“Welcome to Babylon”

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Matthew 22: 34-40

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

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Someone dear to me went to college, fell in love with an athlete, and made a life with him. They began that life together in city #1. And then he was traded, so they moved to city #2. And then #3. And then city #4. And by the time he retired, she had made a new home, a new life for herself and her family, in a total of 8 cities in 14 years. She developed a finely tuned strategy to become part of her new community.

First, housing. Find a home to rent, a place where you feel safe, especially when your spouse is out of town. Second, education. Ensure you’re in a neighborhood with high performing, safe schools for your kids. Find some classes that interest you too. Third, friendship and exercise. Join a tennis team, preferably one housed in a local athletic club. Find a nice route where you can go jogging. Fourth, medical concerns. Find a dentist, an internist and pediatrician you can trust. Fifth, mental health. Find a babysitter so you don’t lose your mind when your husband is on the road—night after night after night!

This “professional mover” sums up her successful moving strategy in one phrase: “Wherever you go, there you are.” In other words, since you can’t do anything about where you’re located, make the most of it! Embrace it.

One way to read Jeremiah 29 is to simplify this scripture down to that one phrase: “Wherever you go, there you are.” God says, “People, I have sent you to this new place: embrace it. Build houses. Plant gardens. Work hard. Encourage your children to marry the locals. Multiply. Make this place, Babylon, your home.”

Of course, there are many ways to read Jeremiah 29. We say the Bible is God’s living word because each time we read scripture it comes alive for us in a new way. It speaks God’s truth to where we are in our lives. And surely this is a unique time in all our lives. My first reading of this scripture was God’s encouragement to us to make the best of things. At a time when God’s people are enduring hardship, God still sees them and encourages them to thrive in their present circumstances. Work hard. Put down roots. Bloom where you are planted.

We are studying this passage today in particular circumstances: in the midst of a pandemic and a new awakening about race in America; as we approach July 4th and the anniversary of our nation’s birth; in Duluth, GA, the deep south. Considering all of these particulars, I’m not sure God is speaking a “bloom where you are planted” message to us. I wonder… are we the protagonists, the displaced, force marched people to whom God is talking?

In any good story, the reader naturally identifies with the protagonist. I’m Charlotte, the spider who writes words in her web, not the farmer. I’m Hermione, the clever wizard, not a clueless Muggle. I’m Scout Finch, child of Atticus, not the townsfolk. Likewise, in Old Testament stories, I identify with the tribe of Israel, the people who escape Egypt, not the Egyptians, or the Jewish people saved by Esther’s cleverness, rather than the evil, scheming Haman. God’s people are often the ones who are at risk, enslaved or wandering.

In today’s story, they are ripped from their home and struggling to survive in a new land. Even in exile, these are God’s people. And God is with them. Always. As your white pastor, preaching to a 375-member congregation where 94% of us identify as white, I ask, are we the people in exile? The people being told to get busy building homes, planting gardens, marrying the locals? Or today, June 28th, 2020, in pandemic plagued, race-torn America, could we be the other group of people in this story? Not the people in exile, but the people already living in Babylon. Could we be… the Babylonians?

In America, we don’t have to use our imagination to see a nation where the community is comprised of colonialists who chose to come here and displaced people who were ripped from their families and homeland and brought here against their will.

As I enter my 7th year as your pastor, I know this church membership. Pleasant Hill Presbyterian is comprised of people with good hearts. I’ve seen you in action. We not only do our best to follow Christ, we work hard at it through sacrificial giving, learning, mission work, through nurturing and raising our children right. Pleasant Hill’s members have great imaginations, a strong sense of empathy, a welcoming posture. Our catchphrase expresses who we are: we connect our faith with everyday life. We are doing the work Christ calls us to do. AND. AND. What if we are the Babylonians in this story?

Not all Babylonians were warriors. Some of the Babylonians were quietly going about their business: sweeping their kitchens, tending their gardens, and feeding their children. What if our larger community in which we all live—our Babylon-- is woven so tightly that there is no room for people who should be part of the fabric of our lives? What if those long-ago Babylonians, or we the people in power now, make it impossible for the displaced people to adopt the “Wherever you go, there you are” approach? Because, willingly or unknowingly, overtly or silently, our resources, laws, and social norms work against God’s peoples’ efforts to bloom where they are planted, to become part of the community to (verse 7) “seek the welfare of the city, for in its welfare [they] will find their welfare?”

How do you rent a home in a neighborhood with strong schools when the realtor only shows you certain areas of town? How do you join an athletic club that once prohibited “your kind” and is named for someone your ancestors feared? How do you see the best doctors when they don’t take your insurance? When, amazingly, half of those doctors believe that “your type” can handle more pain than their other patients?1 How do you find a babysitter when the social network, casual friendship circles, are closed to you?

If God urges God’s people, and their sons and daughters, to set down roots, to take their unraveled lives and begin to weave new plans, surely God is also speaking to those of us who, willingly or unwittingly, stand in the way. God’s people need housing, gardens, schools, and medical care right here in Babylon. God’s people do not need a general distrust based on their appearance. Or assumptions made about their character. Or opportunities snatched away because their name sounds “foreign.”2

It’s time for **me** to unravel my assumed identity as the protagonist and invite God to weave into me a full understanding of my position, as a white, straight, cis woman, in today’s world. That will be one focus of my sabbatical these next three months.

This morning I am asking us, the benign Babylonians, quietly living good lives, to think through how we can offer a radical very-overdue welcome to the great grandsons and great granddaughters of the displaced population in our midst. To those who descend from people who were ripped from their homes 400 years ago, by people who look like me.

That ripping sound can still be heard today, as mothers wail for their sons who are no more. As capable students are denied admission to schools. As loan applications are set aside. How do we move from an unintentional us/them to an us? And I ask you, Pleasant Hill, because I have seen firsthand your enormous capacity to love your neighbor as yourself. And I know your desire to follow that commandment is always burning in your heart.

At the close of worship, we’ll sing a favorite hymn, O Beautiful for Spacious Skies. Stanza 2 says:

America! America! God mend thine every flaw;

confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law!

These words penned more than 100 years ago state plainly that we are a wonderful country. And we do have flaws: we are not perfect. Why? We are a country comprised of human beings, and as we admitted minutes ago, in our prayer of confession, none of us is perfect.

“God mend thine every flaw” Katherine Lee Bates wrote. Amen. And God, show us the many ways to mend that 400-year-old rip of a people from their home, their family, their resources. We are on the cusp of a seminal movement in our country’s history. What part will the church, the people who make up the church, play in this new push for long-overdue equality?

God knows our hearts and our desire to do good. And I know the good, good people of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian church will roll up our sleeves and get to work to connect our faith, our belief in loving our neighbor as ourselves, to everyday life. As we read new books, watch videos, enter into meaningful discussions like Digging Deeper after today’s worship, we will unlearn old things and learn new things from strangers and friends. It may feel like an unraveling. And that’s okay. Because we trust in a God who is with us, no matter who we are in the story, every moment of every day of our lives. America, America, God shed God’s grace on thee. And crown thy good in BROTHERHOOD, from sea to shining sea. Amen.

**Works Cited**

1 https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/how-we-fail-black-patients-pain 50% of medical doctors believe patients of color feel less pain that white patients.

2 “Racism Is Real” by Brave New Films, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTcSVQJ2h8g