I invite you to open your Bible this morning to Jeremiah 29:1-14.

Man, did Jerusalem ever have it bad! Of course, they brought it on themselves. In spite of repeated warnings from the prophets to repent, they continued to chase idols, oppress the poor, corrupt worship, and treat widows and orphans with neglect and contempt. God put up with it for as long as He could. God had tossed them the rope of His patience and cut them slack, slack, and more slack. But rather than use that rope to pull themselves back to God, they tied it into a noose and hung themselves. God had finally had enough, and judgment was falling. The Babylonians had the city under siege. Total destruction couldn’t be far behind.

Babylonian officers had already marched some of Jerusalem’s best and brightest 700 miles across the desert to Babylon. And these Jews found themselves in a strange land among strange people. No familiar landmarks. A strange language they couldn’t understand. No temple. “We know who we are in Jerusalem, but who are we here in Babylon?” Exile is the word for it. And they weren’t coping with it so well. Psalm 137 expresses the sentiment of many of these exiles:

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

*O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed is he who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!*

Sounds a little bitter, huh? And it didn’t help that false prophets had told the exiles not to worry, they wouldn’t be there long—just a speed bump to get over. Jeremiah, a true prophet, knew better. He knew they would be in Babylonian
exile for 70 years or so, three generations or so. This was no speed bump; this was Mt. Everest, and it was going to take them 70 years to get over it.

**Seventy years in this place?** Seventy years in a land that worshiped all kinds of gods, a land whose values were certainly not rooted in the Law of Moses? Seventy years to be strangers in a strange land? Yep, 70 years. That was God’s discipline and judgment for way more than 70 years of their sins.

Seventy years is a long time. I turn 57 years old this month. I feel like I’ve lived a long time and I’m still 13 years short of 70. (Whoa! I don’t want to let that sink in.) But even in my 57 years, I’ve been born, I’ve grown up, I’ve gone to college and grad school, I’ve gotten married, had two kids and five grandkids, buried both my parents, lived in 6 different places, lived from rotary dial phones to smart phones, from the World Book Encyclopedia to online Wikipedia, from 48 states to 50, from early jet airplanes to the space shuttle, from the forceful integration of Little Rock Central High to the nation’s first black president, from *Leave It to Beaver* to *Modern Family*. Fifty-seven years is a long time and it’s still 13 short of 70.

And God said that Israel would be in Babylonian exile for 70 years. So what are they supposed to do as strange people in a strange land for all that time? That’s where Jeremiah’s letter to these exiles comes in. Jeremiah was still back in besieged Jerusalem. He’d heard about the bad counsel of the false prophets in Babylon telling the folks not to unpack their bags since deliverance was coming soon. You can’t live out of suitcase for 70 years, so Jeremiah wrote to give God’s word to those exiles. Hear the word of the Lord through Jeremiah ... (*read the text*).

I

**Do you find this letter as surprising as I do?** It’s interesting what Jeremiah *didn’t* say. He didn’t tell the exiles to rebel. He didn’t tell them to take up arms, to organize some kind of underground resistance and become a thorn in the side of the Babylonians for the next 70 years. Nor did he tell them to sit around and pine for the good old days back in Jerusalem, knowing, of course, that the good old days were rarely as good as we remember them.

Quite to the contrary, Jeremiah told them to *settle in* and get on with their lives. We’d been in Hot Springs for five months or so, living in a rent
house. I was still missing the church and community we’d left to come here. I was privately whining to God and Dayna about how good we had it where we were and how things just didn’t feel right here. I hung my guitar on a tree and said, “How can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Things didn’t get better when I went to the Arkansas Baptist Convention. I knew one Arkansas pastor. I didn’t run into him, but I did run into a guy I had known in Missouri who had moved to Arkansas. I was griping to him about things, and he said four words that became God’s letter to exile John. After listening to me whine, he simply said, “But you’re here now.” Those words hit me between the eyes and worked their way down to my heart. Those four words were a turning point for me and my attitude. Essentially, that’s what Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles says so loud and clear: You’re here now, so …

Build houses and live in them — You’re not on a camping trip here. This is your home. Make yourself a home. It may not be your favorite place, but it is the place where you live. So live here. Lay a foundation. Put up a roof and some walls. Hang a few pictures, put some flowers on the coffee table and live in this place. If all you do is pine for Jerusalem, you’ll never live here. Your life is as valuable here as it was in Jerusalem, so build a Babylonian house and live here as well as you’re able.

Plant gardens and eat their produce — Enter into the rhythm of the seasons. Become a productive part of the economy of the place. Don’t expect others to take care of you; take care of yourself. Learn what grows in Babylonian soil and grow it. Get a Babylonian cookbook and try some new recipes. Live here as well as you are able.

Marry and have lots of kids — Be fruitful and multiply. Pass along your faith and your traditions. Tell the family stories. Take care of one another. It’s not good for a person to be alone so grow families and communities. Even though your Babylonian neighbors are not just like you, they’re not better than you or worse than you, so live with them in respect and mutual good will. Live here as well as you are able.

And seek the welfare of the city where I’ve sent you into exile — Pray and work for the city’s peace and prosperity and shalom. Praying means you’re keeping me at the center. Praying means you’re seeking my face and my

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I’m indebted for some of the insights in this section to Eugene H. Peterson, Run with the Horses (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 151-152.
ways in Babylon. Praying will keep you from being assimilated into Babylon altogether. Praying keeps you connected to me and gives you strength to live a God-centered life even a pagan place like Babylon.

But God went on to say that He wasn’t going to leave them hanging in Babylon forever. “Trust me,” God says, “My plans are not to harm you. I have a hope and a future for you, and that future means Jerusalem. I sent you into exile for your sins, but I will bring you back home again. And we’ll try to get started on the right foot this time. You’ll pray to me and I’ll hear you. And when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me.”

And God didn’t offer this hope as some pie-in-the-sky glaze in their eye. God offered this hope so they could live in the present with faith and confidence, so they could live in a pagan culture without becoming paganized. God offered them this hope so that those exiles could live as the people of God in Babylon.

II

You know, the deeper we get into the 21st century, the more I feel like an exile in my own country. Do you? I’m almost 57 years old and I can honestly say that this is not the America I grew up in. Now before we make the good old days better than they were, it’s important to remember that America has plenty of blood on her hands: from the way we treated American Indians, running them off their land, to the way we treated blacks prior to their achieving civil rights. And we have plenty of other national sins in our past. But it’s still safe to say that I grew up in an America that for the most part revered God, legislated Christian values, and sort of propped up the church, even requiring most businesses to close on Sunday. America doesn’t do any of that anymore.

And what can we say about moral values in a land where one of the most dangerous places to live is in a mother’s womb; where sexual ethics have become almost anything goes and much of it with government sanction and cultural blessing; where states raise revenue by enticing people to gamble their hard-earned money; where families have disintegrated and dads disappeared; where athletes and entertainers make the big bucks while teachers make just enough to get by and now have their health insurance jacked up so high, so suddenly, that it’s like they get a cut in pay; where vulgarity in language and
dress and conversation is the order of the day—it’s almost like “How vulgar can I be?”, where the pornography shop is open 24 hours a day and is just a mouse-click away; where instead of hissing the villains we glorify them, emulate them, and buy their books; where Christians can get in trouble for having a Bible on their desk at work; where the legitimate needy can’t get enough help because of too many freeloaders gaming the system; where the American church can’t even make up its mind about right and wrong. It seems like every court decision these days is just one more in a lengthening line of defeats for Christian values. It’s a mess, a big moral mess, a pagan mess. And a lot of Christians feel like some of the pagans in charge want to rub our nose in it. As one of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s characters once said, “Life is a football game; everyone is offside and the rules are abolished and the referee chased off the field.”

I know a lot of Christians who are very angry about it all and refuse to take it lying down. So they hitch their wagon to a political candidate or a party. They protest. They boycott. They write letters. They work for justice. They do what they can to stem the tide. Who can blame them? And if they feel led to do these things and can do them without bitterness and rancor, then thank God they do. And more power to them.

We’re living in a different America than many of us grew up in, an America many call post-Christian. In many ways, it just doesn’t feel like home anymore. It almost feels like we’re in … exile. That’s what Peter called believers in the first century: “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

III

But that’s not all bad, you know. While disappointing on many levels to see America drift away from traditional Christian moorings, evidence would indicate that the church often does better in settings that are indifferent or hostile to it. It gives the church an opportunity to be radically different from the prevailing culture. It keeps the church from drifting into the idolatry of nationalism. And as opposition grows in the culture against the church, the cream of the church often rises to the top. It’s not all bad.

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I've been doing ministry work since 1975 and I can honestly say I've seen a deeper hunger among many Christians for a closer walk with Jesus. Sure, plenty of Christian sell out to the culture and buy what the culture is selling, but many others have said, “I want more of Jesus”—not just a more moral life or kinder life, but a Jesus-centered, gospel-centered life—“I want more of Jesus.” In the words of Day by Day from the musical Godspell, a growing number of believers want to see Jesus “more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly, day by day.” The cream begins to rise to the top. Just as the difference between church and culture grows sharper, so, too, does the difference between Jesus-disciples and Jesus-admirers. This is a good thing we learn in exile.

And we also learn the importance of fellowship. When you are a minority, it’s important to value one another and stick together. It’s important to pray with and for each other. It’s vital to encourage one another to stick with Jesus even when it’s hard and costly to do so. It’s just good to know we’re not alone. We learn that in exile.

And exile also ramps up the critical nature of corporate worship. We live in such a culture of lies and deceit that worship may be one of the few venues left in our culture where a person can hear the truth. We sing the truth and we pray the truth and we hear the truth. “Hear the word of the Lord,” says the preacher. We need that more than ever while we’re in exile.

Will Willimon writes about a time a few years ago when he was invited to preach in the congregation where a friend of his serves. The congregation is located in the heart of one of our great cities. The congregation is entirely made up of black people who live in the tenement houses in that part of the city. Willimon arrived at eleven o’clock, expecting to participate in about an hour of worship. But he did not rise to preach until nearly twelve-thirty. There were five or six hymns and gospel songs, a great deal of speaking, hand-clapping, and singing. The pastor didn’t pronounce the Benediction until one-fifteen. Willimon says he was exhausted.

“Why do black people stay in church so long?” Willimon asked his friend as they went out to lunch. “Our worship never lasts much over an hour.”

The pastor smiled. Then he explained, “Unemployment runs nearly 50 percent here. For our youth, the unemployment rate is much higher. That means that, when our people go about during the week, everything they see, everything
they hear tells them, ‘You are a failure. You are a nobody. You are nothing because you do not have a good job, you do not have a fine car, you have no money.’

“So I must gather them here, once a week, and get their heads straight. I get them together, here, in the church, and through the hymns, the prayers, the preaching say, ‘That is a lie. You are somebody. You are royalty! God has bought you with a price and loves you as his Chosen People.’ It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them so terribly.”

Black people, white people, all people are so easily swayed by the lies and corrupted values of our culture that it’s easy for all of us to get our minds twisted up. When I was growing up I got pretty much the same message from school and from television and from culture that I got from church. I noticed a big change on that when I got to college and it’s gotten way worse since then. Exiles need worship.

The assembling of ourselves together is not an option, it’s not a matter of convenience; it’s mission-critical to living the Christ-life in a pagan culture. If I still had kids at home, I’d see that neither hell nor high water kept me from getting my kids in the church house every week. When we only get three or four hours a week to speak truth into people who are bombarded by pagan tripe the rest of the time, well, we exiles have got to get to worship.

See, being an exile isn’t all bad. God can do some things among us in exile we’d likely have missed if we weren’t strangers in a strange land.

IV

So don’t be discouraged. It’s easy to be. And most nations and cultures in history that slip from their moorings rarely return to them. Barring some new great awakening, I don’t see America ever being what it once was. So it’s easy to be discouraged, but don’t be. Next time you hear of yet another crushing defeat for Christian values, next time you get flack from the pagans around you for following Christ, next time you get angry and vow to strike back in ways that are outside of the ways of Christ, ways that aren’t marked “with

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*gentleness and respect*” (1 Pet. 3:15), then take heart and read Jeremiah 29 one more time.

That’s what I do. And I’ve done something else. Taking cues from Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles, I’ve tried to imagine what God might say in a letter to us 21st century Christian exiles in America. Now I’m no Jeremiah the prophet; I’m just John the pastor. But here it is:

Dear Church,

I know who you are and I know where you live. I see what’s going on in your country. None of it catches me by surprise. And in spite of what’s going on, I still love the world and that includes America. So make yourself at home in the land where you live. Continue to marry and have children and raise them to follow Christ. America needs more Christians, not less. And work for the peace and prosperity of America. Pray for its leaders and its welfare. Pray for revival in the land.

And fulfill my mission as you do. Your culture has changed; your mission has not. Love me, love one another, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies too, and pray for those who persecute you. Worship me with joy. Grow in holiness. Treat all people with kindness and grace. Serve the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Share the gospel of Jesus in your community and world. Be prepared to give a reason for your hope, and do it with gentleness and respect.

And remember this: I have a hope and a future for you that doesn’t depend on how Christian America is, a hope and a future that doesn’t depend on America at all. The hope and future I have for you is rooted in the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ. It’s a hope and a future in the New Jerusalem of a New Heaven and New Earth. So, seek me right now with all your heart. Find me. Trust me. My hands are on the wheel, and my hands are good.

Love,

God