



good shepherd
presbyterian church

All That We've Lost

Jeremiah 29:1-4

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I named this sermon “All That We’ve Lost.” I wonder what comes to your mind at that phrase. Maybe it’s related to health and COVID. Maybe it’s quarantines and restrictions and freedoms. Maybe it’s related to politics and politicians. Maybe it’s related to worship and other church-related activities. Maybe it’s relationships that have suffered because of all of the above. I’m sure you can fill in many more blanks.

We are beginning a new series called “Exile and Blessing,” hoping to see how God is still working and blessing us and the world even in a time when so much feels lost. We will look at a time in the history of the people of God when much had been lost and see how God met them, cared for them, called them, and used them. My hope is that God will speak to us in similar ways.

Today we are just looking at the first four verses of Jeremiah 29. They really just set the stage for what is to come. But we’ll end on a hopeful note, that God is still with us and still working. The coming weeks will flesh that out in more detail.

A Long Time Ago....

Verse 1 provides the context and historical information to set the stage. Jeremiah is the young prophet who bears the message, usually spoken but this time written. Verse 1 describes the “words of the letter” – a written message – 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.” The audience, then, consists of Jewish exiles living in Babylon. Lost, for the most part, are the benefits and perks of being elder, priest, or prophet. As had happened to northern Israel

generations earlier, a foreign power had conquered southern Judah and taken the people away from their homes, land, and livelihood.

Verse 2 helps date the writing of this letter. It was after King Jeconiah (alternately spelled Jehoiachin) and the queen mother surrendered to Babylon. That story is told in 2 Kings 24 and dates the story to 597 B.C. Verse 2 also tells us that the court officials and skilled labor had already departed from Jerusalem, which was leveled shortly afterwards. Listen to verses 12-16, which describe in more detail what was lost.

¹² Jehoiachin the king of Judah went out to the king of Babylon, he and his mother and his servants and his captains and his officials. So the king of Babylon took him captive in the eighth year of his reign. ¹³ He carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord, just as the Lord had said. ¹⁴ Then he led away into exile all Jerusalem and all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. ¹⁵ So he led Jehoiachin away into exile to Babylon; also the king's mother and the king's wives and his officials and the leading men of the land, he led away into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ¹⁶ All the men of valor, seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the smiths, one thousand, all strong and fit for war, and these the king of Babylon brought into exile to Babylon. (2 Kgs 24:12-16)

What had been lost? Leaders, government, homes, livelihood, business, families, military, and religious symbols. Eventually the Temple and the city of Jerusalem would be torn down as well. The only people left at the end of the passage in 2 Kings are the people who already had nothing.

What was *even worse* was that even though the people at this time were called out by the prophets for being ungodly and unfaithful, they still would have experienced the loss of all those things as the loss of God and God's blessing. That's what undergirded their understanding of the strength of their people, the land they lived on, and the prosperity they had experienced. It was all tied to that covenant blessing of Abraham, God's *shalom* which was blessing, wholeness, and peace. The prophets told them God was punishing them. But beyond that, they would have thought it meant God was turning His back on them; they were losing God's *shalom* or blessing.

Have you ever felt like that?

What is NOT being said...

But like a good parent's discipline, God was not removing His love, but disciplining His people to teach them His love.

Before I go further, however, I need to identify two aspects to how we read and apply this passage.

There are two clear pointers to the limitations in this passage. One is in verse 4, when we read the description of the recipients of the letter: "...to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile..." Later, in verse 7, God describes the city as the place "where I have sent you into exile." Do you hear it? God did this to them. This homelessness, this brokenness, this curse, if you want to call it that, was God's *discipline* for their faithlessness and disobedience over generations. And that's the point where we have to be very, very careful in interpreting and applying into our modern experience. This passage describes one scenario for a people to be anxious for God's *shalom*, but it does not describe every scenario.

First, as you consider what you have lost, realize that not all things you might deem "exile" are God's doing. God may not have directly caused what you are experiencing, but God is always interested in teaching us about Himself. You may experience aspects of exile because of your own choices, the choices or actions of other people, godly discipline, God allowing a test or trial, God's calling or leading in your life, or any other number of reasons. God teaches us, invites us to know Him, in many ways, not just through acts of discipline.

Having said that, I believe the *principle* being taught is not primarily about punishment or discipline, but about faithfully listening to God's voice. Your reason for needing God's healing, help, wholeness, peace, and completeness, may be different from the Exiles' reason, but God's prescription for finding that *shalom* is broad in application.

To say that another way, we have each lost things for different reasons, but God FINDS us and MEETS lost people in remarkably consistent ways. That's what we'll focus on in the coming weeks as we seek to understand and experience God's *shalom* together.

More to Come...

While today's text (vv. 1-4) seems all setup, it does contain a kernel of hope and good news and a pointer to what is coming. It is simply this: in verse 4 God is speaking to the people who feel like God has forsaken them.

God has not gone away; God has not turned His back on them. God is speaking through this letter from Jeremiah and – here's a preview – is going to tell them how to experience that *shalom*/blessing even now, even in Exile, even with so much lost.

My thought, and this is what led me to this passage, is that we also need to hear how to experience God's presence, peace, blessing, and mission in this time when things are so different, so much has seemingly been lost, and we are anxious to know God is still with us.

For today, be encouraged that God still speaks; and let's prepare ourselves in the coming weeks to listen! God has not forgotten us, has not abandoned us, and very much has a purpose for us even now. Amen.