



Living in Exile

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Jeremiah 29:4-7

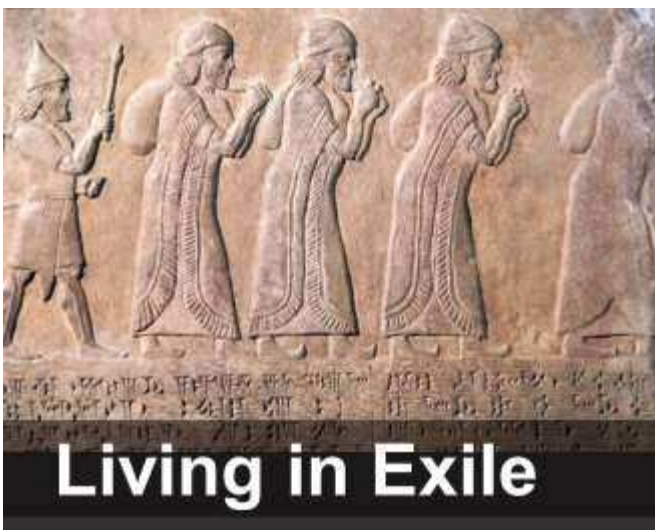
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I attended a board meeting for Gordon Conwell seminary outside Boston this past week. This meeting coincided with a major event in our family. Juliette Rebecca James was born last Tuesday afternoon.

I was sitting in a meeting when Chris texted me the news. I excused myself from the meeting to call Chris to share the joy and clarify Juliette's birth weight. Chris confirmed that Juliette is one big baby. She weighed in at 11 pounds and 3 ounces and was 23.5 inches long. That's a half inch short of two feet. The delivery nurse said in her 20 years at Beverly hospital, Juliette was the biggest baby she could remember. Before she was weighed, doctors and nurses wagered about her size. Andrew and Becky put away the newborn clothes. She left the hospital in a three-month sized outfit.

Juliette is our fifth grandchild. When I came to this church in 1979, Chris and I didn't have children. Now we have two grown, married children and five grandchildren. It's official, folks. I'm an old guy now.

As I look back on these 37 years of ministry and ponder what has changed, one thing jumps out at me. Our American culture has changed dramatically. When I came to this church, the Judeo-Christian ethic was embraced by everybody, or so it seemed. I would never say that today.



We are living in exile, at least those of us who adhere to traditional Christian beliefs. That's why I titled this sermon "Living in Exile." How can we maintain our Christian identity and ethics in a culture that is becoming increasingly resistant and even hostile to the gospel?

Jeremiah's letter to Jewish exiles living in Babylon addresses our predicament. This letter was written in the 6th century BC. The mighty Babylonian Empire conquered Israel in 586 BC. They destroyed Jerusalem, ransacked the temple and enslaved people. They marched its leading citizens and skilled labor force across 500 miles of desert to a foreign city called Babylon.

This ancient city has been substantially excavated. Babylon's ruins have been unearthed 50 miles south of Baghdad in modern Iraq.

One of the so-called wonders of the ancient world is The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar allegedly constructed these elaborate gardens for his homesick wife and queen. It's multi-



level terraces, rooftop gardens and sophisticated irrigation system are a feat of engineering in this desert-like climate.

Most of Israel's prophets (what we would call preachers today) tell the Jewish people essentially what they want to hear. They announce that the exile won't last long. Don't worry, we'll be out of Babylon soon. One prominent prophet, Hananiah, predicts the exile will last less than two years (Jeremiah 28:3).

The Biblical prophet Jeremiah tells a different story. He announces their exile will extend for 70 years (29:10).

Jeremiah begins his letter, "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I called into



exile from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jeremiah 29:4). What he writes next seems illogical and counter-intuitive. “Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and enjoy its produce. Marry and have children” (Jeremiah 29:5-6).

Imagine you are a 6th century Jew living in a Babylon ghetto hearing this letter read to you. You don’t know the language. You don’t care for their cuisine. You have little interest in pledging your allegiance to a capricious, arbitrary god like Marduk.

The next sentence seems even more nonsensical. “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have carried you into exile” (Jeremiah 29:7). You can’t be serious, Jeremiah! You want us to run for city council and join the local PTA?

Babylon is known for its cruelty. It’s most famous king, Nebuchadnezzar, is legendary for his barbarism. As we read in Daniel, he throws three young Jewish men into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to a statue bearing his likeness.

The word *welfare* in the Hebrew, *shalom*, can also be translated *peace*. God’s people are called upon to promote peace in a city famous for hatred and discord.

Suppose Iraq would invade the United States, destroy Washington and transport us into exile in Baghdad. If someone urged us to seek the welfare of Baghdad, we would balk at such an outlandish request.

This is now the second time in Jeremiah's letter where he writes, "I have carried you into exile" (Jeremiah 29:4, 7). King Nebuchadnezzar is not solely responsible for this exile. God has superintended this whole process so these exiles will be sent to Babylon. They are not merely captives; these exiles have been sent to Babylon as God's missionaries.

Jeremiah continues, "Pray to the Lord for Babylon, because if it prospers, you will prosper also" (29:4-7). Praying for Babylon is the Old Testament equivalent of Jesus' teaching about praying for our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).



Why am I going to the trouble of retelling this ancient story? Jeremiah's letter is a needed corrective for Christians living in these uncertain times. Make no mistake about it, we're living in exile. Any such notion of a Christian America is officially over. We no longer enjoy home field advantage.

Our American culture is coarsening with regard to its secular resolve to drive a Christian worldview to the margins of society. Theologian Walter Brueggemann believes this process of Christian disestablishment will likely continue for some time to come. I could point to any number of recent examples—the confusion over gender identity, the absolute freedom with regard to pornography and the deconstruction of traditional marriage. Whether you agree or disagree with my assessment of these issues, I want you to engage with Session and me on such matters.

This disestablishment has been swift and disorienting. We have something to learn from Christians living in other parts of the world who have been marginalized for centuries.

Do not despair. We may be on the verge of a major revival in America. If God has placed eternity in our hearts, then the aftershocks of secularity may actually work in our favor. What we interpret as a sunset for the Christian church may be, in reality, a sunrise, as people turn back to God. What seems like post-Christian America could, in fact, be pre-Christian America.



What are we to do in the meantime? I would propose “The Jeremiah Option.” There’s no use in becoming cynical, bitter people or pining for the good ole’ days when America was more amenable to Christian belief. The Jeremiah Option requires us to embrace three essential priorities.

First, we must become more committed to vibrant communities of Christian believers who know who we are and whose we are. We must become more resilient about being out-of-step with predominant American values. We cannot retreat into our churches to disengage from culture. I’m lobbying for just the reverse—engagement without assimilation. As Dean Inge wrote in the early 20th century, “the church that is married to the Spirit of the age will be a widower in the next.” Our culture will continue to morph and change over time. If we hitch our wagon to the changing values of this present culture, what will happen when this secular enterprise comes crashing down? We want to offer

secular America a viable alternative when the bottom falls out.

Second, I am urging us to redouble our efforts to take Jeremiah up on his invitation to promote human flourishing. Go right on building houses and planting gardens. Marry and have children. God wants us to promote anything that squares with the Biblical notion of human flourishing. We can do this work in our present circumstances as parents and family members, doctors and nurses, auto mechanics and wait staff. This Jeremiah Option calls for rigorous engagement with our American culture. Like I said, our goal is engagement without assimilation.

Third, we commit ourselves as Christ's followers to rely on the power God supplies through the Holy Spirit to get the job done. Don't let the third member of the Trinity confound you. The Holy Spirit is simply the power of God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son that takes up residence in us.



Let me remind you that the Christian church was forged in exile. Jesus' followers banded together during Roman rule to spread the gospel message. This Roman

Empire supplanted the Greek Empire, which superseded the Persian Empire that displaced the Babylonian Empire.

How was it possible for 120 believers to grow into a worldwide movement numbering 2.2 billion Christians today? The answer is found in the first chapter of the book of Acts. Before Jesus ascends to God the Father, he directs his followers to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy

Spirit (Acts 1:7). Jesus' followers take him at his word and gather in an upper room to pray. I don't mean they recite little perfunctory prayers. Luke tells us they devoted themselves constantly to prayer (1:14).

On the Day of Pentecost, it happens. The Holy Spirit comes like wind and fills Jesus' disciples with tongues of fire so they can announce the good news to foreigners gathered in Jerusalem for a Festival called Pentecost.

We have been talking about renewal these last several months. Let's get one thing straight. Renewal is not the next best program at VPC. Renewal is what God gives to people who ask. God wants to renew us in what we believe and how we live our lives. You may have never opened yourself to this Jesus or find yourself needing a fresh filling of God's Spirit. If we are to become resilient communities who promote human flourishing, we need God's Spirit. We need God. We need Jesus.

1. Invest in resilient communities of faith.

