

“NO MORE WHINING”
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 19:11-19
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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

As most of you know, my first church was in Duluth, Minnesota. Shortly before I left Duluth for Seattle, my next door neighbors went through a divorce. There is no such thing as a pretty divorce, but by any standards, this particular divorce was ugly: an affair, money hidden away, the brutal trifecta of lying, cheating, and stealing. The wife, Kathy, was left angry, bitter, consumed with self-pity. Which was not inappropriate in the three months following the marriage’s end. Eight years later though, I was back in Duluth visiting old friends when I ran into Kathy in the grocery store. I asked her how she was, and out of her mouth came a litany of grievance—almost word for word, the same angers, the same accusations and complaints that were her only conversation when I had left town so many years before. I was startled and saddened and, I admit it, a little impatient. In eight years, this woman seemed to have moved forward not one bit from the pain and disillusionment of her past.

“Thus says the God of Israel to the exiles in Babylon: build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. . . . And seek the welfare of the city where you now live, for in its welfare you will find your own welfare.” These words of the prophet Jeremiah were spoken to a particular group of people: the former residents of the kingdom of Judah who had been conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The people had witnessed the sacking of the holy city Jerusalem, then been rounded up from their cities and villages, marched to a strange and foreign land, and told by their captors that they had to stay there.

When the Israelites first came to Babylon, all their thoughts, all their efforts were focused backwards to the home they had left, that safe and, in retrospect, idyllic ground. They collected the old stories; they wrote poems of lament, many of which are contained in what we now call the Psalms and other parts of the Hebrew scripture. They are some of the most powerful and heart-wrenching words of the Bible. And to let you hear that, the choir is going to help me this morning. This is an old musical setting of one of the Babylonian laments, the beginning of Psalm 137.

[sung] *By the waters of Babylon*

We sat down and wept, and wept for thee, Zion.

We remember, we remember, we remember thee, Zion.

So the people cried and they grieved what used to be, and for a while, the prophet and the prophet’s God waited patiently for this time of mourning and dislocation to come to an end. They waited until enough was enough.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.” With these words, the prophet announces that the time for grieving is over; the time for lament is over; the time for looking backwards and, yes, the time for whining is done. You are here now, and you’re going to be here for the foreseeable future, the prophet’s words pronounce, so now is the time for taking hold; now is the time

to look forward, to dig in, time to live the gift of your life fully. It doesn't matter that this is not what you wanted. It doesn't matter whose fault it is or was that you came to be in this strange and foreign land. This is where you are now; make the best of it! "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce." The prophet's words echo down through the ages: as important for us today as they were to the Israelites in captivity in 583 BCE.

We, though we don't know what it's like to be physically exiled from one country to another; we do know what it is like to have our lives changed in ways we don't want them to, ways for which we are unprepared. A job gone sour, a physical change, the death or estrangement of a partner or a parent or a child, financial reverses: the list of the particulars of how we can find ourselves spiritually exiled to a strange land is long and oh-so-hard when it happens to us. Sometimes we know it is our own fault, or at least partially our fault. Other times, change happens and we are entirely innocent, victims of forces beyond our control. And when our experience of exile happens, however it happens, there is a time for looking back. There is a time for grieving. There is even a time for whining, if our whining is the vehicle that allows us to spew forth the anger, the pain, the sadness, the shock, all those emotions that we have to bring up and work out of our system. It's important to be clear about this. The Bible doesn't say never look back, never whine, for if we never did those things, we would never come to terms with what was and how we got from there to here. In the early days of the Babylonian exile, much of what we know as the Hebrew Bible was gathered together, poured over, edited and re-edited until it reflected the people's understanding of their past. That's a basic human need and a positive step towards wholeness, to learn to tell your life's story over again incorporating this new event or information.

But—and you know there's always a "but"—but there is a substantial difference between, on the one hand, exploring the past so as to learn from it and move forward, and, on the other, just rehashing the past, living in the past, getting stuck in the past and never moving on—like my former neighbor in Duluth, or like the Israelites in Babylon might have done. When we get stuck in what used to be, unable to extricate ourselves from our laments, no matter how valid they may be, there comes a time when what we need is not more sympathetic ears to listen to our wallowing, but the prophetic push that says, "Enough. Live with it. Go forward. Seek the welfare of the city where you now find yourself."

Can you imagine how shocking those words about seeking the welfare of the city would have been to the Israelites. They were being told to leave behind their beloved Jerusalem, the city of God, and instead invest themselves in a gentile city, the city of their conquerors. "For in its welfare you will find your own." To seek the welfare of Babylon is to come to a place beyond who's the bad guy and who the good guy, beyond blame, or should or what could have been, or what we would prefer. To seek the welfare of Babylon is a step even beyond acceptance. Because to seek the welfare of Babylon is to dig deep into scripture and into ourselves, to begin at the beginning, and affirm that our lives, however they are configured, are a gift from God, and that no matter how dire the circumstances, no matter where we find ourselves, we can find God there, and we can be God's people and do God's work. Wherever we find ourselves, there can be a wholeness beyond our brokenness that will give us life and will reknit us both as individuals and as the people of God.

Seek the welfare of the city where you find yourself, for in its welfare you will find your own. Whether you are living your life in Jerusalem or in your own private Babylon, Jeremiah today reassures us even while giving us a not-so-subtle push: God is here. Life is here. Time to quit whining and get on with it. Thanks be to God. Amen.