

4th Sunday after Pentecost June 28, 2020

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 6:12-23

Those of you who know me by now know that for most of my life, I have disliked change. I grew up in Charlotte, NC and lived in two houses- when we moved when I was a kid we just went across the back yard. So, I lived in one neighborhood growing up, went to the same schools with the same kids for that whole time.

My move to college was away, but not too far away, about 45 minutes one way. The first time I drove into Chicago for the first round of seminary my shoulders were in my ears from the tension as I drove at night in the driving rain in downtown Chicago without much clue where I was going. I've always found big change hard to navigate.

Over time, what this aversion to change has meant is that I have stayed in situations that were not optimal for me longer than I should have because they were familiar. Because the option was heading into the unknown, either physically, mentally, or both.

That all changed in 2011 when my wife of 15 years and I separated and then divorced. Then, in rather quick succession, I left my position of 11 years at First Lutheran and went on leave from call, I got engaged and then married, and then went back to seminary, before moving to Ely and getting ordained three years ago.

Even after 5-6 years of almost constant change, I still don't like change. But I have learned how to navigate those times. To accept them for what they are and to continue to live within them.

I have learned that change is something you can survive and perhaps even find something new and better in. I have learned to see it not as an exile from what came before, but a journey to something else. Times of change are times to take stock of yourself and your life and see if something in them needs to be redefined. Because if things are so upset anyway, why not do some renovation?

I've noticed some of my neighbors doing that recently- they've rented dumpsters and have spent the last week or so filling them up with the accumulated clutter from their lives or in the process of moving someone out of their household. Here, too, a time of change is the time to really re-think things. What's important, what do you need. Life is upset anyway, so why not?

Now, one of the things I found singularly unhelpful when I was in my period of change was to spend time yearning for what was. To try and go back to the way things were. Oh, I certainly spent time mourning the loss of what might have been. Of the life I had lived. But, at best, I found that looking back helped me to figure out what I didn't want to have happen again. Where I had slipped into that process of accepting things I knew weren't right just to stay comfortable. Looking back was only good in helping me move forward.

In our reading from Jeremiah this morning, we enter into the middle of a conversation, a bit of a contest, between two prophets. Hananiah and Jeremiah. Both are speaking to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Many of their

leaders have been taken from their land to Babylon- exiled- a consequence Jeremiah and other prophets had warned them about for years.

Hananiah has just spoken before our reading- reassuring the Israelites that all will be well. Within two years, he says, the exiled will be back in Israel, back to the promised land and all will be as they used to be.

This is what Jeremiah responds to in our reading, Man, I hope God does this! That would be great! But-this does not match what the prophets before us have forecast. Jeremiah goes on to say that he sees from God a longer time in exile. In fact an even greater exile for more people from the promised land.

A time similar to the wandering of their forebearers in faith through the wilderness. An exile, so that the Jews might learn again what it means to be people of God. A time to come to appreciate what is important to their life and what needs to be gotten rid of. A time to find all those things they thought were important, but really were just things that kept them from being who they were called to be.

So, Jeremiah says, settle in for the long haul, you'll be in exile for awhile. But, don't just sit pining for what was. Don't fight the reality of what is or ignore it. Instead, build houses and live in them, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the city you are in. Live fully where you are, Jeremiah says, even in exile. Invest in this time of exile- and you just might find what God wants you to see. You might just discover the thing you never knew you were missing all along.

This time of pandemic feels like that exile to Babylon- doesn't it. Like the Jews we have been exiled from our routines, our places of work and worship. We have

been exiled from community gatherings, sports, family, and so much more. Change is everywhere. We yearn for the way things used to be - a return to the familiar, so much so we are susceptible to those prophets who want to tell us it's over already. Things can go back to the way they were. Or, we just cave to our own desire to ignore reality and live in the dream of what was. Both of which are dangerous.

I get both these reactions. I'm tired of this life, too. I would love to be able to have you all here with me- filling this space. To see the squirming of Theo and Azalea. To hear your voices filling this place with song. To shake your hands and look in your eyes and share the joys and concerns of your life.

I would love to not have to think about washing my hands, wearing a mask, keeping my distance.

But I also know that my wishing it were so doesn't make it so. I would be offering false hope to say that we will be back to those things anytime soon- or even that we will be back to those things as they were at all.

This pandemic has ripped the illusion of control from us. And- in this exile from what was- it has opened our eyes to see that some of the things we thought were so perfect and right- perhaps were not. That we had placed our hopes and dreams in false gods that took far more than they gave. That ultimately took us away from the one God who has shaped and formed us. Who created all that is. Who has given us so much and demanded so little- just that God be the first things in our lives...and that's because only then will we have true life.

I honestly hope we don't go back to what was. I hope the parents who spoke of the joy they found in just being present with their kids as a family, who found respite from the constant running of their schedules to be life giving, I hope that they do not just mindlessly go back to that- but ponder that God has given us the family unit as a gift- one in which we learn about unconditional love- the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. The place we learn about the freedom that comes in sacrificing for others. Where we learn about what is important and what is secondary. When we aren't with family, we can't learn those important things.

I hope we don't go back to what was. This pandemic has exposed for all to see inequities in our economic, social, and medical systems. I hope we don't forget that it was the least valued of our society: the factory workers, the delivery drivers, the grocery clerks, janitors and housekeepers, medical personnel who were our lifeline-often literally- in the midst of pandemic. I hope we remember that when we talk about a living wage, when we think about how much we pay for something, how to value the way people earn a living.

I hope we don't forget how this virus has struck so hard in communities that lack resources and populations of color. And how those often overlap. I hope we remember that when we talk about the ways in which we share our resources so that we might all be healthier, have better outcomes.

I hope we don't forget how illness in one part of the body that is the United States of America hurts the rest of us. How politics and geography do not matter to this virus. That it sees all of us as possible hosts to infect. As sad as it is to say, would that we all had that same viewpoint.

I hope that we take this time in exile to really stop and take a hard look at ourselves and our lives. To hear clearly the calling to which we have been called by a God who has given everything- everything so that we might have a life worth living. Who weeps- each time we kill one another in word or deed. Who yearns for the lost sheep to return to the fold.

I hope that we remember what Paul says- do not let sin, let the passions of your body run your lives. For even though it may look good, and comfortable, and right- that way lies only death. Death of the soul and the body. You have your ride and you're done.

My friends- thanks be to God- you have been set free from sin by the love of God come to us in Jesus Christ. Set free by the grace of God. An undeserved gift. Freed to live in Jesus Christ. To live in the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed.

We've got a time to journey in this exile of pandemic- this time of great change. Let us heed Jeremiah's advice and not only settle into and live in this exile- but take some time to sort through our lives, toss aside those things that do not give us life, that become more important to us than God, and re-focus on our calling as children of God- as disciples of Jesus.

We can do so only through the transforming power of God's amazing grace- a sign of God's steadfast love for us- given to us in Jesus Christ.

And in the power of that amazing grace and through this love of God we will return from this exile renewed in life. Fuller and more abundant in the Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God.