

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles in Babylon

29 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

...It said: ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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.

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Luke 17:11-19, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Sent to the Center of the Universe

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Each of us could tell a story about how we came to be in this particular place this morning. Perhaps we have several stories, stories about our families, stories about our jobs, stories that start out with choosing a college or seminary, stories about growing up Presbyterian or not being Presbyterian yet finding affiliation with this church more comfortable or at least more convenient than what came before. I have my own stories I tell about what sent me on a journey to the Center of the Universe. It's a good practice to tell each other those stories. They inform our faith, and strengthen our connection with each other. I love hearing your stories, and as the elders, the wise ones of the church, the ones sent here to build and to plant, it is your duty to make that connection with those who will come after you. So how will you hand your 145 year-long history over to the next generation?

Jeremiah charged the surviving elders, the priests and the prophets among the exiles to keep telling the stories of how they got to be where they were. The story wasn't always a pleasant one to tell either. The Babylonians had ransacked Jerusalem and sent her inhabitants to an unfamiliar place, a place that wasn't home. They were dislocated and then relocated in the heart of Babylon. The temptation was surely there to bemoan their condition and long for elsewhere rather than fully live their lives where they had been sent.

Jeremiah expected them to do otherwise. They were to build, and plant, and have families. They were to promote the welfare of Babylon by solving disputes, creating community,

contributing to agricultural and business development, and praying for their neighbors. My hunch is that this wasn't welcome advice. They didn't really want to get that comfortable. They had been part of a forced migration. Weren't they supposed to be working their way back? Weren't they supposed to be pining away for Jerusalem? They probably weren't exactly feeling the love from the Babylonians either. Immigrants are always thought of as "different" – having a different language, different customs, and different religious sensibilities. Cultural clashing was inevitable. And here Jeremiah is telling them to be patient. Dig in. Make a life where you've been sent. Uh yeah.

Maybe some listened. Maybe some realized that they weren't going back where they came from anytime soon. So they trusted God's plan to move forward rather than always looking back over their shoulders. Indeed, this story had become a familiar one. First the Exodus out of Egypt and into the promised land, now an Exile from the exalted city of God to the capital of their enemy's homeland. The Israelite people got good at telling their stories, still are, built their faith upon it. You don't have a Passover meal without telling the whole entire story of the Exodus, slowly, and with questions that prompt the youngest to ask the oldest about the details. In good Jewish tradition, you don't acknowledge much of anything without reciting a prayer of praise to the Eternal God, King of the whole world. It sounds something like this: Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech haolam, and then you pray – for bread, for children, for today's work, for a good night's sleep. It doesn't matter. You tell stories, and you pray. These are apparently pretty important human undertakings.

Journalist and author Krista Tippett has made a career out of hearing other people's stories. She's good at listening, and amazing at crafting just the right questions. In interviewing Vincent Harding, a civil rights leader who helped Martin Luther King, Jr. develop the theory and

practice of non-violence. Harding tells her just how important our words, our stories can be. He says, "... that there is something deeply built into us that needs story itself. Story is such a source of nurture that we cannot become really true human beings for ourselves or for each other without story – and without finding ways in which to tell it, to share it, to create it, to encourage younger people to create their own story. We also encourage younger people to find the elders, to find the veterans, not the celebrities, not the TV stars, but those folks who nobody else knows have lived such magnificent lives. Find them and then sit with them and learn how to ask the right questions so that the opening can take place." And then he adds, "I think that this country cannot become its best self until we find ways more effectively of institutionalizing that process of sharing the stories of the elders." (*Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, p. 52, Krista Tippett)

But it's not just telling any story. There's a difference, a rather big one, between entertainment and the stories that inform and enlighten our lives. Reality show life is about as different as you can get from real life. In Jeremiah's charge to the elders, he also crafted a plan for living out the story. He wanted God to always get the byline. The stories were to be steeped in trust of God's actions – whether on the outset they seemed favorable or not favorable. God was in it with them to get to the promised land, and God would be seeking their welfare if they were willing to work for the good in the place, even the most uncomfortable place, where they had been planted.

So back where I began, to our stories. God is in the details of our lives too. And we, with about 90% pride and 10% humor – or maybe the other way around – have dubbed this town where we are spending this hour the Center of the Universe. Ashland has both its share of joys and its share of sorrows. We revitalize the town center and worry that high speed rail may

demolish the progress. We welcome people to take a respite off the highway and come stay here, but some of our hotels have been filled with residents who are far from experiencing the leisure of a nice stop-over. So we dig in for justice. We contribute to our community with acts of mercy. We build a church, and plant seeds that we may or may not see come to their full fruition. Though we, tongue in cheek, claim to be in the Center, the work that we do mostly takes place in the margins. We are not the celebrities and TV stars. We are the committed teachers, the compassionate nurses, the generous business owners, the artists and crafters and music-makers, the grandparents, the community volunteers, the story-writers and the storytellers. Stories get told Sunday morning as we gather around a lesson on spirituality; and stories get told again Monday night when people come to meetings to remind each other there is hope on the journey from addiction back to sobriety.