

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah
Jeremiah 29**

Good morning, everybody! How're we doing? Happy Father's Day, fathers! My two-year-old boy told me last night that I am the greatest dad in the world. I apologize if that is a letdown for you other dads and you're in a distant second place. I'm only two years into this thing! Anyway let's pray before we get into this series this morning. We will be looking at the story of Jeremiah, the prophet who weeps constantly, unlike those children who apparently have never cried before in their lives.

Jesus, God, You are good and we thank You that You give us freedom to come and worship You and experience You as You are right now, available, so willing to be found. Speak into these moments how You would. We love You. In Jesus' Name, all of God's people said,

[All:] Amen.

It is a gorgeous day today for it to be Father's Day and so I apologize for what we are going to do. We are going to go into a dark place just a little bit. Jeremiah was a dark person in a lot of ways. If you study the story of Jeremiah, you quickly come to find that he was an emotional basket case more often than not. He swung from one extreme of complete joy, he was blissed out, he had to tell, or on the other side he was saying, "I wish my mother's womb would have been my grave. I wish I hadn't made it to Day 1." He's kind of all over the map.

One of the reasons he was so extreme was because this was a very extreme time in the story of Israel. Israel was in a dark place. Israel had forgotten what it meant to live in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh, the one who brought them out of Egypt and all the way to the Promised Land. They had given up that relationship and in exchange, they took on rituals. They took on this idea that that was the faith of their forefathers, that it was the faith of their parents. "They acquired the land. We don't have to do anything anymore. We don't have to live differently because what they set out to do, they accomplished. How we live now doesn't really matter." However, Jeremiah said, "That is not true at all."

Jeremiah was the kind of prophet whose car you would hear going down the street to Jerusalem. It probably was a Charger and he would be shouting out at people, "Turn or burn!" He was a doom and gloom kind of prophet. Kids would run when they saw Jeremiah coming. Old men would cower in the corners. Jeremiah was an intimidating force because he could not stomach the idea that God's people would turn their backs on Him. But that's exactly what was happening, so much so that in Jerusalem at this time, there were high altars being built, not to worship God but to offer children as sacrifices to Baal. They were killing kids to honor another

god, and Jeremiah was fed up. There's a moment when you see it most explicitly. It's in Jeremiah, chapter 7 when he goes to the temple and gives this sermon.

⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place,

if you stop killing those kids,

and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm,

then I'm going to let you stay. This land that your parents came and found, that was promised to your people, it could be promised to you. If you change,

⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.

⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

There was a gap between the words and the ways of the Israelites. For them, religion wasn't a relationship where they actually engaged with the heart of God. It was religious pageantry and in this way, for them back then and for us today, religion can be dangerous because religion can be an incredible smokescreen that keeps us from seeing the movements underneath what is actually happening. Religion can teach you that all you need to do is show up at the temple, tuck your shirt in, mind your Ps and Qs, perform your lines perfectly and you're good. Nothing else really matters. So the people were going to the temple and they would say, "This is the temple of the Lord" but then they would go and repress and kill and cheat and lie. Jeremiah was hoping they would change their ways because if they didn't, a storm was coming. Life was going to be taken from them.

You see this idea of living in a false story under a limited reality in our favorite Kansas girl, Dorothy Gale. Do you remember Dorothy Gale? Small dog Toto? She was about yay high. Dorothy Gale lived in the dirty thirties when the Dust Bowl completely covered Kansas, in a time when you didn't really have much dreaming for the future. You were just trying to get by in today. You were just trying to make ends meet. In the same way, the Israelites were living a limited experience underneath a false story and a tornado came and swept them away. In 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians surrounded the city of Jerusalem. God said, "If you change your ways, it doesn't have to be like this. You could stay in the land." But they didn't change their ways, so Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians surround Jerusalem. For 18 months straight, they beat Jerusalem black and blue until the city completely falls. King Zedekiah is led into exile. His own kids are killed in front of him. The political, the religious, the social, the leadership, everything is taken from him. They all walk 800 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon where they will die. They will live forever in exile.

Jerusalem was burned, destroyed. The temple is no longer standing. The only people left behind are the peasants, the poor, the ones who nobody really cared about, people like Jeremiah. Everyone else though is gone. The tornado took Dorothy to Oz and Nebuchadnezzar takes Judah into exile in Babylon. In Psalm 137 we read that the people are weeping and mourning by the rivers of Babylon.

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
- ³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- ⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?

"How are we actually supposed to live as we are capable of living? God is back there. We have been abandoned. We are orphans." Instead they probably sang the anthem of all exiles at all times. Maybe you remember this song.

[Video clip.]

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
There's a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby

The temptation when you go into exile, when life flips your world upside down, is to believe that all hopes for a good future, all dreams, all potential that your day tomorrow could be better than your day today, is gone. Everything is behind you. You want to return to when the tornado was not there. You want to return to the hours before Babylon set Jerusalem on fire.

Let me ask you a question. Have you had a moment in your life where before that moment everything felt like it was in control? Everything felt like you understood what it was and then that moment came and after that nothing looked the same? You were lifted into a new reality. You once had prepackaged answers when people asked you, "Who are you? What are you about?" You would answer, "Well, I'm this. I do that. That's what I am." Now everything has shifted. Perhaps you had a job you loved and then they made cutbacks. Perhaps you had a child who got sick and the doctors were quiet. Maybe you retired and you woke up the next day and you didn't know what to do with the time. Maybe you are a high school hockey star, the life of the party, and then you graduated. When you go into exile, away from the crowds and the trophies and the accolades of back home, exile is a chance to find out for yourself what you are about. This is the opportunity that is before the Israelites. And yet in exile, they are there with the false prophets who are saying, "You cannot be you unless you are back in Jerusalem." In other words, they fell for the same lie that Dorothy fell for, that there is no place like home. You can't be you unless you can get back. But it makes no sense. At least it made no sense to the scarecrow. [Here is a scene from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.]

"Tell me something about yourself and the country you came from," said the Scarecrow [to Dorothy]. . . . So she told him all about Kansas, and how gray everything was there, and how the cyclone had carried her to this queer Land of Oz.

The Scarecrow listened carefully, and said, "I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas."

"That is because you have no brains" answered the girl. "No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home."

The Scarecrow sighed.

"Of course I cannot understand it," he said. "If your heads were stuffed with straw, like mine, you would probably all live in the beautiful places, and then Kansas would have no people at all. It is fortunate for Kansas that you have brains."

That's pretty good, right? We have these imaginary moments of nostalgia when we believe that our yesterdays were so good... if we could just get back there. I've had that experience. I think it was maybe Week 1 after having a child when I came crying into John Mitchell's office because I wasn't sleeping any more. I thought, man, if I could just go back to before this whole thing. I love my kid. Don't get me wrong. I feel like I really need to say that out loud right now. I do love my child, but losing sleep so quickly was that moment when I wanted to reach backwards. You realize oftentimes that in reaching backwards, you are opting out of the colors of Oz and choosing to live in the colorless land of Kansas. You are going back to that lesser version.

We reach all the time. It is part of the human condition. In fact, if we go back all the way to the story of Genesis in the beginning of time, there have been many creative storytellers who have joined the writers of Genesis, saying that you can't actually ever go back home. We all live east of Eden now. Life moves automatically forward, but we have the choice. Will we move with it? We always just try to reach backwards.

You see, exile came for the Israelites at a time when they thought they had it all figured out. They thought if they just did religion, they would be secure. God would have their back. But then Jerusalem was set on fire. Exile is that chance to remember that you can't wear a winter coat in the middle of July. Seasons change. Time is not a static and still thing. The moments come and the moments go. The tornado happens. Life sends you into a new direction and if you do not evolve and go with it and be in the moment where you are, you cease to live.

When you abide by the rules of a false story, you become like a flea that has been stuck in a jar. I don't know if you guys know this about fleas. They can be stuck in a jar, jumping up and down. They can jump much higher than the lid of the jar, but when they are in the jar for several days in a row, they will hit their heads on that lid. Day in, day out, they hit their heads. Then, when the lid is removed and the fleas come out, the tragedy is that even without the lid, they will never jump higher than the height of the lid. They are stuck to that false story. They live in that story, that dominant narrative that says you cannot be you unless you are back there in that time. The tragedy of the fleas is that they have copied and pasted their own flying patterns. And their children copy and paste the flying patterns of their parents and will never fly higher than the lid that they have never even experienced.

So what happens and what we learn from something like this is that exile can provide us with an opportunity. If we do not seek to live in the moment and are only living behind us, it is not just going to impact us, but we will also inflict damage upon other people. Other people pay for it. The Bible talks about that over and over again with the generational curses that happen. When

you carry on a negative story, it does not stop there. It seeps down and it continues. That is why, I think, when Jeremiah is standing in Jerusalem, the first thing he tells them is

² . . . “Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. [Jeremiah 7:2-3]

This is what the Lord Almighty says to all those He carried into exile. God was the one who delivered this. God was the tornado and could it be that the tornado did not come for destruction but was actually offering a chance for deliverance? Could it be that that in life-altering moment you went through, that moment that felt like much more than just a moment, could it be that God was saying, “I cannot stomach the idea of leaving you as a flea. I want so much more for who you are”? The tragedy of the life of a flea, the lesser version that was being lived out in Israel, was not that they were aiming so high with their lives and missing. The tragedy was that they were aiming so low and hitting the target every single time until God interrupted and broke that pattern of false stories and took them into something new, something better.

When Jeremiah wrote to the people in exile, what did he say? What do you say in a moment like this when the world has been set on fire, when you no longer know what the next step is, what the right words are? What will he say to the people in this time? Here is what I think is one of the more prophetic things found in all of Jeremiah’s texts. He says this.

⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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. 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.” [Jeremiah 29:5-7]

You see, what is happening here in the exile is that the people who thought they had everything are exposed and are finally beginning to realize that they had nothing. In the exile, you come to the end of yourself, which is the perfect place to be if God is going to do an amazing new thing in your life. This is a creation-out-of-nothing story. God created the world when it was just a void. It was chaos. Out of nothing God brought forth life and light and He is doing it again right here. The powerful image that Jeremiah is casting here says, “You can begin again. Whatever went wrong with your life before, whatever was not going right with your life before, the opportunity for newness is now.”

This is revolutionary because at this time, the Jewish people were thinking there was no way they could begin again because God is back there 800 miles away and they are right here. How could we actually do that? But Jeremiah is saying that even though Jerusalem burned in the fire, God did not die in the flames. God is not limited to that space right there. The Spirit seeped into the streets. Jeremiah is calling for the revelation to understand that this can be Jerusalem right here in Babylon. “Wherever you go is where God is.” Paul says it like this.

²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ [Acts 17:28]

In the Father, in the Almighty, inside of His reality, we live and move and have our being. We can’t be exiled away from God. Amen! The people in the exile were coming to understand this.

This was a wakeup moment for them. Years and years before, Jacob, the patriarch, had gone on a little sojourn, on his own little exile, where he wandered and then fell asleep. He had a dream and had experiences inside the dream.

¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” [Genesis 28:16]

I don't know if you are like me in this way, but I can get so busy, so wrapped up in to-do lists and the routines and patterns of my everyday life. And if it's not that, it's often reaching back, wishing I had that one thing that I don't have, and I become completely unaware that God has been in this place all along. To build, to plant, to settle down, to eat the food, to get married, to make babies, and then to pray for your enemies is God's way, saying through the words of Jeremiah that your story is not over.

Friends, this is the story of resurrection right here. We look at the resurrection of Jesus and think of it as a historical event that was landlocked into that time and place. But what Christ says through Paul's writings is that the story of Christ coming out of the grave can energize you. It is the spirit of the resurrection that is here today telling us that no matter what pain we have, the story is never over. That pain is real. We name that pain. We experience that pain. We step into that pain. We own that pain, but the moment the pain tries to say that it has the final word we walk away because the resurrection says that the story is never over.

Exile may be that Holy Saturday, the day after Christ goes on to the cross, but it lives in anticipation of the tomb being emptied. What Jeremiah writes is that today is Day 1, so practice resurrection. Experience what God is calling you into right now, because this is where God is. God is not in the past. He is not distant in the future. He is right here waiting for you. And the question He asks throughout the story of Genesis, of Adam, of Moses, over and over again is, “Where are you? Where are you? Are you here with Me, or are you still back there?”

We are powerfully reminded in this story of what it looks like to wake up and realize that God has not abandoned us, God has not left us and anything is possible. When we come to that place where even though we are on the banks of the rivers of Babylon, even though we have left our city and our homes and everything we once knew is gone, we build and we plant and we settle and we move forward. There is a powerful hope that this gives to the world.

We saw it this week in Charleston, South Carolina. You had a group of people who were living in the reality of experiencing God in this moment. They had come together to listen to the story of God as it was designed to be heard, and in walks a young man whom they immediately welcome into their community. They pull up a chair for him. An hour later, the young man opens fire on nine of them, ending their lives. This is a tornado moment. Nebuchadnezzar has seized Jerusalem and it is on fire. This is that Saturday moment of the exile where you can either believe He did indeed die last night, or you can live, practicing resurrection. There is not a more important story that the world needs to hear than of a group of people who are daily practicing resurrection, who are daily being dealt blows, but getting back up because death cannot have the final say. Love always adds an extra word. To practice resurrection is to say that hate will not win. It can't win. That is the Gospel message in a nutshell right there. It is that Christ came to conquer death.

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?” [1st Corinthians 15:55]

Death is no longer because hate cannot win. Love has to win. The story of Jeremiah calling to the people in exile who have lost everything is to say this. “You have little say in when your story starts. Its context is out of your hands. But you have much to say about the content.” Will we be a people who practice resurrection and bring life and light into the darkness of death when everybody else says, “You should cease to go on living”? Jeremiah says, “You leave the banks of Babylon and you pray for the enemy. You pursue the welfare of those who try to take everything from you.” The families of the victims sat in the courtroom on Friday and told the killer, “You are loved. May God have mercy on you. We forgive you. You hurt us. We’re not going to play it off like you didn’t. You did, but we forgive you.” That’s an incredible story that needs to be lived.

I don’t know if your story starts in a place like Kansas where it’s just kind of confusing. Maybe it’s just the ho-hum, daily patterns of life where you aren’t thinking you really have much of a future. It is what it is. Or maybe it is like Jerusalem. Something happened. Something went wrong. Somebody did something to you and all of a sudden you no longer know how to go on living. I don’t know where your story begins, but the powerful message of the Gospel is that you get the opportunity to begin again because Christ is here. Christ is risen and He is calling you to come from death to life. People are depending on you to do so. Pray with me.

Jesus, You are God. You are good. You have given us permission to live again. You have encouraged us, Lord, not to give up, not to believe that death has the final say. You have encouraged us to believe that the tomb is empty, but that love and life always win. The story is not over. Help us, Lord, to draw near to You, to find You, to cling to You, to wake up, Lord, and experience that You have been here all along and we were just unaware of it. In Christ’s Name, all God’s children said,

[All:] Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.