

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Against the Flow

(studies in Jeremiah)

Grateful and Contended (in Babylon?)

(Jeremiah 29)

Study #9

Introduction: Exiles...

Exile – even the word sounds ugly.

To be “exiled” is to be forcibly removed from one place. Usually, exile removes you from the place where you are most comfortable, the place where you most want to be - to another place.

And usually, the new place is VERY different from your place and usually not at all what you would choose.

- Near the end of the first Christian century, the apostle John was exiled to the isolation of the island of Patmos for being an outspoken servant of Jesus.
- During the 20th century, the Soviet Union sent millions of Russians into exile - many of them to the frozen wasteland of Siberia.
- Among our own nation’s saddest chapters is the story of the exile of Native Americans from their homelands to new homes they didn’t want.

Throughout history, political dissidents, hated minorities, threats to the ruling powers, and unwanted populations have been exiled from their homeland.

Exile, sadly, is something that many, many people have experienced.

Essentially, to be exiled is to be forced to live in a place you don’t want to live and to live among people you don’t want to be with.

The most extreme cases of exile involve physical dislocation. And clearly, this most extreme form of exile is traumatic and terrifying.

For most of us, a sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When these things change, violently and abruptly, who are we?

The exile often feels like worthless baggage. *“No one needs me. I am just a cast-off. I’m not necessary.”*

The place of exile may boast a higher standard of living. Its weather may be more pleasant. It doesn’t matter. It isn’t home.

“Exile” and “Home” are the great contrasts. Home is where we are comfortable. There are familiar sights, smells, sounds - and especially familiar people. Exile changes all of that.

Some of you here today may have experienced an extreme exile. Perhaps you have left a place because you were forced to. You didn’t want to leave where you were, and you didn’t want to go to THAT destination. Maybe you have been “exiled” to a prison cell because of a crime committed.

Or maybe you have experienced a less extreme, and much more common, exile.

Surely, every one of us here knows what it is to be in a place we would rather not be. Without a doubt we are all sometimes around people we wouldn’t choose to be with.

At some level we are all familiar with the uncomfortable, disturbing, dislocating world of exile. So the question comes to us, *“How do we live when we find ourselves in a season of exile?”*

There were some Jews who lived in the 6th century BC who found themselves in an extreme exile. The prophet Jeremiah wrote these exiles a letter.

That letter gave them instructions for how to live in exile – and it provides us with ground rules to follow when we find ourselves in a season of exile, too.

We read about this exile at the beginning of Jeremiah 29.

An Exile for the People of God

History of the Jewish Exile

*[1] Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [2] (This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the court officials, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.)*¹

Finally, the long-threatened exile has occurred. It is an exile that most of Israel's prophets had warned would come if the Jews continued on their rebellious way.

And, since they continued in rebellion, the exile was inevitable. This exile, though, came in stages. Here we read of the first stage.

In 598 BC the Babylonians carted off King Jehoiakim, the queen mother and most of the leading citizens of Jerusalem.

Very purposefully, the Babylonians selected the movers and shakers of society for exile. The reason is clear. With the leaders gone - artisans, merchants, politicians - the general populace would be more docile and submissive to the invaders.

Our focus today, though, is not on those left behind. Today, we are concerned with the exiles - those who went to Babylon.

They were uprooted from the place where they were born. They were forced to leave the land their forefathers had been promised by God.

They traveled seven hundred miles to Babylon, mostly along well-established roads. The journey would have taken long-hard months.² Jeremiah was one of those left behind, and he wrote this letter around 594, four years after the exiles had left Jerusalem.³

And what would the Jewish exiles have found when they arrived in Babylon? They would have found what exiles throughout history have found in the new place - that there is no place like home!

Character of the Jewish Exile

In Babylon, the landscape was odd - flat and featureless. In Israel, there were the coastal plains, sure. But there was also the beautiful Hill Country. There was nothing like that in or near Babylon. Nothing but miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles of endless plains.

And the climate was different. It was mercilessly hot.

And the customs of the people were strange. The language was unfamiliar.

Plus, the people - who looked really weird (and then looked at the Jews as if THEY looked really weird!) - spoke a different language.

The food they ate was yucky. Buildings were made of kiln-dried bricks rather than the sturdy stone of Palestine. The schools were sub-standard. There were no decent places to worship.

If we want to know how the exiles felt, all we need to do is remember the last time we were asked (or forced) to spend extended time with people we didn't like, doing something we didn't enjoy, in a place we would rather not have been.

Remember THAT and you know how the Jews in exile were feeling.

² And the rest of the populace was left behind under the puppet king, Zedekiah.

³ Isn't it interesting that Jeremiah was left behind. Evidently, he had been ignored for so long by the leaders that the Babylonians did not consider him important enough to exile...

¹ See 1 Kings 24:12-16.

They wanted to go home. Generally, exile is not something people choose. Exile is forced upon us. It puts us off balance. And the belief of most exiles is that the only way to regain equilibrium is to regain home.

It was to this people in exile that the prophet Jeremiah wrote his letter. He wrote to give them *“the word of the Lord”* - and *“the word of the Lord”* would tell them how to survive an exile.

But Jeremiah wasn't the only one claiming to bring *“the word of the Lord”* to these Jewish exiles.

In particular, there were three Jewish prophets - prophets who were also experiencing Babylonian exile - who were speaking to their fellow Jews. They are exiles, in exile, speaking to fellow exiles.

Messages to the Exiles

Messages from Three Prophets

These three men are listed in the second half of Jeremiah 29. Their names are **Ahab** and **Zedekiah**⁴ (addressed in verses 21-23) and **Shemaiah** (addressed in verses 24-32).

These three called attention to the unfairness of the plight of the Jews. Their message was the message people in exile most want to hear.

“Yes, Jerusalem is what we must get back to...Hang in there, folks, and we'll all get back home. This exile can't last that much longer. Not one of us deserves such a life as we have here in Babylon.”

These Jewish Babylon prophets spoke to the discontent of the exiles. *“Justice will prevail!,”* they cried! *“You will go home! And soon!”*

You can almost hear them describing dreams and visions God has given them of a triumphant return to Jerusalem after a quick end to the misery of exile.

⁴ Not the king, who was ruling Judah in Jehoiakim's absence, but another Zedekiah, the son of Maasaiah.

Another man - Hananiah - was saying similar things back in Jerusalem.⁵ His message was that God would quickly break the yoke of slavery they were suffering. The three prophets in Babylon declared with certainty that happy days were just around the corner, that Babylon would soon be a fading speck in their rear-view mirrors, and that a return home was in the immediate future.

This was the message that homesick exiles were hearing from the self-appointed prophets in Babylon.

And it was to these same exiles that Jeremiah wrote his letter.

The Message from Jeremiah

[3] The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon...

One day two men - Elasah and Gemariah - arrived in Babylon from Jerusalem carrying an official letter to the king of Babylon.⁶

These two were carrying official correspondence between Jerusalem and Babylon. Normal correspondence between subjects and king.

They were likely God-fearing men who were sympathetic to Jeremiah's message. So they were more than willing to stop off for a visit with the exiles on the way to the palace to take a few minutes to read Jeremiah's letter out loud.

The letter was from Jeremiah. More properly, it was from the Lord.

And in this letter, the Lord gave instructions to people who find themselves where they don't want to be, living among people they don't want to be around, who want nothing more than to go home.

⁵ Read about it in Jeremiah 28.

⁶ Both of these men were from priestly families that played an important part in King Josiah's reforms, twenty five years earlier.

The message was a shocking one. A jarring one. And it was provided a marked study in contrast to the message proclaimed by the three prophets in Babylon.

Build houses and live in them (v. 5)

[4] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile⁷ from Jerusalem to Babylon, [5] ‘Build houses and live in them

By this time, the Jewish exiles had been living in Babylon for at least four years. To this point, they were living in ramshackle huts or tents. Temporary housing.

They thought of themselves as being on an extended camping trip.

Jeremiah says, “*You are not camping. This is home. Make yourself at home. Go to Lowe’s or Home Depot and find out how homes are built here in Babylon. You know how to gather stones; now learn how to make bricks. Build yourself a nice, solid Babylonian home. Make it with a sturdy foundation. You’re going to be here a long time.*”

He delivers the death blow to thoughts of a quick return to Jerusalem. They are to settle down and to settle in for the long haul.

The letter continues.

Plant gardens and eat from them (v. 5)

[4] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, [5]...plant gardens and eat their produce.”⁸

For four years the Jews had engaged in subsistence living. “*Why plant a garden?*” they thought. “*We’ll be back in Jerusalem long before the tomatoes ripen? We won’t even be here for the harvest - why bother sowing?*”

Jeremiah assures them that they will have plenty of opportunity to eat the produce of the gardens they plant.

“Plant vegetables. Plant fruit trees. Plant shade trees. You’ll be here long enough for your grandchildren to enjoy their shade.”

Farming was different in Palestine. Regular rains provided all the water the crops needed. The desert climate of Babylon required irrigation from the mighty Euphrates River and the nearby Tigris River. The Jews would have to learn new farming techniques.

Jeremiah’s words called the Jews to become a productive part of the Babylonian economy. Citizens. Contributors. Not parasites.

If they thought they were going home soon, there would be no motivation to engage in committed, faithful work in Babylon. But Jeremiah’s letter tells them that the exile will last seventy years (v. 10).⁹

They are to enter into the rhythm of the seasons. They are to learn how to live with these soil conditions, these weather patterns. This is home. Learn Babylonian business practices. Learn Babylonian recipes and cook them. Learn to love the food.

Radical stuff. Jeremiah completely contradicts the words of the prophets in Babylon. And, still, there was more to the letter.

Raise families (v. 6)

People in exile (“extreme” and otherwise...) are often greatly tempted to consider the people they are with as beneath them.

Even though the exiles are foreigners in a foreign place, the people in the place they don’t want to be are still “foreigners” to the exiles. It is tempting to be aloof and irresponsible in exile.

⁹ [10] “*For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.* Obviously, Jeremiah knew this by revelation from God. But the fact that he could see the exile ending this quickly (i.e. - Babylon relinquishing power that quickly) is remarkable.

⁷ Note the words from God, “*I have sent into exile...*” Babylon wasn’t ultimately responsible for the exile. God, the Shepherd of Israel, was. (see also verse 7)

⁸ Note that Jeremiah’s original call involved “building” and “planting”. (1:10)

At least two of the three false prophets in Babylon - Ahab and Zedekiah - demonstrated their disdain for the Babylonians by engaging in casual sexual hook-ups with Babylonian women. (29:23)

And why not? *“We’re only going to be here for a little while. Our REAL relationships are back home in Jerusalem. It doesn’t much matter how we behave here in exile.”*

Why engage in meaningful relationships with these people? *“Because,”* Jeremiah would say, *“These people are now YOUR people. What you have in common with these people is far more significant than your differences.”*

Hence the command - **[6] Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.**

The Jews in exile were to develop deep and trusting relationships with the Babylonians. They were to love them. They were not to be afraid to marry them. They were to introduce these people to God in the most intimate of covenant relationships.

Jeremiah’s instructions wrap up in verse 7.

Seek the welfare (shalom) of Babylon (v. 7)

[7] ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’

The Hebrew word used here in verse 7 that is translated “welfare” is *shalom*. Of course, “shalom” means “peace” - but it means more than our word “peace” usually communicates. It speaks of an absence of conflict PLUS health PLUS prosperity PLUS safety.

The Jews were to be vitally concerned for the welfare of **Babylon!!**

“Throw yourselves into the life of the city. Go to neighborhood get-togethers. Engage in Chamber of Commerce discussions.

“Run for City Council. Do everything you can to promote justice and prosperity. And do what you do for the city on God’s terms. Do it prayerfully.”

No doubt, this would have been hard advice for the people to accept. More than likely, they had been praying for the downfall of Babylon. Jeremiah urges them to pray blessing, instead.¹⁰

The long-term future of the Jews was in Jerusalem, sure. But that is generations away. The personal long-term future of the exiles - the rest of the lives of those to whom Jeremiah is writing - is in Babylon.

While they are there they are to do the best they can **there!**

Summary:

Jeremiah’s letter was both a contradicting rebuke to the three prophets of Babylon¹¹ and a revolutionary challenge to the exiles.

He says to people who are absorbed in self-pity,

“There is no future in feeling sorry for yourselves. Your aim is not to be as comfortable as possible. It is to live as well as possible and to trust God as deeply as possible.

“You didn’t do very well at this assignment while you were in Jerusalem, did you? Well, that is why you are here in Babylon!

“Soooo... why not try living godly and deeply here? You’re going to be here for a long time, so you had better make the best of it. Don’t just muddle along, waiting for a miraculous rescue. Live fully here and now!

“The only opportunity you will ever have to live by faith in God is in the circumstance you are provided here. It may not be your choice place.

¹⁰ This was not totally altruistic. They would be blessed as Babylon was blessed!

¹¹ [8] **“For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. [9] ‘For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,’ declares the Lord.**

“But it is a place. Your life right now, here, is as valid as it ever was in Jerusalem.”

That was the word of the Lord to the exiles in Babylon. Words of rebuke and challenge.

But Jeremiah’s letter also contained words of promise. He wrote to the exiles about God’s wonderful plans for them.

Hope - God is in it (the exile)!

[29:11] ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

And following that reassuring promise, this -

[29:12] ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. [13] ‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. [14] ‘I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

The amazing thing is that this letter from Jeremiah is what actually shaped the exile experience for the Jews in Babylon.

Think about it. The Babylonian exile could have been the end of the Jews. It brought them to the edge of existence. As a people, they were hanging on by the skin of their teeth. Humanly speaking, the exile could have made the Jews an historical footnote as irrelevant as the Philistines, the Amorites and the Canaanites.

But God used Jeremiah’s letter to awaken these exiles to the realities of their faith. Living out what Jeremiah wrote, they didn’t simply survive in Babylon. They thrived and found abundance.

Jarred out of their discontentedness with exile by Jeremiah’s letter, they started to search for what it might mean to be God’s people in the one

place they didn’t want to be (Babylon). And as a result of that search, they didn’t lose their identity, they found it!

In exile -

- They learned how to pray deeper and more genuinely;
- They wrote and copied and pondered the Law and the prophets;
- They discovered the richness that is in the Scriptures;
- They found that God was not tied to a place;
- They found depths to their life with God they had never imagined possible;
- They lost everything they thought was important - and found God.

They did not become dull. Exile sharpened them. Exile brought out the best in them.¹²

The word of the Lord had its intended result - and the Jews lived!

Not that they all lived happily ever after...

You can imagine that Jeremiah’s words went over like a lead balloon with the three false prophets in Babylon. One of them, Shemaiah, desperately wanted to shut Jeremiah up!

To accomplish this, he actually wrote his own letter back to the High Priest in Jerusalem.

Nay-Sayers to Contentment

[24] To Shemaiah the Nehelamite you shall speak, saying, [25] ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Because you have sent letters in your own name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah, the priest, and to all the priests, saying, [26] ‘The Lord has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to be the overseer in the house of the Lord over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and in the iron collar, [27] now then, why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who prophesies to you? [28] ‘For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, ‘The exile will be long; build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce.’ ” ” ”

¹² As William Faulkner observed, “It’s hard believing, but disaster seems to be good for people.” Quoted in Eugene Peterson’s Run With the Horses.

Shemaiah was furious at Jeremiah's insistence that the Jews get used to the idea of living in Babylon. He wanted to go back to Jerusalem and he knew that if the people started feeling at home in Babylon, well, they would NEVER get back.

A message such as Jeremiah brought is never very well-received by some.

The message of contentment is hard. *"Accept your situation as the place where God wants you. Accept the people around you as the people God wants you to be around. Live well here. Love them well now."*

It's so much easier - and may even seem so much more RIGHT - to wait until you are back where you are "supposed" to be among the people you are "supposed" to be with to start living well.

Conclusion:

Thanksgiving Day has come and gone, but this is my Thanksgiving sermon. Thanksgiving and contentment go hand in hand. Both are relatively easy exercises when life is sweet. Both are challenges for people facing exile.

How are we to live when we find ourselves in a season of exile? It is an important question because, truth be told, life is an experience of exile.

- We are exiled from the safety and comfort of our mother's womb and begin afresh in strange and harsh surroundings.
- We are exiled from our homes and find ourselves in the unfamiliar world of school.
- We are exiled from school and have to make our way the best we can in the world of work.
- We are exiled from our hometown and have to find our way in new cities.

Change - in culture, in our bodies, in our health - all of it is exile from what is familiar and comfortable.

Exile (being where we don't want to be; being around people we don't want to be with) forces a decision: Will I focus my attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for myself? OR will I focus my energies on how I can live at my best in this place, here, now?

Exile offers us a choice to say either -

"I don't like it here. I don't like this situation. I don't like these people. I want to be back there, where I was a few years ago, with those people. I'll settle for mediocrity until circumstances change. Until God provides what I need and long for, I refuse to call THIS home."

OR

"I will do my best with what is here. Far more important that this place's climate, economy, neighbors, politics, etc... is the God of this place. He loves the people of this place and He is here, now. I can just as well live out the will of God here as anywhere else. I'm confused and I feel out of place. I have much to learn here. But I remember feeling like this back home sometimes, too. Change is hard. Developing intimacy among strangers is always a risk. But if that is what it means to be human and to be alive, I will do it."

Normal life is full of distractions and irrelevancies. Then comes catastrophe: Dislocation. Illness. Accident. Job loss. Divorce. Death. These are exile experiences. The reality of our lives is rearranged without anyone consulting us or waiting for our permission. We are no longer at home.

All of us are given moments, days, months, or years of exile. What will we do with them? Wish we were someplace else? Complain? Escape into fantasies? Drug ourselves into oblivion? Or build and plant and marry and seek the "shalom" the place we are in and the people we are with?

Exile reveals what really matters and frees us to pursue what really matters, which is to seek the Lord with all our hearts.¹³

¹³ Many of these thoughts have come from Eugene Peterson's writings, especially Run With the Horses, his meditations on the prophecy of Jeremiah. For years, Peterson has served as my mentor in pastoral work and I am deeply indebted to him.