

Text: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14
Title: In a Strange Land
Date: 11.26.17
Roger Allen Nelson

There is a good deal of America that I don't recognize anymore.

While I remember Vietnam, Watergate, civil rights struggles, assassinations, cultural unrest, riots, 09.11, and blundering into war, I don't remember anything like this. There is a good deal of America that I don't recognize anymore. I feel like a stranger in a strange land.

That's not a swipe at the Trump presidency. Some of you would have said the same during the Obama presidency. It is the recognition that there are powerful tectonic shifts underfoot. I feel like a stranger in a strange land.

It's easy to catalogue the usual suspects: crass political discourse, toxic tribalism, a diminished middle class, more technology and less connection, globalization, unfettered capitalism, big government socialism, racism, etc, etc, etc. Pick your litany. David Brooks offers this helpful summary:

...if you weaken family, faith, community and any sense of national obligation, where is that social, emotional and moral formation supposed to come from? How will the virtuous habits form?

Our society is an unsteady tree. The branches of individual rights are sprawling, but the roots of common obligation are withering away.

Freedom without covenant becomes selfishness. And that's what we see at the top of society, in our politics and the financial crisis. Freedom without connection becomes alienation. And that's what we see at the bottom of society — frayed communities, broken families, opiate addiction. Freedom without a unifying national narrative becomes distrust, polarization and permanent political war.

Dear friends, there are all sorts of ways to frame this cultural moment. There's all sorts of commentary and critique. I am simply suggesting that the edges are ragged, there's a rupture at the core, there's some erosion of a shared narrative. There is a good deal of America that I don't recognize anymore. I feel like a stranger in a strange land. Maybe you do too.

Which is why this passage in Jeremiah is so intriguing.
Jeremiah is writing to strangers living in a strange land.

In broad strokes....

(Last week it was the Assyrians; this week the Babylonians.) The Babylonians overrun the Assyrians, storm Jerusalem, and destroy the temple. And then, in three deportations in 597, 586, and 581 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar drags the Israelites away from the land God promised and exiles them in Babylon.

They're ripped away from a shared narrative.
They're captives to something they don't recognize.
They're strangers in a strange land.

And, Jeremiah is a reluctant and long-suffering prophet during these troubled times. He warns and pleads, he chastises and laments, he longs for and loves, and maybe more than any other prophet Jeremiah embodies the emotional life of God. He is full of the passion and pathos that flows from the heart of God....

Which, again, is why our text this morning is so intriguing.

In chapter 28 the prophet Hananiah announces that this exile in Babylon will only last two years. To quote Hananiah, who claims to be quoting God:

I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all of the articles of the Lord's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon...

Two years. No biggie. Anyone can ride out two years. But, Jeremiah comes along and says, "Slow your roll. This captivity is going to be seventy years, not twenty-four months. So you may want to settle in for the long haul...."

God doesn't want Israel to hunker down and withdraw.
God doesn't want Israel to retreat into a religious ghetto.
God doesn't want Israel to stoke revolution.
God doesn't even want Israel to "camouflage her religious identity" to blend in.

Rather, God calls the exiled people of God to put down roots, grow gardens, get married, make babies, pursue peace and prosperity, and pray for the good of Babylon. They're called not to run or rage or retreat but rather to seek after God ~ who will be found, even in Babylon.

So, is there anything here that's helpful for our time and place?
Is there any light for those who might live as strangers in a strange land?
Let me point to three things that surfaced for me....

One.

Most of you know that 32 years ago my father was murdered in front of me and Sandi in the parking lot of Roseland Christian Ministries. He died in my mother's arms. On Thanksgiving morning, my mother had a stroke deep in her brain. She died quickly and quietly with my brother holding her hand. But....

She lived for 32 years longing for and missing my father.
She had the promised land ripped out from underneath her.
She was exiled for 32 years.
She was a stranger in a strange land.

In the last few days as I've thought about her life I am reminded of how she didn't run or rage or retreat, but she stayed the course of faith. She once described God as providing an invisible "undergirding." Somehow, the promises of God held her up and held her together.

Maybe Jeremiah reminds a people in exile that the promises of God undergird their current predicament. Those promises are more sure than this current reality. As Jeremiah puts it:

"I will come to you and fulfill my good promises to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...."

I don't know what sort of exile you know. I do know that most of us are navigating some manner of brokenness, some sense of captivity, some loss, some disorientation or dislocation....

But, I think it is a fair reading of Jeremiah to be reminded that the promises of God overarch and undergird our predicament. No matter the personal journey, no matter the shape of our shared national narrative, the promises of God are unshakable and unbreakable. That is not say that there won't be dark days, but it is to say live in the light that the future is ultimately held by God.

Two.

There is a great deal of hand-wringing over the state of the church. There are those who see an assault on faith by the establishment elites, by the media, by Hollywood and Harvard. And, there are others who can't fathom Christian support for the likes of Donald Trump or Roy Moore, etc. To quote a scholar of church and culture:

The reason Fox News is so formative is that it's this repetitive, almost ritualistic thing that people do every night. It forms particular fears and desires, an idea of America. This is convincing on a less than logical level, and the church is not communicating to them in that same way. Loyalties are much more strongly formed by conservative media than their churches. That's the challenge for the church today — rediscovering rather ancient ideas about how to form our ultimate loyalty to God and his kingdom.

Again. Not a political swipe. I think there is reason for concern on both sides. But!

But, how will we live as a people in exile? When Christianity is not the dominate cultural narrative how then do we live? What patterns will shape our loyalties? Rather than shrink or hide or dilute; how can we embody a faithful community that cuts against the grain of the dominate culture and that establishes a different way of being? What "liturgies" will we adopt that will help us follow the way of Christ and not the way of Babylon?

I think it is worthy of note that Jeremiah calls exiles to sort out the lies that are being told among them, and seek the good of Babylon and the face of God. May we do the same.

Three.

Wilco, a scruffy-post-modern-endlessly-ecclectic-exceptionally-gifted-Chicago-based-rock-band, opens a song with these lyrics that capture my imagination and encourage me.

*Tires type black
Where the blacktop cracks
Weeds spark through
Dark green enough to be blue
When the mysteries we believe in
Aren't dreamed enough to be true
Some side with the leaves
Some side with the seeds*

Some side with the leaves.
Some side with the seeds.

I don't want to side with the leaves.
Even while there is a good deal of America that I don't recognize anymore, I don't want to side with cynicism and despair. I don't want to side with greed, or complacency, or indifference, or consumption, or individualism, or...

I want to side with the seeds.
I want to side with the seeds of justice.
I want to side with seeds of forgiveness.
I want to side with the seeds of mercy.
I want to side with the seeds of the kingdom.
I want to side with the beloved community ~ that's black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, Muslim and Mexican, liberal and conservative....
So, let us continue to put down roots, and plant gardens, marry and make babies, and seek the good, even of Babylon. Let us pursue peace, even as strangers in a strange land.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.