

Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apartⁱ

2nd of 5: *When Dreams Unravel* ~ Jeremiah 29:4-14

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

Most of Jeremiah's 52 chapters, never see the light of day in a pulpit or in a Sunday School classroom. All that doom and gloom is hard to take on a Sunday morning. However, verse 11, the second sentence of the text I am about to read, is one verse from Jeremiah that is well-known. "For I know the plans I have for you..." It appears on plaques and pendants. It is particularly popular among college students on posters in their dorm rooms. I know it gave me hope me when I was a young adult wondering where in the world my life was going. Although v. 11 holds meaning for us regarding our individual lives, today you will get to hear this verse in context. It is actually part of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the people of Israel who had been deported from their home in Jerusalem, and their lives as they knew them were completely unraveled. Their lives as they knew them, utterly shattered. Yes, their dreams and their very identity as God's chosen, covenant people had unraveled. To these broken, disoriented people, Jeremiah wrote a very surprising letter.

Today, in our second week of this UNRAVELED series, we are a long, long way from last week's story that took place in the heat of the day, by the Oaks of Mamre. You may recall that story was about the totally surprising, upending news of Sarah finally, after years of not being able to bear a child of her own, having a son in her 90's. In today's story, here comes God again, with utterly surprising, counterintuitive directions. That is the thread that runs from the Oaks of Mamre to the exiles in Babylon. God's signature moves of surprise and impossibility. And the call, as always, to have faith in God's larger plan. Talk about the long game: you will hear in this letter a promise they will have to wait seventy years for it to be accomplished. Seventy years! Keep in mind that seventy years back when this was written in 597 BCE, was actually about *two* life-spans. Life expectancy was only 35 years for the original hearers of this letter. This promise would not be fulfilled until the grandchildren of these folks hearing this letter, had been born. God's dream, God's future for us, is threaded with hope in a larger vision of which we are a small, but essential part. What will we do with the short time we are given?

Sermon:

Have you seen the ad? It was the picture of a snazzy, intricately engineered running shoe that grabbed my attention as I was reading a news story on my phone. (Adidas marketing knows what it is doing.) Just underneath the picture was the tag line: "4DFWD is the next big thing in 3D printed midsole innovation. Coded to move you in one direction only: forward." I then googled around a bit and discovered there is actually an 11:28 YouTube video you could watch to hear the full story of these, purportedly remarkable, breakthrough shoes. Of course, as an aging runner, the idea of a shoe that would move me forward caught my attention. Totally worth \$160...

Whether you are a runner or not, isn't moving forward something we all want to do? And how ever we might get an edge to help us do that: we're in! We do not like going backward.

Going in reverse causes severe tire damage, yes? Right now, we are all finding our way in the midst of what feels like a reversal in our collective effort to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. Worse than severe tire damage (annoying, but we know how to get tires fixed and replaced) is what feels like a reversal in our fight against the COVID pandemic: the Delta variant. Right when we thought we were past the worst of it. We are so ready to move on.

How wonderful it has been to reopen church for worship and to end our exile from gathering for worship. Singing, praying, being together are joys we no longer take for granted as we once did. Just this past Friday, for the first time we had the joy of sharing a funeral luncheon meal in Fellowship Hall again, after the memorial service for Mary Ousley. The angels of FPC, got to do their magic and put their hands and hearts together to host a spread that filled our bellies and our hearts. Wonderful! Yet the changing circumstances of COVID in our community and nation are calling our "Reopening Work Group" to meet again, for the first time since May. Today, after worship, this group will do its best to discern how God is calling us to move forward faithfully in the context our most current data and health recommendations.

While the COVID-19 global pandemic has exiled all of us from the life we knew before March of 2020. As of June, the number of exiled people literally fleeing wars, violence, persecution, and human rights violations world-wide rose to a record-high 82.4 million people, more than 1 % of the world's population (1 in 95 people). Thousands of Afghans have added to that number in this month, as they attempt to flee the Taliban takeover of their country. While God calls us to have compassion and to seek justice for those who are literally exiled, the experience of being literally exiled from our home or home country, is not something most of us have had to endure up close.

If we broaden the concept of exile beyond being banished or expelled from one's own country or home, to being banished from our metaphorical home, comfort zone, or familiar pattern of living: I think we all know what that feels like. Whether it's needing to move from your own home to an assisted living facility; or no longer being able to continue a seasonal migration away from Wisconsin winters; or learning to live without a loved one who has been your partner and companion for most of your life: these are all forms of exile, as well. For some of us it may be more internal, as our bodies change and our functionality diminishes, we can feel exiled from the body we've known and depended on for years. Any of these types of exile are hard. They make us mad at or upset with God. We may decide to shut down, in one way or another. Best to keep our heads down, pull in the wagons, armor up.

If you are feeling a little unraveled or full-scale exiled in one way or another right now, today's letter from the prophet Jeremiah may be just what you need to hear this morning. God's surprising instruction to them and to us: "Don't resort to blame game and blame the Babylonians, or anyone else, blame me. And don't stop living. Don't wait until some elusive "someday" to get on with the business of continuing to be God's covenant people. Right here and now: Build houses, plant gardens! AND not only that: seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. Yes, the welfare of the Babylonians. In its welfare you will find your welfare."ⁱⁱ

That's right, they are being told to pray for their enemies, their captors. This may be the text that Jesus was building on when he preached to the crowds on the mountain one day, to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44).

Keep in mind, the Hebrew word translated as "welfare" here is the word "shalom." A wonderfully, rich word that means peace, wholeness, healing within and among people. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God is telling them to *resist* the allure of succumbing to their feelings of despair, dismay, depression, and numbness. Instead to see, to dream, to imagine how their "shalom" is interdependent upon the "shalom" of the Babylonians. Just when they were sure it must be the season of break down, disruption, a season for hate and fighting back, God surprises them with a clear directive. Expand your vision, hope in the long-term future, and at this moment: move forward to survive. Without any special foot gear.

Exile felt like a death for the people of Israel. Death of their identity as they knew. Destruction of the temple built by King Solomon. And yet looking back, the period of exile was at the same time, extremely generative. It was also a period of rebuilding. Many of our Old Testament books were written during the time of Exile. And in time, the temple was rebuilt. Like Jesus' death and resurrection for us, so too this was the beginning of a resurgence for the people of Israel.

What about us and the feelings of exile we may be experiencing, as well as the over 1% of the world population who woke up in exile this morning? We heard in this text that "shalom," for all, the welfare of all, is at the core of God's dream. Yet, who know why, but God's gives us a choice when it comes to participating in making God's dream for the world come true or not. I have a story, written by Mark Nepo, spiritual poet, writer and philosopher, that can help us to see both the challenge and the choice we have, every day of our lives. Choices that will make a difference now, and in seventy years for the lives of our grandchildren. It is called, "The Story of Two Tribes." It goes like this:

In the beginning, when the first humans came across each other, it went two ways. Upon seeing someone different, the more fearful one said, "You're different. God away." The other, upon seeing someone not like him, said, "You're different. Come teach me what I don't know." While our reasoning has grown more complicated throughout the centuries, it's essentially the same. "Go away" or "Come, teach me." Since the beginning, the two tribes have had their philosophies. The "Go away" tribe has always believed that human beings, by their nature, are self-serving and untrustworthy, in need of control. The "Go away" tribe believe in stringent laws and constraints, both moral and legal, to ensure that people don't run amuck. The "Come, teach me" tribe believe in empowering laws that cultivate freedom, to ensure that people actualize their web of gifts through relationship.

The truth is that we are born into both tribes and can move from one to another, depending on the level of our fear. The times of genocide throughout history mark the extreme, malignant manifestation of the "Go away" tribe. Distorted by fear, it's not enough just to say, "Go away." For unbridled fear turns to anger, which normalized turns into prejudice and hate. Such embedded fear dictates that we need to make sure that those who are different can't

return. And so, we exile them, jail them, hurt them, and in extremely ugly cases, persecute and kill them.

However, the times of enlightenment throughout history mark the extreme manifestation of the “Come teach me” tribe, which through learning and wonder leads to eras of compassion and cooperation. Empowered by trust, curiosity turns into interdependence and a belief that we are more together than alone. When allowed to blossom, we realize that we need each other and our diversity of gifts to make life whole.ⁱⁱⁱ

The “Come Teach Me” tribe paints a picture that sounds like God’s dream, doesn’t it? While all spiritual traditions teach that we are all parts of the same whole that love and suffering reveal, in our Christian spiritual tradition, we have Jesus whose self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice. This is the thread that weaves throughout the gospels: Let go! Don’t cling! Don’t hoard! Don’t assert your importance! Don’t fret.” If you want to move forward, begin with some form of kenosis, self-emptying. Jesus-style.

One final thought: You may be surprised to learn that recent discoveries in neuroscience confirm that self-emptying, kenosis, the choice to live your life in the “come teach me” side of your brain will lead to God’s dream of shalom within and around us. Data collected by the California-based HearthMath Institute shows that if you respond with any form of initial negativity (which translates physiologically as constriction)—freezing, bracing, clinging, and so on—that pathway illumined leads to your amygdala (or “reptilian brain,” as it’s familiarly known) which controls a repertory of highly energized fight-or-flight responses. If instead, you can relax into a stimulus—opening, softening, yielding releasing—the neural pathway leads through the more evolutionarily advanced part of your forebrain and, surprisingly, brings brain and heart rhythms in sync with one another. This leads to a feeling of calm and shalom, which opens up new ways to consider what before may have seemed unbearable or intractable. When we train our brain and spirit let go of a thought, this interior relaxation helps you get ever closer to the “mind of Christ” within you.^{iv}

Whether we are talking about shalom for the people who have suffered 40 years of war in Afghanistan, or shalom for the crisis of unaccompanied children, teens and adults seeking asylum at our southern border, or shalom for the global and national public health threat of the Delta Variant, or shalom here in Marshfield, the way forward is neither simple nor obvious. Just as 4DFWD running shoes are not going to give me instant strength and speed to run like USA marathoner and bronze medalist, Molly Seidel, nor are we handed immediate and lasting solutions to all that is unraveling us. But we are given a glimpse of God’s dream. Of God’s way forward. It calls on all of us. And it calls us to see how our welfare, how our shalom is interwoven.

ⁱ This sermon theme series, “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart,” was created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ revgalblogpals.org, Rev. Pat Raube

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/fieldnotesonliving/2017/01/16/the-two-tribes>

^{iv} Center for Action and Contemplation, “Learning to Let Go”, 8.14.21.