

October 13, 2019

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

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“God Is Where We Are”

Have you ever had something you desperately wanted to say but tried to keep quiet about it. Some of us are better than others at keeping secrets, and if you’ve ever tried to keep from sharing a really good secret you know it can be physically painful. We’ve got to “bite our tongue”, we say. We may have to clench our gut or tighten our fists to hold it in. Not long ago, some members of my family were working on a surprise party for another family member. We did the usual “wink, wink” to one another behind the scenes and then there was the filtering of what we said when we were with that person, so we didn’t spill the beans. Keeping secrets is one way we try to stay quiet about whatever it is we know. It’s not easy to do. And then, there are other more weighty experiences when we try to hold information and they aren’t as light and fun as planning for a surprise party. Sometimes, we stay quiet because the information we have might be harmful or hurtful. Sometimes the information we are holding can get us into trouble and we weigh all of that trying to discern what’s right. Our nation’s government is embroiled in the turmoil of the impeachment inquiry following the actions of a whistleblower. We’re well aware of the political wrangling on all sides of this event, so I’ll leave that be this morning because that’s not our focus here. What does make a connection for us today is the reason whistleblower laws exist across many industries and corporations within our culture. There are times when what is known must be said, and those who know it and say it have the right to be protected because speaking the truth could bring personal harm or hardship. This is the situation the prophet Jeremiah faced when, many centuries before the birth of Christ, he delivered God’s message to God’s people. Jeremiah had something to say. It was the word God gave him and speaking the truth aloud would not come without controversy. The message brought much ridicule to Jeremiah. The message made things difficult for him and for no other reason than this we owe it to the prophet to hear what he has to say and learn how that word of God impacts us and our lives.

This is what was happening in that long ago time and place. Today’s reading brings us, again, to the time of Exile in the history of the Hebrews. We find the theme of Exile often in the Bible. In fact, we referenced this just last Sunday. Babylon conquered the territory of Judah. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple ruined. Families were ripped apart. Some fled for the hills but others were captured and carried away. There, by the waters of Babylon, they were held in captivity. It was a dark time. The life the people had known was destroyed and because of this their faith and hope dried up. It was to that people, in that desperate time, that Jeremiah wrote a letter, delivering the message of God to those in Exile. We’ve read a portion of Jeremiah’s letter this morning and before we focus on his message let me say a brief word about what other prophets of the time were saying. The message of other prophets to the people was this: “Don’t worry,” they said. “Yes, exile is a terrible ordeal. But, your hardship will be short lived,” they proclaimed. “It won’t be long before God will bring an end to your suffering and you will find your way home,” other prophets preached. “Soon you will make things just as they were before.” Hearing what these other prophets said brings to mind what we sometimes say to those who are in trouble. “Hang in there,” we say. “Tomorrow will be a new day. Things will get better. God never gives us more than we can bear. This, too, shall pass,” we say to one another. Now, we mean well but to always suggest that the hard situations of life will certainly not last is not always the most helpful message. Jeremiah’s word to the people was that their season of Exile was here to stay. He told them they had better get ready for the long haul. They didn’t like his message and because of it they didn’t like him. The people assumed that if God was on their side, if God really cared, the hardship of their lives would come quickly to an end. If God was really with them, the people thought, then all of the heartache they were suffering would be over and they could go back to the way things were before. Jeremiah’s word to them was that they should prepare to endure. Instead of going back to their homeland and to the way things had been before, Jeremiah told them to make a life where they were. He said, “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” He told them to grow their families, to take wives and husbands, and have children and grandchildren. In other words, Jeremiah told the people to live life where they were and build a life with what they had. We can see the picture now. The people were ready to give up. Jeremiah told them, “multiply” in the place where they were. God’s message to the exiled people was, “do not decrease.” This was a startling word. The people were set to give up. God wanted them not to decrease, not to decrease their faith, not to decrease their hope, and not to decrease the value of their lives. Their salvation would not be found in going back to the way things had been. Their salvation would come in knowing God was with them right where they were, even in the darkest of days.

I am regularly asked how my dad is doing. I have shared that he suffers from Parkinson’s Disease and is now in a nursing facility in the retirement community where my folks live. When I’m asked about dad I say, “He’s not doing so good but we’re OK.” When I say, “We’re OK,” I don’t mean we like the way things are. There’s

nothing easy about dealing with a debilitating illness. Our family is very aware of what has been lost and we know we can't go back to the way things were. What we've tried to do is find what we often call "the new normal." You know what that means. Like many families that face these kind of struggles, we do our best to accept what is and to find comfort and peace in the midst of the reality where we are. My dad has good care. My mom is safe. They are surrounded by many friends and supported by a loving family. It's a long haul, to be sure but I've learned that being people of faith makes a difference. Nothing regarding my dad's situation is the way we want it to be and, yet, there is the certainty that God is with us through it all. Many of you know about this kind of experience, either through what you are dealing with personally or because a loved one close to you faces struggles. Our salvation is not hoping things will be as they were. Our salvation and hope comes because God is with us giving us strength to continue living life where we are.

The Hebrew people were hoping it would all just go away. Jeremiah's message wanted them to find a deeper hope in the God that was with them where they were. To that end, Jeremiah gave the people a way to deepen their present hope. He said, "pray to the Lord" for those who have conquered you. In their "welfare you will find your welfare." We call to mind the day Jesus taught his disciples, saying this: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus said that by doing this those who followed him would be connected to the kingdom of God. When we are in times of trouble we sometimes get wrapped up in casting blame, or pointing fingers, or disparaging whoever of whatever has caused the trouble to be laid upon us. Jeremiah and Jesus both say the more faithful response is to pray. When we pray it is not just for ourselves but for those who are against us because that connects us to the way God is working in the midst of it all. When they are lifted up so are we. Their welfare is connected to our welfare. This is the deeper hope and when we pray for all who are involved we become more certain that God is always working for good.

My family, your family, God's family, our faith makes a huge difference in the place where we are. Today we affirm this, and it's especially important for times when we wish we could be somewhere else or with someone else. God is in this moment. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of God is at hand." There's a place in Jeremiah's writings when he describes his awareness of God as a "burning in my bones." (Jer. 20:9) For Jeremiah, God was real and God was now. The burning passion of our faith allows us to discover where is God making a new way possible right now, right here. Can you see it? Do you believe it? Will you build your life upon it?