

Jeremiah 20:1

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.

Scripture Background

Jeremiah wrote to the first wave of exiles who were taken into captivity, along with their king, after the first time the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar struck out at the little kingdom of Judah and its great city, Jerusalem, in 587 B.C.E. This first group, Jeremiah tells us, included not only the king but the leaders of society, including priests and prophets (Ezekiel, but not Jeremiah)—and ‘the artisans and the smiths,’ that is, the skilled workers who would have been sorely needed back home. In other words, those who could be of use to the Empire. Historians tell us that, ten years later, Babylon would return to devastate Jerusalem and carry off even more of the population, and then a third group would be taken in 581 (from Christine Pilkington, ‘The Lectionary Common Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts’)

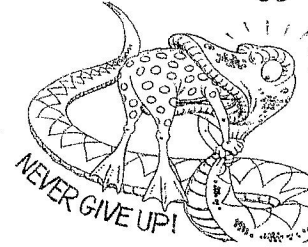
James Newsome finds it significant for all of us—not just the Jewish people themselves—that they survived the Babylonian exile. He reminds us that the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been carried off by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., leaving behind only a remnant, the people we have come to know as the Samaritans, but otherwise disappearing from history. Why, in contrast, did the people of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, survive their time of exile in Babylon, and eventually return to their homeland? Of course, we can say it was the hand and will of God, but, Newsome insists that we must also credit the prophet Jeremiah and his powerful words of inspiration and hope for helping to carry his people through their time of trial (Texts for Preaching Year C)

‘Planting Life’

Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.

Maya Angelou

Staying alive during life threatening times isn’t easy, as this humorous cartoon suggests. But if we do survive . . .



‘thank you God’ is what we say and gratitude is what we feel. We’re grateful to be alive, to feel the fear disappear, and to appreciate anew the preciousness of life. No doubt about it, it’s gratitude that stills and warms our hearts, just as it is faith that gives us courage, not just to go on, but to thrive by building bridges to overcome evil and welcome good. In faith, people learn to live with cancer; retrain after job loss; reconcile relationships gone bad; mend broken hearts with new loves. For the displaced Jews in exile it was a matter of learning to thrive as displaced citizens during a 70 year exile in Babylon. They thrived by putting into practice the Word of God that Jeremiah spoke to them. ‘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; 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 their welfare you will find your welfare (Jer. 20:1, 4-7).

Years later after the Jews returned to Jerusalem, Luke’s gospel records that Jesus lived out the Word of the Lord as he traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee on his way back to Jerusalem. ‘As he was going into a village, ten men who had

leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" when he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19).

In her commentary on this gospel story, Rev. Maggi Dawn wondered: Why did Jesus send the lepers to the priests? Why not heal them on the spot? Then she wrote: 'I think the answer has to do with prejudice, and the way we exclude people from society. In the first-century, priests not only diagnosed leprosy, but also declared a leper ritually unclean. By sending the ten to the priests, Jesus raised the possibility that they would not only be healed but also declared pure, which was essential if they were to reintegrate into society. The twist in the tale is that that this particular colony was near a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria, communities that were acrimoniously divided. Jews considered all Samaritans ritually unclean, and would travel miles out of their way to avoid having any contact with them. Stigmatization is a great leveler; while they were ill the ten lepers had discovered that which side of the border you were from meant nothing if you had leprosy. Once they were healed however, the old divisions kicked into play again. Ten were healed, but only nine would be accepted; the tenth would always be unclean because he was a Samaritan. Jesus knew that barriers to joining society on the Galilean side of the border ran far deeper than leprosy. It was only to the Samaritan that Jesus said, "your faith has made you well. Maybe he meant that deep-seated human divisions are a much more serious malady than even leprosy—that our souls can be far sicker than our bodies and yet most of us do nothing to heal the breach. Maybe he wasn't commenting on the attitude of the nine who didn't return as much as on the system that would accept them and reject the Samaritan' (The Untouchables, Christian Century p. 18)

Racism, hate, and prejudice exist in our society, building walls between souls. We deem people unclean and systematically deny fellow human beings access to life giving resources in the community because of their gender, race, nationality, sexuality, ethnic background, class, economic status, physical and mental conditions. Evil ISM'S of all kinds run deep and sicken our soul. But the good news of our faith is this: Christ Jesus is alive and helping his Church to thrive by building bridges across the ISM's that divide us. In Hebrews 13:8 we find this eternally inspiring statement of faith and hope: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever'.

In his devotional on this passage, Richard Floyd wrote: 'My friend John, an ophthalmologist and former congregant of mine, led several dozen trips to Ecuador on "eye missions." I went with him on a couple of them. Our team worked together with area churches, and one day he introduced me to a local pastor, who immediately invited me to preach at their Sunday evening service. But that Sunday afternoon we had torrential rains that filled the streets with over a foot of water. I said to one of their church members, "I suppose the evening service will be cancelled?" "Oh no, they'll be there!" And they were. The church was packed. We waded to get there. My Spanish is pretty much limited to eye testing: "Otro oho" So I employed our translator, Ira, to follow me line by line as I preached. I started out with our differences: "I live in North America, and you live in south America." "My congregation is very old and yours is very young." And so forth. Finally I said: "But despite our many differences we have something very important in common. We share faith in Jesus Christ, who is the 'the same yesterday and today and forever!'" As I had been speaking, and Ira had been translating, they had been attentive and polite, but now the whole congregation rose to their feet and started clapping, and they weren't cheering for Ira or for me. No, they were cheering for Jesus!'