

“Bloom Where You’re Exiled”

PRAYER: Loving and forgiving God, we pray for our world today as we prayerfully bring the virus under control. May we all feel your love this week as they go about our work and play.

Welcome to worship once again this morning. As the summer of 2020 marches to an end and the cases of COVID-19 continues to dwell in our country, we look forward to more of you joining us once again in person very soon. Until then, know that you are missed, and that you can continue to worship with us in spirit. It would be easy for us to look around whatever room we are in this morning and wonder, “Just what is it that God is doing?” Left to our feelings, it is difficult not to conclude that maybe God has left the building. For those at home reading this worship service or even watching our video, it isn’t the same as gathering with God’s people and experiencing it together. It is the best we can do at the moment, but is certainly can’t compare to the real thing.

There are masks that make it impossible to see loving smiles, the lack of singing during the service, and the general feeling of discomfort and stress that seems to follow us whenever we leave our homes. We can do a lot more today than we could a month or so ago, but when we do it doesn’t always seem like it is worth the effort. It would be easy for us to begin to believe God has forgotten about us, even abandoned us. Easy to slip into despair as we wonder when will all this end.

Sisters and Brother, what pleasant and hopeful aspirations we had for our new decade. New Year resolutions that consisted of weight loss, quit smoking, more family time, achieving a long-forgotten ambition. We made it into the early weeks of Lent fasting and praying, all the while anticipating once again that the tomb would be empty – Christ is risen today, halleluia. A virus, economic upheaval, rampant systemic and intuitional racism, mask wearing, friendly protest, unemployment, riots, yes, Black Lives Matter, social/physical distancing, businesses closed, shortages of disinfectants products, paper towels, police reform, hopelessness, loneliness, and politics. Children of God, are you looking around? Are you looking? As we, the Church, the bride of Christ looks forward, are we looking for those who are looking for a lifeline? We can’t forget the mission, even as a lot of stuff is changing. Yes, lot of our normal is going to go away, but these things won’t go away. Prayer, stewardship, the mission of the Church.

The pressing question for us this morning is: “What do you do while you’re waiting?” How do you wait? The main idea of our text today is **Bloom Where You’re Exiled**. You and I are called to live and serve and act in anticipation of what is coming. We are not meant to fold our hands and arms and wear a frown at the way the world is. Rather, we look forward to God’s promise of deliverance by getting busy living under his reign.

Our Old Testament text subtheme from Jeremiah is referred to as “Promises of Hope”. The northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and now it is the southern kingdom’s turn to taste the bitterness of defeat at the hands of the Babylonians a little over a century later. So, it’s happened. (2King 24:8-17) The Exile promised by Jeremiah for the last 28 chapters has happened. King Jehoiachin (grandson of the great and pious King Josiah) and many of the well to do have been taken into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah is left in Jerusalem with a puppet king with the ironic name, Zedekiah, the Lord is Righteous. And he sends this “Promises of Hope” of letter to encourage those in Exile.

Like the Israelite Exiles, we are called to **Bloom Where We’re Exiled**. Realize that the place you live, the people you interact with every day, the job you have right now, the work God has called you to right now is not by chance any more than Israel being in Exile was by chance. Definitely the Lord uses means to get you and I to where we are, v. 1: “whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into Exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” But behind that instrument is the hand of God, v. 4.

Once we grasp that, we can understand that we are to **Bloom Where We’re Exiled**. One of the hardest things you have to do in life is to adjust to finding yourself in circumstances that you did not plan to be in and do not want to be in, but for the time being you cannot get out of.

Most of us have expectations of what we want our lives to be like. We have dreams of the ideal job, with work we passionate about doing and working alongside people, which makes the day so enjoyable it's wrong to consider it work. Dreams of salaries that will allow us to live the kind of life we want to live. We have dreams of a house in the country or in the suburbs or a condo with no grass to mow. We have dreams of getting finished with school and out of the house and finally being free from parental and teachers' direction. We have dreams of the perfect marriage and beautiful, bright, well behaved children.

Then real life happens and we have to learn to cope with disappointment. We find we have to start at the bottom of the job ladder, or we find that the job we have idealized has lots of drawbacks. That dream house is way out of our price range. Freedom from parents and school brings the harsh reality of a full-time job and monthly bills. The best of marriages brings plenty of challenges, and parenting often feels like trying to navigate a mine field in the dark.

It is against the backdrop of Babylonian atrocities and Jewish hatreds that Jeremiah's astonishing message must be heard. "O Jerusalem, cleanse your heart that you may be saved. How long will you harbor your evil thoughts?" This message God gave Jeremiah to send the exiles was so harsh.

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Built houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'" Can you imagine the jaws dropping among the exiles upon hearing this letter read? Why is a madman like Jeremiah who claim to be prophets not put in stocks and neck irons? Sending us a letter saying, 'It will be a long time. Therefore, build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.'

Jeremiah was convinced that the exile was within God's plan and that it would last a long time – he said 70 years. (Getting through this pandemic – 2024 but still having residuals for years to come). The thing to do is quit whining and complaining; quit plotting rebellion and planning for revenge; and get on with the business of life and learning the lessons of exile. Bloom where you have been exiled.

Establish homes and communities, plant gardens, have children and raise them, encourage them to marry and have children, pray for the peace and welfare of the people whose land you dwell in, because your fate is tied to theirs for the foreseeable future. Bitter advice indeed, and initially it received the reception you would expect.

But let's look down the road for a minute now at the outcome of things. The Babylonian exile did come to an end, just short of 70 years, and the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Many did, though a fair number chose to stay in Babylon and continued living there. Many of those taken into exile undoubtedly did not live to return. Many who made the return had been born in exile and had never seen Jerusalem.

After the exile, the scroll of Jeremiah was preserved and treasured by the Jewish people. Though his message had been consistently disliked and disregarded, history proved him right. I expect that after the initial shock and discouragement of exile wore off, the people were able to see the wisdom in Jeremiah's message. They settled in for the long haul, got on with the business of life, had children and grandchildren, reinterpreted their faith and taught it to the next generations, and kept the dream of going home alive. They **bloomed where they were exiled**. So, when the time came for the exile to end, there was a people who were prepared to go forth and remembered who they were and where they were going and why.

Jeremiah may have empowered the Jewish people to survive the exile by giving them this word from the Lord. The northern ten tribes of Israel which had been exiled to Assyria 125 years earlier, never returned. They are referred to as the lost tribes of Israel. Much of the credit for the survival of the Jewish exiles may be laid at the feet of Jeremiah. For it was Jeremiah who encouraged the people to come to terms with the tragedy of their nation and, thus, rise above it and bloom where they have been exiled.

Jeremiah has given us a great gift in offering this paradigm for dealing with exile experiences in our lives. I do not think it means that in every circumstance we have to meekly accept what is happening to us. But I do think that in every case it is worth considering the possibility that God want us to accept our circumstances for the time being and do what we can with it. Feeling exiled by a job transfer to a place you didn't want to go that is away from family? Feeling exiled in a marriage that isn't quite what you expected it would be? Feeling exiled by the disorienting experience of grief or chronic illness? What difference would it make to shift from self-pity and anger at God to asking the question, "Is God calling me to be patient and bloom where I am exiled until further instruction?" What if we focused on working for the shalom (peace) of West Bend; planting a garden in our social distancing lives which seems to have become dry and lifeless; expecting that God still has a plan for us on the other side of loneliness, grief illness, and death?

There are times to bloom where we are planted, and times for us to be transplanted so we can bloom even better elsewhere. Just follow the Lord where he leads. Israel's faith matured tremendously as a result of the exile, but how many of us would choose such a painful way to grow? It takes a lot of patience and courage to learn to bloom where you are exiled when where you are planted is not at all where you want to be.

The promise of hope in Jeremiah's message is that while the exile will last 2 years, 20 years or 70 years, **the promise of God is it will come to an end and exiles will return home. The message from God is, "Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."** This continues to be the message for us today. As we move forward into our church year, energizing our missions and outreach program, flu season in addition to COVID 19, kids returning to many hybrids of learning, Christian Education opportunities, politics overload, a hope for normalcy, we find a marvelous promise of God in Jeremiah 29:11, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord. 'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future and a hope.'"

God has a plan for you. This hope was fulfilled in Christ. He is our hope. His hope doesn't disappoint us because God, Paul writes, "God has poured out His Spirit into our hearts." The Holy Spirit doesn't disappoint us. Her hope is in you right now. As we move forward, no matter what gets rushed, pulled back, given back, or taken back, we faithful disciples, have a future in Christ.

You need to hear that. If you do not hear anything else on this 1st Sunday of our New Church Year, this Holy Communion Sunday as we celebrate and partake of the body and blood of Christ, we are still calls us to love one another, serve one another, and care for one another – we can courageously, confidently start to move forward because we do have hope. We have Christ – Emanuel – God with us! We have Christ, his presence poured into us by the Holy Spirit. Yes, you have hope that is encased in peace – Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

"Truly charity has no limit; for the love of God has been poured into our hearts by His Spirit dwelling in each one of us, calling us to a life of devotion and inviting us to bloom in the garden where He has planted and directing us to radiate the beauty and spread the fragrance of His Wisdom. Christ has a plan for you. Don't ever forget it. He's got a plan. It's a divine, godly plan. As we move forward, let's place our hope in Him, Jesus our Lord and Savior. **Bloom Where You're Exiled** for the best is truly yet to come. God bless each of you is my humble prayer. Amen!