

Seek the Welfare of the City
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
November 28, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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I love sunshine. I find it easier to rejoice in the day that the Lord has made if I can greet the sun when I wake up in the morning. If you have ever been to our house, you know that the whole front wall of the living room is glass, two stories high. Our house faces east, and in the morning, that room can be so bright that it is impossible to use a computer or watch television. This is not a problem for me. In fact, it is a plus.

But the days are getting shorter now, and greyer, and sometimes I am inexplicably cranky about it. I find that I am yearning for lengthening days and brighter light to come again. I know I am not the only one who feels this way. When it seems that all you can see before is one grey day after another, like a thick blanket over your head, it can be depressing. We are all old enough to know that spring will come again. But when we are missing the light in our spirits as well as in our bodies, it can affect us deeply. This is especially true, I think, when the world around us seems all out of kilter, as it often does.

We need the light. This is one reason that we light Advent candles, so that we can see the light grow with each succeeding week, as we wait for that darkest night of the year and then the glorious light of God bursting into our world as a little child.

So, we light candles at this time of year, and we pull out the artificial sun lamps that are tucked under the bed or in a closet somewhere, and we listen to our favorite music as we make ourselves busy, and we wait and hope for the days to become longer again.

Today's scripture is about a time when the people of Israel were without hope, and it offers us another way to find hope when the world around us is dark and hopeless. You know that after the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two separate kingdoms, one in the north and one in the south, and they both suffered from a series of terrible kings for about 400 years. During this time, the empires around them began to do battle with one another, and little Israel was caught in the crossfire a lot. The Northern Kingdom was annihilated by the Assyrian Empire about 800 years before Jesus was born, and then about 300 years later, the Southern Kingdom was defeated by the Babylonian Empire. Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed, and hundreds of political and religious leaders and artisans were all carted off to exile in Babylon. There they sat, not knowing what to make of their world, not knowing how long this would last, doubting that they had any future at all.

The prophet Jeremiah was not among the exiles in Babylon. He remained in Jerusalem for a period, and he wrote letters to the exiles, speaking God's word to them. Today's scripture is from one of those letters. It is a gorgeous passage that finds beauty and purpose in the darkest of times. This is what God says to the exiles:

Build houses and live in them; 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.

Make peace with where you are, God is saying. Don't just wait around for things to get better. That will happen in my own time. In the meanwhile, you have lives to live, and you should – you MUST – find a way to live them in the circumstances in which you find yourselves.

And then, God says this beautiful, hopeful thing to the exiles:

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.

Leave the future to me, God says. In the meantime, think outside your own interest. Think even beyond the interest of your own Israelite community. Seek the welfare of the city where you find yourself, for your welfare is tied to its welfare. In working for the welfare of the city where you live, you will find hope. This must have been a terribly difficult message for the exiles to hear. Pray for your captors? Work for their welfare? Don't hold yourself off from these foreigners whom you despise? But become solid citizens in this place that you never wanted to be? In THIS they were to find hope? This is a challenging word from God, and I can imagine that many of the exiles were reluctant to receive it.

This is an Advent message for us, too. We all thought, we hoped, we believed, that the pandemic would be over by now and that we would be back to life as normal. But that is not what has happened. And so, we have had to find a way to live in this time where we are in exile from our familiar lives. And we are beginning to figure out how to take care of ourselves in this new space – with vaccines and masks and ribbons on the pews. We hold worship services every week and we even pulled off the Holly Fair this year. Many of us are venturing out to visit with loved ones or regain a few of the activities we missed the most in the past year. In the words of this scripture, we may not like the city where we have been planted but we are building houses here and living in them and planting gardens. We are multiplying here and not decreasing.

But the message for us goes further: We must seek the welfare of the city where we are living, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, we will find our welfare.

I love that we donated so much food to the local food pantries this month. We have always been good at that. We reach out to our community in so many other ways, as well. Sometimes, however, I think that we think of our worship and fellowship as centrally what makes us a church, and the mission work can feel a little bit like something we do on this side. This scripture tells us that what we call our mission work is not something extra. It is central, and our worship and fellowship are what equip us to do this work. It is in working for the welfare of those around us, no matter who they are, that we will find our own welfare as a church.

So, let us find our own hope and consolation and inspiration in worship within this beautiful building. Let us light candles to remind us of the coming of the light. Let us breathe in the love of God and the fellowship that we find here. Let us welcome all who come. And let us then take the light that we have received here out into our community, and let it shine for everyone we meet, for all those who are longing for the return of the light in their own lives, for those who are hanging on to a thin thread of hope, for those who are hungry in body or in spirit. It is in their welfare we will find our own welfare as well.

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Amen