

Lent Midweek Service, March 25, 2020

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

Psalms 96

Matthew 6:25-34

Even though our Jeremiah reading ended with one of our more popular Bible verses, this was not a popular message when Jeremiah preached it. The people have been conquered. Jerusalem is no more. They have been taken captive by the Babylonian and dispersed throughout the Babylonian empire. And the prophet who has been warning the people about this future, who has been calling them to change their ways and put God first in more than name; *this* prophet is now telling them to seek the welfare of the place they now find themselves. To work for good in the place they least wanted to find themselves.

And that is when God gives the promise that we print on signs, decorate our houses with, put on cards, print on planners... The promise that surely God knows what God has planned. In the context of this passage, I'm not convinced that this is a verse about fate or about God predestining all the events of our lives. I think this verse is a promise especially for the times when we find ourselves in places we do not want to be. Or for times when it feels like the floor has just completely fallen out from underneath us. I think this is a promise that God's love will not be deterred.

Outside of Israel, the predominant belief was in territorial deities. The deities were thought to have a particular territory where they were effective, and they would have to fight other deities for more territory. The belief also meant that if your country lost a war, that was because your gods had lost the war. So our spiritual ancestors lost the war to Babylon. I have said before that this exile shaped the whole Old Testament. It affected which books were included. One of the reasons the exile had so much power is that it forced the captives to wrestle with the question: is God God even here?

And even when we don't have formal "territories" for God, this is a question we often come back to whenever we are faced with any feelings of exile. Can God be God even here? Can God be God in the midst of an unwanted diagnosis? In the face of a town that doesn't look the same? In the face of COVID-19?

The Israelites wanted to hear that God was going to fix things immediately. That God would bring them home right away; that God would return them to their normal routines and places. But that's not the message Jeremiah has for them. Jeremiah tells them to make new homes and new routines. That this is the place they are going to be for a while, but that the answer to that important question: is God God even here? The answer is yes. Yes, God is God here. In the midst of the uncertainty. In the midst of the confusion and the unknown. God is God. And God is here. God is not confined to the places we normally think to find God, but God is loose! God is moving in places all around us.

Even in our own homes. This is our first worship that I am leading from my own home. I have had the luxury many of you have not for the past week: I was still leading worship from the church. But this week things are different. This week, as I hear these words from Jeremiah to build houses and families and lives in the midst of the exile, I'm making my own space in my house set aside to help me be more worshipful. I have candles that I light. I have a decorated egg. It's a fancy Easter Egg that was given to me a couple years ago. On one side, it has a cross. On the other, it says "Faith, Hope, Love." It's a reminder to me right now that we are Easter people; that even in Lent we live out of the resurrection. And it's a reminder to me that faith, hope, and love is what I am called to right now. While I have at least one or two bibles, I have the one that I have spent the most time reading and annotating in here with me as well. And I have a simple bowl. One that I already had, that I have filled with water to remind myself of the promise of Baptism. It's a simple space. But it helps me to feel worshipful.

"Bloom where you're planted" is our theme this week. I have commented before, but this theme of exile is far more fitting this Lent than I had imagined it would be. And this week, as we are more confined out of love for our neighbors, paying extra attention to where we have been planted is especially fitting. Because the words of Jeremiah are true for us today as well. Look at where God has planted you, even in smaller spheres than we are used to. Because God is God even when we are afraid or bored or lonely. "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you a future with hope." Especially when we do not feel hopeful, especially when we cannot see that hope, God calls us to trust. To trust that God is at work among us. That God is God even here.