

The Welfare of the City
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Northminster Presbyterian Church
November 26, 2017
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You've got to love Jeremiah. After 20-odd verses of dire pronouncements and condemnations, and weeping for the failures of Judah and her people to follow God's ways, after haranguing the leaders for their injustices and the religious for their prideful piety, there he stands. Nebuchadnezzar has overtaken the city, the terms of surrender have been signed and the leaders of Judah are packed into their Lexuses and mini-vans and SUVs for the long trek over to Babylon where they will be dumped onto an undeveloped sector of land near the capital where the powers that be can keep an eye on them. And they will be forced to fend for themselves away from the power and the privilege and the servants, and the land that defines who and whose they are.

This is where the people find themselves. And they look over at Jeremiah, expecting a big fat "I told you so," but he is smiling at them. His is not a smile of the victor laughing at those who would not listen, but the indulgent smile of a parent who knows that what is about to happen won't be fun, but will be a learning experience for them. It will be the life they played their part in creating, but he will not gloat or triumph. No, he has these words for them, words he is so compelled to share with them. He places them in God's mouth and what does he suggest to them? Build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, raise your families, seek the welfare of the city of your exile. Very simply, he calls for them, in the midst of difficulty and challenge and the loss of almost everything they valued, he calls for them to live — not simply to survive, not simply to eke out an existence, but to let go of the fear and the anger and the frustration and the disappointment — and to seek the welfare of the city.

I have to admit that whenever I encounter this text — one of my few favorites in Jeremiah — it reminds me of that great character from literature, the stage and the screen, Auntie Mame, the fictional aunt of little buttoned-up, serious Patrick Dennis. She is always encouraging him and everyone else to "Live, Live, Live!" The plot takes Mame and Patrick from the roaring twenties through the crash of 29, the depression, the war years all the way to the successful 50s. And always, in wealth and want, Mame says to "live, live, live." So does Jeremiah.

One wonders what he might think of us. What a month! It began with contentious elections and the rising tide of the hashtag "metoo" as thousands of women have come forward to reveal the predatory, chauvinist, even illegal actions of men in power in Hollywood, Washington and countless offices and board rooms toward women and some other men. And of course political leaders have taken sides. The balance of power in the Senate may well ride on whether a man alleged to have had sexual contact with two teenaged girls over 30 years ago will be elected to the Senate. We have seen the spectacle of the Governor of Alabama saying she has no reason not to believe the women involved, but will vote for a man she believes to have committed sexual assault over a member of the party she opposes. And then there are the proposed tax bills, with their long lists of winners and losers that have many questioning what and who we value as a nation.

Commentators are disagreeing over what will be good and what might hurt people or the economy, and the trenches on both sides are dug deeper and deeper.

Does it feel like exile to you? The world so many of us thought we knew, the advances in what people have said about equality and respect, the language of our politicians about the value of every citizen and care for those in need gets twisted into something we can't recognize. Who we thought we were gets yanked away as sad and pathetic truths are revealed. Maybe that's how it was for some here at the beginning of the Babylonian exile. They thought things were going okay — the wealthy had been largely exempt from the sufferings of the last siege, but now they were the price of survival for Judah as a people. It was surrender to exile or die. Not exactly a "live, live, live" kind of moment was it?

In the midst of this odd m̄lange two stories were virtually lost in the news this week. Last Sunday was the anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg address, a reminder of a time when this nation was set against itself in the bloodiest war of our almost two and a half centuries as a nation. And Wednesday was the 54th anniversary of the Kennedy Assassination. I couldn't help but think that these are two men who very much lived the life that Jeremiah speaks of. And perhaps we have something to learn from them in the midst of our division and discord, for each in their own way arose from their own exiles to seek the welfare of the places in which God had placed them.

John Kennedy was a gregarious young man, popular and a devoted follower of his mother's edict — to whom much is given, much is expected in return. He was entitled, based upon the physical he took on entering the Navy, to have a desk job for his entire career. He refused, twice requesting transfers against the suggestion of his family doctor to be in a more forward combat position in the Pacific during the Second World War. He ultimately commanded PT 109, a stealth naval ship that one night on patrol was sliced in two by a Japanese destroyer. Kennedy almost single-handedly got his men to safety on an island almost three miles away, towing an injured crewman in a life-vest by holding the strap in his teeth. What he didn't reveal to his men was that he had seriously injured his back.

Eventually, after rescue and recovery, Lieutenant Kennedy was given an honorable discharge from the Navy. The basis of his discharge was disability. The man who would become a Senator and a President was entitled, from 1943 onward, still in his 20s, to retire on a military disability pension. He could have wallowed in his injury, retreated to the family compound and lived out his days as a wounded warrior, already a hero. Further, since his older brother, Joe, the star of the family had died in the war, he could have turned bitter and resentful that circumstance robbed him of a brother and his youth. But he didn't. His faith, his family and his own determination called him into a life of service — to seek the welfare of the place where God had placed him, not just Massachusetts, but eventually the entire world.

Abraham Lincoln was, by all accounts, a man whose faith was very private and who was skeptical of any organized religion. But he was also the President who, until the second President Bush, quoted scripture the most in his speeches and addresses to Congress and the nation, at least after 1862. What happened that year, his year of exile? Well, the war

had been going terribly wrong and there was growing pressure to reach a settlement that would divide the nation, something Lincoln simply could not abide.

And as the bitterest part of winter settled over Washington, William, his second oldest son, just 11 years old, came down with typhoid fever, caused by the contaminated drinking water in Washington D.C. And he died. Lincoln's son Edward had died of tuberculosis back when the Lincolns were living in Springfield, and the death of a second child almost destroyed the President. Private diaries of his confidants note that he withdrew to his office and would see no one for many days. But somewhere in the midst of his loss — the destruction of his dreams for Willie, who had told his Sunday School teachers at New York Avenue Presbyterian church that he wanted to be a minister someday, and the reminder of the loss of Eddie — somewhere in the midst of that loss, he found a new connection to the calling of his life.

From just days after Willie's death forward, Lincoln's resolve grew stronger than it had ever been. He rededicated himself to seeking the welfare of the nation entrusted to his charge and its most vulnerable. That summer he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and just a year later, as he prepared to make the speech we celebrated this week, he also did something we just celebrated. One hundred fifty-four years ago, the grieving father declared a national day of Thanksgiving for the fourth Thursday in November.

These two men somehow found that spark to "Live, Live, Live," that spark that Jeremiah seeks to light in his people as they are dragged away into exile. Just what motivated Jeremiah to change his tune from condemnation to comfort? What motivated Kennedy and Lincoln to rise from their despair and loss, to throw off the mantle of victim and surrender disappointment in favor of hope and service and life? Maybe they encountered what Jeremiah knew — that in the midst of their loss, God was still with them. God would journey with the exiles into Babylon and be with them. God was with those men struggling to survive in the Pacific. God was there weeping with a bereaved father in the White House.

Jeremiah is confident that God will never abandon the people and he seeks to remind them of that, and to encourage them to live as though it is true, to seek the welfare of their city. Because, even in a foreign land, even in exile, God is there. And apropos of today, God reigns. For us in our time, we proclaim Christ reigns, God with us now and forever. And in Christ's sovereign kingdom, life and love and hope and justice and peace and wholeness are both the goal and the end result. All of that can be summed up in one word, Shalom, completeness.

What Jeremiah and Kennedy and Lincoln and even Auntie Mame seem to understand is that we aren't promised an easy life or one free of exiles. But we are invited to see each day as the gift it is and more importantly, to remember that life only has value if it is lived, if it shares itself and if it seeks the wholeness, the peace of wherever we find ourselves. For that is actually what Jeremiah tells the people. Seek the shalom of the city into which you are being sent in exile. Seek peace and mutual prosperity even in the land of your enemy, even in the place you do not want to be, for there your welfare, your shalom, may be found as well.

It makes me wonder what exiles might have us captive? Yes, it is a political swamp that we are slogging through. But aren't there others — retirement, busy-ness, unrealistic expectations, unwanted changes in living arrangements necessitated by health, illness, injury? All of these can be exiles.

So what are we to do? Crawl into the hole that is our own little lives, or our own little church? Build up the walls and protect ourselves from whatever it is out there that forces us into exile? What do we do? Jeremiah said it. Mame said it. "Live! Live! Live!" Build houses, plant crops, take husbands and wives, marry your children off, see to the family, invest in the future — emotionally, economically, spiritually.

But we don't do that alone. Today we are celebrating the church year, the annual march of the liturgy from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost to Ordinary time to this day, Reign of Christ Sunday. The church calendar is one of those constants, a reminder that the seasons change, but God is with us in all of it. And today we remember too that our loyalties may change, we may move from regime to regime, but our ultimate fealty is NOT to leader or party or nation but to God in Christ, our sovereign lord who will not disappoint.

May Christ, our sovereign, empower us to be thankful for the lives we have, for the blessings we have received, but also empower us to be bold, to fully "live, live, live" the individual and corporate lives we are meant to live in this place. Let us, hand-in-hand with the Spirit of our living Lord, seek the welfare, the shalom, of the many places into which we have been sent — in exile, perhaps, in joy, sometimes — our home lives, our families, our careers, our church family, and our world. May we, who have been fed from time to time at that table, see the joyous banquet that is life. And may we be the bearers of its life-giving food of love and grace to the world. And so, let us "Live! Live! Live!" May God make it so. Alleluia, Amen.