

***Bloom Where You're Planted***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 6, 2022*

*based on Jeremiah 29: 1- 11*

Our text today from the book of the prophet Jeremiah speaks of the people of Judah who have been taken hundreds of miles from their home in Jerusalem to Babylon where they are interned in prison of war camps.

They are hoping for a quick return home. Their religious authorities, those so-called prophets who had served the king of Judah back in Jerusalem, have marched into exile with them and they are preaching the power of positive thinking: "We'll be home by Christmas," they are saying. "Let's not sign any one-year leases." Let's rent, and rent by the week!"

In a letter to these exiles the true prophet, Jeremiah, scoffs at the inflated optimism of his brothers and sisters in Babylon. Such preaching is merely wishful thinking -- whistling in the dark.

*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.*

Build up some equity in that faraway place.

*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. Yes, 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. (Jer. 29:4-7)*

Make no mistake, this is a hard message to hear. Could their welfare really be tied up with that of those people who destroyed their homes, and burned their holy temple to the ground?

It's like finding out you have cancer and then having someone say, "Your richest days are ahead of you." They may be, but what you want said is – "Hey, this new immunotherapy treatment is going knock this thing out.

Most likely we would go into denial, insisting there's been some mistake. Jeremiah's message amounts to this: "Be assured there has been no mistake." God means for the captive people of Judah to be just where they are, as they are, for the present. In fact, Babylon will be their home for the next fifty years.

God is saying, "Bloom where I have planted you." Bloom and thrive.

In his classic book, *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore tells us that in his years as a psycho-therapist, there were many people who came to him with the same desires and expectations people have who come to surgeons. They were looking for cures. They wanted him to cut away the diseased part of their psyche. "Cut away my depression," they would ask. "Cut away my feelings of inadequacy, my tendency to be dependent, the pain of my divorce. Just remove it. Take it out as you would a putrefying appendix."

But Thomas Moore observed that in his years of listening to the hearts and attending to the souls of such people not only was that often impossible; most of the time it would be a violation of their very heart to do such a thing.

Like Judah lying captive in Babylon, they were (in some way that made quirky sense) in an ok place; in a place that was right for them at the time. Not all people with depression are in an okay place, but some. Sometimes depression is a signal to us to pay attention; it can be a means of personal growth.

Of all the people in scripture, the apostle Paul had the most personal lesson in this of any. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians he speaks of having some unidentified malady; one he identifies as a "thorn in the flesh." He says that he prayed three times for God to remove it without result and, after much cogitation concluded not that he himself lacked enough faith, but rather that God was saying something to him through the experience. God's word to Paul was this:

*My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

For "made perfect," read: "made whole." God's perfect will is for us to be made complete, to have our lives and our character brought to a mature fullness.

Well, many times that wholeness can only be accomplished in crucibles like exile; exiles that come naturally to us with our illnesses, separations, bouts with depression and personal loss.

In an interview with Judith Viorst, the wonderful actress, Liv Ullman spoke of having lost her father at a very early age. When she became a woman and began seeking intimate relations with men she found herself forever looking for a father replacement (typified by her famous affair with the director, Ingmar Bergman).

Of this "father hunger" Ms. Ullman confided: "I can take it out and look at it . . . but I think it will always be there. It is so deeply rooted, so basic that it will not be resolved."

What is it you have that you can take out and look at, but not throw away for good?

Well, by naming it, Liv Ullman found her chance for wholeness. To make friends with one's "weakness," one has a chance to not only find self-acceptance, but also a spiritual "power;" a divine sympathy for others who are in similar circumstances, and also for oneself.

*My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

Once again, what I'm suggesting is that we should at least entertain the notion that the Babylon we find ourselves in, our special place of exile, might, in fact, be right where God wants us to be for now. There is something for us to learn there. But our eyes may need to get used to that particular low kind of light.

Here is what the wonderful Joseph Campbell had to say on this: "It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, *there* lies your treasure. The very cave you are most afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for." (*A Joseph Campbell Companion*, ed. Diane Osbon, p. 24). Pretty crazy, eh?

Imagine what life might be like if we lived with that kind of perspective. Imagine the courage we might get if we realize how close God is to us at some of our lower moments. How valuable they can be to us going forward.

Now, let me tell you about someone who took Joseph Campbell's words literally about going down into the abyss. Completely literally.

Vedran Smailovic was principal cellist in the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra. And while many heard him play in the symphony hall of Sarajevo, he is most remembered for playing in a hole.

On May 27, 1992 bombs were dropping on Sarajevo. One fell outside of Smailovic's window landing on hungry people standing in line for bread. The bombs killed 22 men, women, and children – these were Smailovic's friends and neighbors. It left a huge crater in the street, and in everyone's lives.

The next day and every day thereafter for twenty-two days, Vedran Smailovic emerged from his apartment dressed in concert tails. He placed a stool in the bomb crater and right there he played Albinoni's Adagio For Strings with all his heart and soul.

He played in a daze but in an incredibly evocative way. In spite of the risk, people gathered to listen. When he was finished he packed up his cello and went to a coffee shop. Quickly people came up to him expressing their appreciation, "This is what we needed," they said.

Smajlović went back the next day and the next 22 days, one for each person killed. Sniper fire continued and mortars still rained down in the neighborhood, but Smajlović never stopped playing.

Then he went to other sites where shells had taken the lives of Sarajevo's citizens. He played in those places, and he played in graveyards. He played at funerals at no charge, even though the Serbian gunners would target such gatherings.

His music was a gift to all hiding in their basements, a voice for peace for those daily dodging the bullets of the snipers. As the reports of Smajlović's performances on the shattered streets spread, he became an inspiration.

He did not flee, as most would who had the means. No, Vedran Smailovic decided to bloom where he was planted. To make a recital hall out of a bomb crater. There, in a place of death he played a song of life. He played as an exile in the center of Babylon, claiming that time, and that crater, and his bleeding city as a place where beauty might triumph over ugliness.

I wonder what similar examples of resilience will come out of Ukraine.

Central to the message of this four part sermon series I am delivering this month is a quote from St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is a human being, fully alive."

Smailovic's action is what life is really about, you know. You only find out what life really is when you see your own light illuminating an abyss you've found yourself in and have adopted as home.

Well, I don't know what it is that might be keeping you from living your life more fully. Whether it's some fear that the timing is not right for something, or the stars are not aligned, or you're not in the right place, or your parents would disapprove even though they are long gone, or you think you don't have enough money to do something, or you have too much to do it, or you're too old, or too young. There are a lot of Babylons in which to be "exiled."

What is your particular Babylon right now? Once more, hear the words of the prophet:

*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.*

Thankfully this is NOT the prophet Jeremiah's last word to the people. God has another word for God's people, a promise:

*Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)*

It may not be the future you originally envisioned, but it may be one that, in God's grace and time, will fit because a way toward wholeness is always available. Always.

And where should we look for it? Right where we are, right now; right where we feel the weakest. At such a place the power of God looks to find free reign.

Amen