

BABYLONIAN BLUES

Jeremiah 29:1-14

*(sermon outline developed in conjunction with Rev. Bobby Dagnel,
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In the book of Daniel, even an angel asks the question, “How long will it be?” (Daniel 12:6). The angel is asking what we all want to know, “When is our day of deliverance?”

The question is not a new one. Throughout scripture, God’s people cry out loud, asking “How long must we linger like this?” In Psalm 13:1, the psalmist says, “How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?” The song book, Psalms, comes from the soul – the impatient soul of God’s people. These are songs sung together as they gathered in worship. Throughout the songs of the psalter, the people sing, “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 74:9-10; 79:5; 80:5; 89:47; cf. Isaiah 6:11; Jeremiah 12:4).

As we look at this song book, we can see that God knows that waiting on Him can be hard. Devotional writer Jon Bloom writes, “He gives us permission to ask Him, ‘How long is this going to last?’” (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-long-o-lord>)

Our present experience is an experience common to all believers who call upon His name – common enough that the saints of old had songs about it, and the prophets (Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah) proclaimed it. Today we look at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 29 gives attention to those in exile, those who had been taken away, captured, kidnapped, deported from their homeland in Judah – and carried away to Babylon. They were exiled geographically, displaced physically. But there is more to exile than geographical location. Exile, in fact, is not primarily a geographical phenomenon, but is a social, moral, and cultural phenomenon. It is the loss of a structured, reliable world which gives meaning and coherence to life. It is the loss of a framework and structure that has been treasured and trusted. A person can find themselves in exile while being geographically at home. Perhaps you are exiled in your own living room this morning.

Perhaps many of you this morning feel like those ancient Israelites felt. Perhaps you, too, feel like you’re not where you need to be. You’re in a foreign land. Some of us this morning may feel like exiles because of social distancing. There has been a drastic change in our lives, like the drastic change that God’s people incurred. We, too, have been carried away to a foreign land, to a place where we have lost the rhythm of our life. We have been imprisoned in the Babylon of our own backyard.

The normalcy of our lives has been ripped away, seemingly never to return. We fear things are really never going to be just exactly as they were. Our exile is spiritual and emotional, because we, too, have had everything we trusted, everything we've looked forward to snatched away.

Chapter 29 is a letter carried by royal messengers. Perhaps they are dispatched for the purpose of carrying this letter, or perhaps it is taken incidentally, like the mailman carries our mail away along with other business. Because Jeremiah had intense interaction with King Zedekiah, carrying such letters may have been routine business for any diplomatic courier.

Jeremiah had received word in Jerusalem that there were false prophets in Babylon telling the exiles their circumstances would soon change, they would soon be going home. It was a message of "Pack your bags, God is going to release us back to home. You're just visiting, just passing through Babylon. Get ready. Your old world will return." The false prophets were giving words of assurance, words of hope, words of peace, words of comfort – words that were absolutely false and absolutely a lie.

The exiles were making little or no effort to adjust to their new surroundings. They were putting all their eggs in the false prophets' basket. They were counting on the false hope of returning to their old reality soon. Jeremiah knew better. He knew they were going to be there. He knew they had a seventy year stay ahead of them. He was disturbed by their unrealistic attitude, and so he sends a letter. It's a letter about circumstances and situations that cannot be quickly changed.

"I know you're weary. I know you're defeated. I know that you want to get back to the way they were. But it's not going to happen today. So between now and then, I want to tell you how to go on with the business of living – not just surviving, but how you can bloom where you are planted. It's about living with the things you cannot change."

I want us to look at three words of Jeremiah to ancient Israel.

I. The first word is "face the facts."

To exiles then and to exiles today, to those who lament and despair over the way things used to be, how you want them to be, Jeremiah says, not coldly but realistically, it's time to face the facts as they are and to realize that relief is more than a day away.

Look at verses 8-10.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them" declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place."

These false prophets are found throughout the book of Jeremiah – chapter 23, chapter 27, chapter 28. They offer the seduction of a religious fantasy. The threat to the Jews is that they will be, by these false prophets, talked out of the reality of exile, invited to deny the real place where they

must live their faith. No pretense based in religious fantasy can extricate God's people from their actual place in history. They are in exile. They are in Babylon, singing the blues.

The false prophets are trying to peddle a bill of goods. It wasn't a wicked message they proclaimed – just a wrong message. “Don't worry. Things are about to change. Captivity is going to end, and you're about to get your old life back.”

Jeremiah declares, “Don't believe it. Things are not going to change quickly. You are going to be in captivity for a while. Face the facts.

We may have to re-evaluate our priorities after the virus has vanished. We have to adjust our lifestyles and look past our portfolio to find inner peace. All we have left is faith, hope in our Christ, and love for each other.

Perhaps some of you this morning need to hear the message, “Face the facts.”

These are difficult words from Jeremiah to the people in exile. They are hard for us to hear and even more difficult to accept.

Everyone has suffering in the coronavirus catastrophe. The great Scottish preacher, Alexander McClaren said, “Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone you meet is fighting a battle.” When you think about it, the only really normal people you know are those that you don't know very well.

But everybody has challenges and difficulties. Everybody has disappointments. Everybody else is a virus victim in some way – we are not alone.

1. Here, a family waits anxiously through a fever – hoping, praying the test will not return positive. Minutes are hours; hours are days; days are years – waiting.
2. There, a girl of 23 years of age calls the church to postpone her wedding. A lifetime of dreaming and months of planning all meaningless – in March, and maybe even in May – because of a microbe. Planning for the nuptials is a nightmare.
3. Here, a man ponders how long his company can keep paying his salary when the plague has made it impossible to see the possibility of any future profits.
4. There, a cashier worries about her own health, but has no other way to make ends meet but to handle everyone's cash and stand inches away from coughing customers.
5. Here, a healthcare worker sleeps in his own garage in a tent, as he dare not risk infecting his own family with the virus he battles every day.
6. There, a man of 82 years of age can no longer make his rhythmic routine of visiting the memory care unit where his wife of sixty years waits to see him. What was once their daily ritual is now impossible. His smile is the only thing she remembers – and now, it, too, is gone.

7. Here, grandparents are restricted from the hospital, robbed of peering through the nursery glass window and proclaiming with pride, “That one is our precious girl.”

II. There is a second thing Jeremiah says in verses 5-7. He says “flourish in face of the facts.”

Look at verses 5-7

Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters, and multiply there and do not decrease. And 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 have welfare.

Look at these commands, these imperative verbs. Build. Live. Plant. Eat. This is the key to the whole message of Jeremiah in this letter. Judah is going to have to face its proper place in exile. There in exile, there in Babylon, she is going to have to live her life and practice her faith. The Jews have no option to Babylon. This is where God has planned for them to be – for now.

Seventy-two years ago, great Christian thinker C. S. Lewis wrote words that ring with some relevance for us today. Perhaps we should just replace the words “atomic bomb” with the word “coronavirus.” Lewis writes:

In one way, we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How do we live in an atomic age?” I’m tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year; or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer. An age of paralysis. An age of air raids. An age of motor accidents.’

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, Lewis writes, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented; and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways....

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we’re all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb – [we might say corona virus] – let that bomb, when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things – praying [even if in our closet], working [perhaps at home], [preaching to a camera], reading, listening to music, bathing the children, [walking the dog in the sunshine], chatting to our friends [on Facetime]... – not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies, [and he says, maybe prophetically] a microbe can do that, but they need not dominate our minds.

(“On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*)

Jeremiah offers the exiles a new attitude, a new perspective – how they should look at the situation before them. Perspective is everything, isn't it?

Jeremiah says despite your exile, don't put your life on hold. Roll up your sleeves and get about the business of living as best you can. Bloom where you are planted. Stop window shopping and live with your own inventory. Play with the hand you are dealt.

Nobody ever gets a perfect set of circumstances. Those who survive, those who make it, those of us who are in exile who prosper are the ones who say, "You know, it's not perfect, but I can find a way to be faithful."

While you are singing the Babylonian Blues, be the presence of Christ. The church will emerge focused and fierce for the gospel.

At First Baptist Church of Amarillo...

- already, we have members sewing medical masks to protect first responders and health care providers
- already, we are preparing boxes of food to provide to those who need their next meal
- already, Young Adult Sunday School classes are calling senior adult church members asking, "What can I get for you? How can I serve you in Christ through though the coronavirus crisis?"

Member caring for member.

Our old world has – in some ways, and not all bad – been broken, and our priorities, perhaps, have shifted to our faith in our Christ and His church.

Each of us has divine appointments – some planned and some spontaneous. Opportunities to be the presence of Christ. I am reminded of the man who approached his pastor, wanting to know why the church didn't do something to help a hopeless man he had just encountered. The man continued his conversation by replying that he himself had stepped in to help. The pastor replied, "The church DID just do something when you did something. You are the church – the hands and feet of Christ." We send you out every day.

While we are singing the Babylonian Blues, we each have divine appointments to be Christ to those around us.

Charlie Brown's sister, Sally, may have expressed it best when she said, "I think I've discovered the secret to life. You just hang around until you get used to it." That was the word to the captives. That was the word to the ancient Israelite exiles. That's the word to the quarantined Christians. You're going to have to hang around and just get used to it. So move on with life. You can either get bitter or get better. You can either be paralyzed or propelled by your circumstances in life. The command comes to build, live, plant, and eat.

III. There is a final word from Jeremiah. It is “Have faith in face of the facts.”

The most remarkable observation we can make concerning the exilic circumstance is that it did not lead the Jews to abandon their faith or settle in despair. In fact, however much the message seems to be one of doom and gloom, Jeremiah actually assures them of a future and of a hope.

Look at verses 10-14

For thus says the Lord, “When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.”

The message is Yahweh will keep the promise of homecoming. The promise is rooted in God’s long-term resolve for His people. The future is a future willed by God that refutes any despair which Judah has experienced. While the ancient Israelites thought that God was inept, unavailable, absent and ineffective, they now hear the word of promise. Look at the verbs in this passage. Call. Come. Pray. I really am listening (look at the end of verse 12). God can and will do a new thing. There will be a time when all the suffering will stop and all the pain will go away and all the deaths that hurt us will be conquered by life. We are not to despair.

God is going to do a new thing with you, with us – First Baptist. We must answer His call, even as we bide our time in Babylon.

Shall we join the psalmist and say, “How long, O Lord?” And until we get an answer, may we hear the words of Jeremiah, “Get busy even in Babylon.” For just as surely as ancient Israel returned, so shall we ...when we gather, in His grace, on the other side.

But for now:

1. Be the presence of Christ.
2. Place your worries in God’s hands. He is never surprised or caught off-guard.
3. Be willing to examine how displaced our priorities have been. Babylon is a place to ponder priorities. Dr. Brad Johnson tweeted, “Pro sports are suspended and not one person is asking athletes to justify their millions during the shutdown. Meanwhile, teachers with kids at home are expected to sit in front of a video chat room 14 hours a day, teaching and taking attendance, or people lose their minds about them getting paid.” I’ve learned now that I can live without LeBron James, but the check-out lady at Walmart is indispensable to me.
4. Realize you are not in control, and your only anchor is Christ. And His only place is the church.