need to be right in the thick of it all to make any difference.

That is so very true. But, if we get to the place where we compromise the truth of God's word for the sake of not offending, we have lost our saltiness and our light. In other words, Jesus tells us we have lost our usefulness.

It is actually one of the reasons why the church is not taken seriously and why she lacks the power and authority God gave her on the day of Pentecost.

She has become, in many places, no different than those around her. The gospel has been watered down enough so as to not offend the unbeliever, and sadly at the same time, it has become useless to disciple the believer.

It becomes nothing more than a self-help book and a bunch of suggestions on your way to a better you.

The main thrust of the Gospel is that Jesus came to die for me, because the "better me" is at best still just a man fumbling his way along in this world. A sinner saved by grace.

What, or rather who we need, is Jesus. Learning to attach ourselves to Him alone focuses us correctly. Then we understand He is actually calling us to live faithfully present within the culture He sets us down.

Settle down, Jeremiah says. Be faithful, be present. How? Buy homes, plant gardens, marry and give in marriage. Be salt and light. Don't be absorbed by the culture, but subvert it from within, by how you live.

2-Be the best citizens you can be

"But 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."

-Jeremiah 29:7 ESV

Listen, God has never called us to be disobedient, complaining, trouble-makers. No matter what or how our prideful ways and inclinations may tell us.

No, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." Don't condemn

it, destroy it, or simply not care about it,

Why? Because its welfare, affects your welfare! Look, our first reading from Hebrews reminds us that we are aliens and strangers, just as those from the great list of the faithful:

"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."

-Hebrews 11:13 ESV

But that doesn't mean we stop living faithfully present within, just because we don't like the culture or the leaders. Our focus is to always be upward. So that when our gaze turns outward, we see things as we ought.

This upward adoration ought always to lead us to act outwardly -for His glory and for the benefit of others. But never by compromising the truths of God's word.

When we are called to seek the welfare of our city, to submit to those in authority, it is never to cause us to violate God's law.

Neither, however, is it to be done when we feel or have a dislike /opinion

against a decision. So long as directions come which do not violate God's law and commands, being a good citizen means we submit and comply with the governing authorities.

That is not weak, that is not compromise. It is Biblical. Jesus, Paul, Peter and others spoke of these things while being governed by some of the worst tyrants this world has seen.

I am sure Joseph and Mary were less than pleased with the government decree that they needed to be counted.

For many reasons, the least of which was a 90-mile journey south on a donkey while very pregnant. Even then the Government didn't care much about your comfort. But they did it!

Exiles and strangers...Obedient in the here and now, all the while looking to the horizon for their soon and coming King.

Knowing as Paul tells us in Romans:

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."

-Romans 13:1-2 ESV

So, (and we need to be clear on this point) because it didn't violate God's law, as much of an inconvenience as it was for them, they went south.

We are called to be the best citizens possible because we are the reflection of Jesus in this world. People who don't know Him see Him in our behavior, our attitude, our respect or disrespect for authority, as well as how we navigate adversity.

Seek the welfare of the city where I set you down. Because it directly impacts you! We are to be salt and light, we are called to be the best citizens possible, and finally, we are to stay on task!

3-Preach the Gospel

"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord."

-Jeremiah 29:8-9 ESV

Pay attention and focus on the right things.

The Church was not and has never been called to attach herself to worldly institutions or political agendas. Or even to the speculation of the things to come.

Now-that does not mean that these things don't matter. I think we have sufficiently showed this morning that we must be involved. However, these are never to be primary focus for the Church.

So, to be clear, the CHURCH is not to attach herself to political agendas as if God has a special person, party or country.

But Christians are to be involved in politics because politics create policy, policy affects people and its people who matter to God.

These things ought to be the outworking of our prime directive here in this world.

A reminder from Jesus Himself here is very helpful:

"So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (*A lot in that question: politics, power, prophesy*) He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

-Acts 1:6-8 ESV

Preach the Gospel. Inherent in that is being salt and light as well as being the best citizens possible. Our main reason for being is to testify, through our lives, our words, and our actions to what Jesus has done and who He is.

Paul the Apostle:

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

-Acts 20:24 ESV

When our focus is wrong, we become unsettled in this world. Events and speculation on the day, the hour, if not firmly rooted in the truth and the clarity of the Bible, cause us all to become very unsettled.

Remember -the main things are the plain things. That means the plain things are the main things. We are not meant to know

everything! Some things will simply be a mystery and God intends it to be that way. But He has given us what we need.

When we truly understand our fundamental task in time -Light, salt, best citizens, witnessing the Gospel, we find our faith strengthened rather than shaken.

Our joy becomes complete. Being in exile, like the people of Israel is always purposeful. Frankly, no matter who our leader is, the Church is always in exile here in this world.

For we are waiting for the New heavens, the new earth, the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. Stop focusing on the here and now as if certain things must happen in certain places and that will trigger certain events. These things are mere signposts pointing to something much greater.

Shadows of the things to come..

So, hear the words of John the beloved and with this I close:

"And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from

the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

-Revelation 21:5-7 ESV

Be salt and light, be the best citizens possible, preach the gospel both in word and in deed. For a worried and frightened world is watching.

The Church is the only hope in this world because she holds out the hope of Jesus..