



good shepherd
presbyterian church

What Are We Supposed to Do?

Jeremiah 29:5-6

Sermon by: Robert Austell

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Can you remember back to March, when we started the shut-downs, quarantining, and other restrictions to try to slow COVID? Just this week someone recalled that to me and said, “Don’t you remember how we thought we’d do that for three weeks and it would get better?” Of course that wasn’t quite the goal even then, but regardless, it just got worse and lasted longer. Then we got past the short-term thinking and started having to ask the question I want to raise today: What are we supposed to do?

How do we visit parents and grandparents in the nursing home or the hospital? How does working from home work when that’s not something many of us had ever done other than a day here or there? How does doing online school work? Do we ever get to go out to eat? And even harder, how do restaurant owners and employees stay afloat? And then the biggie for us here: what does church look like?

Last week we looked at the introduction to Jeremiah 29, God’s Word through a letter delivered by the prophet Jeremiah to the Exiled people of God. The Exiles – those who had been ripped from their homes, businesses, families, friends, land, capital city, and singular place of worship – the Temple. We ended on the Good News that God was not turning away from them, but indeed speaking TO them through this letter. God had a Word, a purpose, and a plan. Today and over the next several weeks we are going to work slowly through that letter and God’s message to them.

I noted that we are not ancient Israel, exiled by God because of unfaithfulness. But we do share much with them in the sense of having the familiar taken away. We share much with them in wondering in this time when so much is different: what are we supposed to do?

Build, Plant, Marry, Multiply (vv. 5-6)

God doesn't waste any time getting right to the "to do" list. There is a whole string of verbs, which all come in pairs:

BUILD houses and LIVE in them
PLANT gardens and EAT their produce
MARRY and HAVE FAMILIES
MULTIPLY there and DO NOT DECREASE

All of those pairs have a common theme. Yes, you are far from home, cut off, and exiled. But don't give up on life; make a home for yourselves. Build and live, plant and eat, marry and have families. In other words, keep living life! For the Jewish people, these particular challenges tied rather directly to the covenant challenges (cf. Deuteronomy 6) to grow families and teach them about the Lord.

While the Holy Land was part of God's gracious provision, *it was not the only place where His people could be faithful*. Indeed, both in the generations before coming to that land and in many generations after being displaced, His people had to learn and re-learn what it meant to be faithful in every setting. God's challenge to the Exiles was no less than His challenge to His people wandering through the wilderness between captivity in Egypt and arrival in the Promised Land: "listen to me; trust in me; make a home and teach your children about me." That home was and continues to be our "first congregation" even before that of the church community.

The Exiles also had to re-learn that they were no less God's people in Babylon than they were when worshiping in the Temple in Jerusalem. God was with them in Exile and also had a mission for them. Their obedience and service in that place was their worship... one of the core meanings of worship is to serve God.

What Are We Supposed to Do?

So back to us... what are we supposed to be doing? Is our faith and spiritual growth and mission just "on hold" until COVID passes? To quote the Apostle Paul, "May it never be!" Yes, the setting for much of life this past year has changed for many of us from travel and workplace and schoolyard and restaurants to home and home and home and home. But our core calling

remains the same: worship, service, care of one another, love of neighbor. We've had to learn new ways to do those things, but that's just the point here in Jeremiah and elsewhere in scripture: God cares less about the form of things and more about the heart, motivation, and expression of faith and obedience.

We've learned how to use technology to connect for worship and Sunday school classes. Our deacons have really stepped up to reach out to every member for regular contact, so that folks don't feel quite so isolated. We've had to learn to worship in new ways and with new patterns and rhythms; that has been a particular stretching point for me! Our prayer ministries have flourished in a number of ways. I hope families and individuals have sought out ways to grow faith and express faith at home.

I hope you have not put faith on hold. I know it can be tempting... I've been tempted to do that with exercise as well, but it is similarly vital to our overall health. One of the great blessings for me has been finding more time to go on walks or runs, either for my own exercise or to spend time with Heather. But my schedule is so different than before COVID; I've had to figure out new routines and times to go. It's the same with faith. This could be a time to hit pause, but it could also be a time to really dig in and plant... to spend extra time in prayer, to spend more time reading scripture or exploring the world of online resources for spiritual growth. It could also be a time to reach out and call more people, to have MORE contact with people outside your and my usual circles.

It has been so easy for me to view the last 9 months as a loss, a hassle, a burden to be borne. And all that is true to an extent. But like so much of life, like the Exile of God's people for multiple generations, it can also be a God-opportunity if we recognize that God is always near and always at work and always inviting us to participate in obedience and service in some way.

For the children's messages during this Jeremiah series, I've challenged the folks doing them to think about hidden blessings in the midst of COVID. I'd make a similar challenge to you as we all ask "What are we supposed to do?" Try to identify the hidden blessings and, even more than that, the hidden OPPORTUNITIES God may have for you during this disruption and displacement.