

Faith Mennonite Church
12 Scriptures Project
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Seeking welfare in our exile
Jeremiah 29:1-14, Romans 8:18-39

We all experience periods of exile in our lives—of being in a place that we did not intend to inhabit...a place that we do not consider our permanent home. This can be geographical, emotional, physical, spiritual, social, mental, professional, or financial. Exile can happen suddenly and seemingly unrelated to anything that we have done—such as receiving a pink slip when the economic tide changes or when a loved one unexpectedly dies. It can happen over time, perhaps in part because of decisions we've made or patterns we've chosen. Exile may be related to conditions we've inherited.

However we arrive at this place we did not choose, at a place that is not home, we likely share, at some moment, feelings of anguish, helplessness, anger, and injustice. We may feel deeply alone, disconnected from the communities that surround us and disconnected from God. No doubt our strongest urge in such times of exile is to hasten its end...to return to a former time and life, which all of a sudden become idyllic in our memories; or to escape to a new future free of the current disorienting pain.

The wisdom of Scripture and the experience of our spiritual ancestors suggest a different path. Slow down. Seek the shalom, the welfare, *within* your place of exile and in doing so you will find a new home. This was the Word of God that the prophet Jeremiah communicated to the exile community in Babylon in the 6th Century BC. The divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah had both fallen and their people were now scattered in three places. Some remained in Jerusalem, some went to Egypt, others were in Babylon.

A certain “prophet” named Hananiah assured the exile community in Babylon that their time there would be brief—just two years. Welcome news, we can be sure! But Jeremiah cried foul and said that's not what God had in mind. No, settle in for a good long stay: build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children, and seek the welfare of this place of exile.

Which message would you want to hear? Two years or 70 years? If we were given the choice, we'd no doubt choose two! But in this case there wasn't a choice; the exile community was at the mercy of their captors. And, for Jeremiah, the captors were at the mercy of God. This exile was part of the overall work of God.

The Jewish exile in Babylon did what all times of exile do: it raised deep questions about accepted understanding and identity. The Jewish people had been freed from slavery in their past and had received the promise of land and a kingdom that would last forever. They understood God to be on their side. God would protect them from their enemies. Having their country overrun, their temple destroyed, and their leaders taken captive shattered that former understanding.

The prophets—Jeremiah and others—interpreted the exile as a consequence of and punishment for sin. The people had turned away from God, creating alliances with foreign powers and ignoring injustices within their borders. Being God's chosen people carried expectations and responsibility, not unmerited privilege and safety.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the Word from God to seek the welfare of this place of exile—this enemy territory. It would anticipate the words of Jesus, centuries later to “love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” The community in exile was not to close itself in a ghetto or plan a clandestine uprising, but to enter into the life of the community, to bring life to themselves and to the wider community. “Seek the peace/welfare of the (pagan, foreign) city.”

And it is in the heart of this turbulent, world-turned-upside-down reality, that we hear the beloved word from God: “For surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” This is no inscription on a Hallmark graduation card for someone who has grown up in a safe, loving home and is about to head off to college. (Although it's fine to use it that way

too!) These words are spoken into the very center of the exile experience. And they call for a response: “Call upon me, pray to me, search for me and seek me with all your heart,” says God.

This is the activity of exile. It is the opening of ourselves to the unfolding of this plan that God has for us...a plan for our welfare and not our harm. We open ourselves as we combine the actions of building homes, planting gardens and having children (interactions with the community) and the actions of prayer and seeking after God with our whole hearts (deep spiritual actions). These combined actions didn't restore the exiled community to their former status, but broke open a whole new, creative future. Indeed, the time of exile is considered to be the most creative time in Israel's history, more so than even the height of the monarchy under David and Solomon. Scholars now recognize that this was a time when much of the Old Testament, as it has come down to us, was written or edited. It was a theologically rich and productive time.

Of course, return from exile was not the end of the story. The return brought its own challenges and tensions: How would the remnant community in Jerusalem that had endured poverty during this time receive the returned exiles who had flourished abroad? How would the remnant community, which had remained ethnically “pure” receive the exiles who returned with foreign spouses and mixed-blood children after several generations of seeking the welfare of the city?

Centuries later the Apostle Paul and the early church lived in a new experience of exile. They believed that God had worked powerfully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, fulfilling God's original covenant intent to draw all people—all of creation—to Godself. Nevertheless they faced opposition from the surrounding culture of the Roman Empire. And they faced opposition from the religious community that gave them birth. But Paul pushed onward in hope. Like Jeremiah who encouraged the exiles to seek the peace of the city, Paul wrote to the church in Rome, the very heart of the empire, to trust in a new, unfolding reality: “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The opposition, the persecution and suffering were not the final word. These were but the path that Jesus walked and that was confirmed in his resurrection.

And the power that raised Jesus from the dead was the power of God's eternal love. And it was in that power of love that Paul rested his case: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

We often read these as words of individual assurance for our personal experiences of exile, but Paul was writing them in a collective sense to the church. The letter and feedback we have received from Central Plains Conference, following the regional meetings last fall (which we will discuss during the education hour this morning), may well leave us feeling in a place of exile. This is not a new experience for this congregation but that doesn't make it any easier. There is a way in which seeking the welfare of the city over the past few decades, opening ourselves to the experiences of immigrants, of the lgbt community, of the homeless, of the pain of mental illness, has shaped our understanding and identity in a way that creates a new time of exile within our conference.

Today, I believe that the word of God through Jeremiah to Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis may well be “Seek the welfare of the conference, for in their welfare you will find welfare.” I do not know what this means; that is something we will need to continue to discern together. But God's wisdom is always greater than our wisdom, God's ways always beyond our ways. What we can be assured of is that the wisdom and the ways of God are ways of love and compassion and life. I trust that God's Spirit will be our guide.