

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: March 25, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BUILD, SETTLE, PLANT, EAT”
Jeremiah 29:1-23

Earth is our home. The Creator designed this beautiful planet to be our ideal habitat. We belong here.

Human community is our home. Christian discipleship requires us to love our neighbors, not to segregate ourselves from them. We belong here.

But **this world** (by which I mean the dominant **ethos** and **ideologies** and **power structures** {Eph 6:12} **“of this present [age]”**) **is not our home**. It is an ugly caricature of creation, marked by disorder and oppression and ruled by {Eph 6:12} **“spiritual forces of evil”** dead set on dishonoring Holy God and destroying humanity. We are {1 Pet 2:11} **“aliens and strangers in the world.”** We do not belong here. We are children of the Exile.

□ Exile is the basic problem and reality in Jeremiah 29.

⌚ The time is 597 B.C., and Judah is in a tight spot.

{2 Ki 24:1; Dan 1:2} Eight years ago in 605 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar made Judah his vassal. Though he allowed King Jehoiakim to remain on the throne, {Dan 1:3ff} he exiled to Babylon the brightest, best qualified young aristocrats. That was the first deportation.

{2 K 24:1-7} Fast-forward to last year, 598 B.C. When Jehoiakim withheld tribute money, Babylon swiftly sent a contingent of soldiers to crush his rebellion. Jehoiakim was killed in battle.

{2 Ki 24:8-17} His son Jehoiachin immediately ascended the throne. Meanwhile, the bulk of the imperial army mobilized and marched on Judah. They arrived early in 597 B.C. and laid siege to Jerusalem. On March 16th Jehoiachin surrendered, having ruled Judah for a brief 3 months and 10 days.

{2 Ki 24:18} After installing Zedekiah as his political puppet, Nebuchadnezzar exiled thousands more to Babylon: Jehoiachin, the queen mother, the palace attendants and officials, all surviving military officers and fighting men, every skilled craftsman and artisan. That was the second deportation.

■ That brings us to the present. Jeremiah 29:1: **“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”**

For years the recipients of this letter have taken comfort in the false hope that {Jer 5:12} **“No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine.”** For years they have chanted, {Jer 7:4} **“This is the Temple of the LORD!”**, confident that its existence rendered them impervious to significant defeat.

Now they have been defeated, ripped away from their country, city, temple, and homes, marched 1,000 miles, and forcibly resettled in a foreign city full of foreign people who speak a foreign language, use foreign currency, wear foreign clothing, practice foreign customs, and worship foreign gods. The words of

Psalm 137 {137:1-4, 8} vividly express their bitter heartache and homesickness:

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept,
when we remembered Zion.**

**There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs
of Zion!’**

**How can we sing the songs of the LORD
...in a foreign land?**

**O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is [the one] who repays you
for what you have done to us –**

■ Verse 4: **“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:”** Who has **“carried”** them to this alien place? Not Nebuchadnezzar; the Living God! To be sure, Judah has brought the Exile on themselves by their persistent immorality and injustice, despite Merciful God’s repeated warnings. Still, he is the One who is doing it, and it is jarring to hear him take credit for it as the disaster actually unfolds before their eyes.

■ His first command in verse 5 only adds to their disquiet: **“Build houses”** – not shelters or tents, but real **“houses”** – **“and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.”** The Exiles yearn to return home *now*, but you don’t build houses, plant gardens and eat their produce overnight. These activities take time, energy, and money.

■ Verse 6: Sovereign God’s second command is more alarming: **“Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.”** The Exiles would prefer to sleep with their boots on, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. That is hard to do while you are making babies, arranging their marriages and bouncing your grandkids on your knee. This is a call to rootedness and community-building.

■ If that seems like a lot to ask, wait till you hear the third and fourth commands in verse 7: **“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”** The Exiles fantasize about taking revenge on the enemy, but God’s third command is to **“seek,”** to actively work for the **“peace and prosperity”** (*shālôm*) of their captors.

The concept of *shālôm* comprises the absence of strife and war. But it goes beyond that to include physical, mental, and spiritual health, positive relationships, personal righteousness, social, economic, and political justice, and shared prosperity. The Judeans must pursue wholeness and blessing for the Babylonians as well as themselves.

Few of the Exiles are naturally capable of such mercy and forgiveness, hence YHWH’s fourth command: **“pray to the LORD for”** this. He is more

than able to accomplish the impossible among us, if we are willing.

Notice that these commands get progressively more difficult. They advance from mere physical presence, to personal rootedness, to profound engagement, to prayerful mission on behalf of Babylon. In case they are tempted to disobey, the LORD God Almighty reiterates that he has brought them here, he is sovereign here, and he will achieve his purposes even here in Babylon.

- Skip down to verse 11 (one of the most frequently misquoted verses in Scripture): **“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”**

Aha! So the Exile will be short after all! This promise of prosperity, **“hope and a future”** must involve a quick return home, right?

- Wrong! Verse 11 immediately follows verse 10, in which Sovereign God announces that he *will* bring Judah home – seventy years from now, after seven decades in exile. No one is leaving anytime soon. God’s plan is to prosper the Exiles – *as Exiles, in Babylon*.

- And that announcement follows the warning recorded in verses 8-9: **“Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.”**

These are some of the same false prophets who gave false assurances of security back in Jerusalem. Now

they are saying that God will bless the Exiles by quickly returning them to the Land of Promise.

But why won’t he? Why is he inflicting this long Exile on them? To put it another way: *What does God mean by “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”?*

- He tells us the answer in verses 12-14a: **“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD.”**

The Exiles weep for the belonging, safety and comfort of home. But they already have all that in Babylon – or rather, they could, because YHWH is with them. He **“carried [them] into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”** He is available to them today. He will be present to them tomorrow.

Find God and you are always at home, even when you feel out of place, insecure, and uncomfortable. Fail to find him and you will not really be at home, not even when you feel that you fit in, feel secure, and feel comfortable.

Israel has forgotten this.

The LORD gave them the Land of Promise as a place in which to dwell with him. Yet they have loved the gift more than the Giver. As a result they have been dwelling in the land without him.

The LORD gave them the Temple as a space in which to commune with him in worship. Yet they have loved the gift more than the Giver. As a result they have been worshiping in the temple without him.

Back in Judah the Exiles believed they were at home in the land and at the temple. Those feelings of belonging, safety, and comfort inhibited them from repenting of their sin and coming home to God.

The Exiles do not feel at home in Babylon at all. Their feelings of belonging, safety, and comfort have been stripped away. Now, they can repent of their sin and come home to Merciful God, who is their true home. As painful as their displacement is, it is a profound act of divine mercy toward them.

Of course, it does not seem that way to them. They assume that God has cursed them and blessed their countrymen who were allowed to remain in Jerusalem. In point of fact, just the opposite is true.

■ Verses 16-18:

This is what the LORD says about the king who sits on David's throne [that is, Zedekiah] and all the people who remain in this city [Jerusalem], your countrymen who did not go with you into exile – yes, this is what the LORD Almighty says: “I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like poor figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with the sword, famine and plague and will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth, and an object of cursing and horror, or scorn and reproach, among all the nations where I drive them.”

We have not been deported against our will to a distant land. (Some of our ancestors were long ago, as victims of the slave trade). However, if we keep our primary citizenship in the Kingdom of God then we are exiles, **“aliens and strangers”** in this world. Our exile will end either with our bodily death or when Christ returns as King of kings and Lord of lords.

What shall we do between now and then?

We could sit and weep and celebrate the future destruction of the world, as the Psalmist did.

We could console ourselves with false dreams of escape, as the false prophets did.

We could withdraw from the world and passively wait for deliverance, as the Exiles were tempted to do.

Or we could move beyond mere physical presence to rootedness, engagement and mission in the communities where Triune God has placed us.

This is too much mission for us alone. But we can do it by calling on God, seeking him with all our heart, and coming to him in prayer.

Here is the really great news. He promises that if we do this, we will find him. **“I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.** And if we find God we will always be at home, even when we feel out of place, insecure, and uncomfortable.

Jeremiah 29 is the word of the Lord.