

Sermon: “Seek the Welfare of the City”

Series: “Celebrating What Matters”

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 29:1-9

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Preacher: Rev. Jasiel Hernandez Garcia



During my tenure as an associate editor for the national publication “The Journal for Preachers,” one of my responsibilities was to connect with preachers across the country, attentively read or listen to their sermons, and submit those sermons for publication.

Serving within the “Journal for Preachers” allowed me to build meaningful relationships with pastors within our denomination and beyond. This is how I came across a noteworthy sermon from my now friend and colleague, Sarah Are Speed. She is the Senior Pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City.

Sarah submitted a sermon based on Matthew 11. This is where John the Baptist is incarcerated and sends one of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one we have been waiting for?”

In this thoughtful sermon, Sarah shares a short story that illustrates what it means to embrace uncomfortable uncertainty with outlandish hope. From my perspective, this is what the prophet Jeremiah encourages those in exile to do in our reading for this morning.

Sarah writes,

For our honeymoon, my husband and I were fortunate to spend time in Italy, where we saw the majestic Alps towering over the horizon—unlike anything I’d ever seen.

While there, I learned a remarkable story about those mountains. In 1848, construction began on a railroad through a section of the Alps known as the Semmering, intended to connect Vienna and Venice. Many claimed it couldn’t be done—the mountains were too steep, the avalanches too dangerous, the winters too harsh. Yet designer Carl von Ghega pressed on.

After seven grueling years, 20,000 workers completed 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 100 stone arches, and 11 bridges—at the cost of 700 lives, including Carl’s own. Europe finally had its first railway crossing of the Alps.

But what amazed me most wasn’t the engineering—it was the vision. When the Semmering line was built, no train in existence could handle its steep grades and

sharp turns. Four locomotives were tested and failed, forcing engineers to design an entirely new kind of train.

Those 20,000 laborers from Austria, Italy, and Germany toiled day after day in brutal conditions, building a track for a train that did not yet exist.

They did this because they believed, deep in their bones, that someday, a train capable of going up those mountains would come.

Just like those workers who built the Semmering railway through the Alps, the people of Israel in Jeremiah's day were called to trust in something they could not yet see - deliverance.

Jeremiah 29 documents a letter to the exiles in Babylon. After 30 years of prophesying that the Babylonians would come and conquer their land if the people of Judah didn't repent, the prophecy finally became true. The Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem, looted the temple, and carried off part of the religious and political leaders, in addition to the skilled workers and artisans.

Jeremiah was one of the few people who were left behind. He writes this letter as someone who witnessed the destruction of his beloved home and the separation of families and friends. Amid his heartbreak and desolation, Jeremiah receives word from the Lord - a heavy message that does not offer consolation, much less immediate hope.

Jeremiah tells those who longed to return home something unexpected: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce, establish relationships, and seek the welfare of the city to which I have carried you."

In other words, God was exhorting the exiles to live faithfully in the waiting.

Anyone who's ever been a Boy Scout knows the motto: "Be prepared." Scouts train not only to survive in the wilderness, but to make the best of whatever situation they find themselves in. Whether it's starting a fire in the rain, setting up camp with limited supplies, or navigating unfamiliar terrain, the goal isn't just to get by—it's to adapt, to stay resourceful, and to make the most of what's at hand.

That same spirit lies at the heart of Jeremiah's message to the exiles in Babylon.

God's message through the prophet Jeremiah tells those in exile to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, to embrace uncertainty with conviction, and to make the most of what's at hand.

But Jeremiah's message did not make sense to those in exile.

You see, in the previous chapter, the prophet Hananiah declared that the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, would break the yoke of the king of Babylon and, within two years, return all items taken from the temple and all those taken in exile.

Jeremiah's response to Hananiah's forecast is clearly a more pessimistic outlook. Why would the people of Judah hear Jeremiah's message over Hananiah's?

This reminds me of those situations when you have an overly optimistic friend who believes everything will eventually work out (the one who is always looking for the silver lining), while the pessimistic one is always telling you the worst-case scenario.

The prophet Jeremiah is the friend who will tell you things for what they are - whether you like it or not. He will tell you what you **need** to hear, not what you **want** to hear.

It isn't always easy to love that one friend, right?

But isn't that the friend who helps us become better people?

And that is the point of Jeremiah's message to the exiles. Stop waiting for things to get better and start living!

Those in exile are told that they must embrace the good in their current circumstances and strive toward prosperity for themselves, their community, and, indeed, for the welfare of the city of Babylon itself.

That's a message that seems almost impossible to digest.

But what other options do they have? Do they pull away and default to their own circles? Do they grow in resentment and hatred toward the city and its people? Do they surrender to despair?

As Professor Melissa Ramos writes in her commentary for this text, "In the midst of difficult circumstances, sometimes the call of God is to dig in and find ways to thrive rather than waiting for a change in our current situation."

This message is especially relevant today as we discuss stewardship in our beloved congregation. The church with a capital C is indeed going through a season that feels uncertain. And we see some of that uncertainty within these walls.

Like the exiles in Jeremiah's day, some of us find ourselves longing for what once was, hoping for a time when things felt familiar. Others feel like change is not happening fast enough, meaning that we are not adapting to the new theological and Christian landscape in our country. I am sure there are also a few of us who would much rather not change the status quo and continue our ministry just the way it is. And there are also a few of us who

are ready to try something new to bring more people, especially younger families, to our church.

You get the picture.

We live and minister in this constant tension.

And this is the reason why Jeremiah's words must become our compass and guiding light for our ministry ahead.

God does not say, *"Hold tight until this is over,"* but instead, *"Build houses, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you."*

God calls us to live and minister fully *now*—to seek the welfare, shalom, of our beloved Hill Country community, for in doing so, we may find our own welfare and shalom.

We often think that launching the right program or worship service will lead to more people and growth at our church. I think that is partially true. However, I believe that if we commit our church resources not only to seeking the welfare and growth of our congregation but also to that of the place in which we live, we will see a kind of flourishing we have never seen before.

Friends, this is what it means to seek the welfare of the city—to live faithfully right where we are. Even when resources are scarce, even when energy feels depleted, even when we can't yet see what God is building—we keep showing up. We keep building a railroad because we believe deep in our bones that a train will come.

So, church, let's not put our lives on hold until things "get better." Let's build houses of faith right where we are. Let's plant gardens of hope in the soil of our present struggles. Let's seek the welfare of our beloved city, trusting that God's blessing is not waiting somewhere down the road—it's already unfolding in our midst.

AMEN

29 These 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.

2 This 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. 3 The 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:

4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

6 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. 7 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.

8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.