What Disciples Do

Disciples Wrestle With God

OT 29C-22

Genesis 32: 22-31

10/13/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Jeremiah 29: 1-2, 4-7**

These are the words of the letter

that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem

to the remaining elders among the exiles,

and to the priests, the prophets,

and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar

had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother,

the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem,

the artisans, and the smiths

had departed from Jerusalem.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,

to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile

from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Build houses and live in them;

plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters;

take wives for your sons,

and give your daughters in marriage,

that they may bear sons and daughters;

multiply there, and do not decrease.

But 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 find your welfare.

What Disciples Do

“Disciples Make the Best of Babylon”

Imagine it’s the year 597 BCE. You’re a Hebrew, who spent your entire life in Judah, the name of the Southern Kingdom of Israel once Israel was split into two kingdoms. As a Hebrew, Judah wasn’t just your home. It was the heartbeat of your faith; it was the land God had promised to your ancestors… and to you; it was the source of your culture and the center of your identity.

But earlier that year, King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire conquered your beloved homeland. Initially, Babylon wasn’t as interested in occupying Judah as much as they wanted to use it as a vassal state to garner money. So at first… Babylon didn’t seek to destroy Judah or its capital city, Jerusalem… at least not yet.

Instead, in order ensure Judah would remain conquered and subservient, Babylon simply sought to export its rulers and military leaders, along with much of its upper class and skilled artisans.

Let’s imagine this is where you fit in. As a member of a craftsman’s family, you and your family got swallowed up in this initial round of forced migration as Babylon forced you and your fellow citizens to migrate some 900 miles to the heart of the Babylonian empire… what today would be somewhere near Iraq.

While you didn’t know what to expect… you were surprised to find that you weren’t thrown in prison or internment camps. Instead, you were allowed to live amid Babylonian communities… as long as you did what the empire told you to do, and put your skills to use on the empire’s behalf. So there… in Babylon… you were forced to work and live in a land that was not your own… surrounded by people who followed strange customs and worshipped strange gods and spoke a strange language you had no interest in learning!

And you could not escape. While you weren’t exactly a prisoner, you were also far from free.

You were an exile… who couldn’t go home. The whole of your life had been radically displaced… and there was nothing you could do about it.

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It was during this time you heard from two very different prophets. One was named Hananias, who *claimed* to be a prophet of the Hebrew God. Hananias wrote to all the Hebrew exiles in Babylon with wonderfully good news… saying, “Take heart. I have heard the voice of God declaring that God will break the yoke of Babylon. And all of you—from the king and the royal court to the artisans and craftsmen—will return to your homeland and find life once again.”

“Could it be?” all the exiles asked. Such a prophecy seemed too good to be true. All you needed to do was wait two measly years and life as you knew it would be restored! Hallelujah!

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But then you heard from a different prophet… a much more difficult… sort of gloom and doom kinda prophet named Jeremiah… who had heard something very different from the voice of God.

According to Jeremiah, God was not planning on ending the exile in two years… but in 70 years. According to Jeremiah, “thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles sent out from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may be children; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you… and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

And there you had it. Two men both claiming to be prophets of your God… but each proclaiming a very different prophecy than the other.

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Now… as we gather here today… clearly… you aren’t one of those Judean exiles living in Babylon. And as Americans… it’s almost impossible for us to really understand the threat or pains of living as an exile or even a refugee.

But if you were one of those Judeans living in that exile… consider, if you would, which prophet would you have wanted to believe?

Hananias or Jeremiah?

* The one who said, “Just be patient. Wait. In two years your old life will be restored.”
* Or the one who didn’t seem to care that you were in such a difficult place… but kept encouraging you to put down roots. To even invest in the Babylonian community around you… saying “Build… plant… eat… work… marry… live!”

And not just that. Jeremiah went so far as to foreshadow Christ’s own radical call to love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you… encouraging the Judeans to pray for the Babylonians… and invest in their communities.

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Considering we’re reading from the book of Jeremiah… and not Hananias… it’s a bit obvious which prophet turned out to be true… and which one was false. Jeremiah was the prophet who spoke truth to the Judeans. Jeremiah was the one offering the word of God.

But that doesn’t mean it’s not altogether natural to want something back when we lose it.

Whenever something we love leaves us… whether it’s a bygone era of a simpler time… or the loss of a job… or bad news from a doctor amid the loss of health… or perhaps the loss of relationship… the loss of someone you love… it is natural… healthy… necessary to grieve and yearn for what’s been lost…

To yearn for a return to when no one had heard the word Covid.

To yearn for the time when the kiddos were little.

To yearn for a return to when your body obeyed you.

To yearn for a return to when the dinner chair across from you didn’t sit empty.

Amid loss… it’s deeply understandable to ask God to take you back. To ask God to restore what’s been taken. To ask God to make things as they had been.

**But Jeremiah reminds us… God doesn’t work like that.**

God’s *not* in the business of returning us to periods past…

God’s in the business of leading us into new life.

Which is why God sent Jeremiah, God’s true prophet, to those exiled Judeans… to remind them while it is okay to grieve the past that is gone… that is no excuse not to embrace life today.

* While it’s okay to grieve that the kiddos have grown up… that’s no excuse not to enjoy who they are right now.
* While it’s okay to grieve the loss of your health… that’s not a reason to just give up and stop enjoying the life you have.
* While it’s okay to grieve changes to the world around you… that doesn’t mean kingdom life isn’t just as possible now as it was then.

“So live,” God told the exiles. “Live life as fully as you can. Yes—your circumstances may have changed dramatically. Yes—parts may be harder now than it was. But that doesn’t mean you still can’t eat and drink and grow and serve and seek the kingdom of God exactly where you are. It doesn’t mean you can’t give and receive love. It doesn’t mean you can’t still practice grace. It doesn’t mean you can’t still find peace… exactly where you are.”

Because Judah or no Judah… Jerusalem or no Jerusalem…. God is still with you. And if God is with you… wherever you are… and amid whatever you are experiencing… then kingdom life is always possible.

Even in Babylon…

Even in grief…

Even amid a pandemic…

Even when your surrounded by change you didn’t ask for and don’t like…

Kingdom life is still possible…

“So live,” Jeremiah prophesied. “And invest in where you are right now.

“Don’t wait for the past to be restored.”

“Don’t wait for things to be perfect.”

After all, perfection is not and never has been the goal. The goal is… and always will be… transformation.

So wherever we find ourselves, dear friends… in good times… and perhaps especially the bad… God tells us to live… and invest. Invest in the people around you. Invest in the needs around you. Invest in what is needed to keep pursuing the kingdom of God… exactly where you are. Understanding that while God is not in the business of returning us to what has past… God has shown us… time and again… that God can and does bring about new life… true life… kingdom life… even where we least expect it. Amen.