

## Jeremiah

Verse 11 of today's reading is one of those coffee mug verses. I know the plans I have for you has adorned countless coffee mugs, t-shirts, decorator pillows, and confirmation cakes, including I think Erica's.

But I bet you've never seen a decorator pillow with verse 10 on it - <sup>10</sup>For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you.

While verse 11 is lovely by itself, the context is less so.

So, let's get situated here. Up to now, we've been hearing from the prophets before Judah's exile. Jeremiah was called by God to prophesy before the exile. He was very young.

He prophesied the same kind of warnings that Amos and the other prophets did. He tried to get Judah to change their ways – to be faithful to God and live the way God wanted them to live...to treat each other justly and with compassion, especially the most vulnerable – the poor, the immigrant, the widow, the orphan.

Jeremiah warned the rulers that an invasion from the north was coming – Babylon.

He battled false prophets who reassured the king that no harm would come to Judah. He battled powerful people who did not want to hear what he had to say.

But he ended up being right. Today's passage comes after it's already happened. Judah was invaded by Babylon. Jerusalem was besieged and the city and the Temple were destroyed. Judah's best and brightest people were marched off into Babylon to live in captivity.

So this passage comes from one of Jeremiah's letters to the exiles.

False prophets telling people what they wanted to hear were still an issue. One, a prophet named Hananiah told them the period of exile would be two years...they'd be home in no time.

Jeremiah dashed those hopes. Nope, he said. It will be 70 years.

So, think about that for a minute. 70 years...yes, God had plans for a future with hope for Judah...but the hope for this generation didn't lie in the future. Practically none of the people to whom Jeremiah wrote would live long enough to see home again. They'll spend the rest of their lives in Babylon.

Jeremiah will continue to write to them with God's word. Jeremiah's words turn from the harsh warnings to reassurance of God's presence and hope for Judah's future. God doesn't abandon them. But they're still stuck in a bad situation.

So what does Jeremiah tell them to do? Live where they are. Build houses. Get married and have children. Work for the good of Babylon, because for now it's where you are.

Daryl and I moved quite a bit during the early years of our marriage to finish our educational endeavors. We first lived in Omaha, then Lincoln, then Leavenworth, KS, then Rochester MN. While we were out of state, the plan was always to come back to Nebraska. But we learned early on, you have to live where you are.

If you think something is temporary, you might be tempted to not really engage. But to just wait something out isn't really living. So we lived where we were – we made friends, got to know neighbors, joined a church, and so on. You have to live where you are.

And that's what Jeremiah told the exiles to do. Live where you are. While there was a future hope for Israel and Judah, the hope for this generation would lie in Babylon. Their hope would lie in living in the moment, and trusting that God was still with them and still loved them. Their hope lay in the trust that underneath that awful situation in which they found themselves, God was still working.

Some of the most profound shaping of the people of Judah happened during the exile. It's when their belief that their God was THE one true God really became finally and firmly entrenched. It's when a significant chunk of the Bible was written. Their understanding of who God was and what God was really like...and what God wanted them to be like grew exponentially.

So it is with us. Religion that only gives us hope for some glorious future in the afterlife doesn't actually do much for us in the here and now. I for one wouldn't be all that interested in that kind of religion.

Yet we struggle to really live in the present. We rehash old hurts and old mistakes. We regret things we did and things we haven't done.

Or, we think of the past as some magical time that was so much better than now.

We worry about what's to come. Will my kids turn out OK? Will my job last? What if someone I love gets sick and dies or has a car wreck? When will this pandemic end? What if there's a Rho or Sigma mutation? And does any of this matter if climate change kills us all?

We can be tempted to just exist...to say I'll start living when...the pandemic is over...when I get married...when I lose 20 pounds...when I get my dream job.

We too are called to live in the here and now...to trust that God is with us and working on our behalf...now.

The people of Judah did not want to live in Babylon. But to be honest, it often takes those hard times to force us to learn to live in the moment.

When our son first got sick and was hospitalized in Chicago, the doctors said it should run its course in a few days and we could go home. That was the beginning of 7 weeks in Northwestern Hospital in Chicago and another month at Nebraska Medicine in Omaha. Then months recovering at home.

It was the same year my mom started her final decline into her death.

I definitely prayed. And I did trust that God was with me. But that didn't change the uncertainty of the future. And ruminating on the past just made me depressed. I learned a lot about living in the present that year. Something I found myself saying at different times was, This year has sucked, but this moment right here doesn't.

See the only place we can actually meet God is in the present moment. Past, present, and future are all in God's hands. God has promised a future for creation full of meaning and purpose and potential. But the only place you can be present to God and feel God's presence with you is in the moment.

There is actually considerable meshing of psychology and spirituality here. In the world of psychology and neuroscience, it's been found that some of the things we might call spiritual practices - like mindfulness, gratitude practices, and meditation – actually help treat things like addiction, anxiety, and depression.

When you intentionally practice living in the moment, your brain gets better at it. And it loses some of its tendency to regret the past or worry about the future.

Centering prayer has long been one of my go-to practices. The goal isn't really to empty your mind of thoughts. Rather it's to notice them in a neutral way and let them float by as you return to your centering focus.

When you sit doing nothing, every single thought you have will be either something that happened in the past, something going on somewhere else, or something that hasn't happened yet and may never.

When you return to your centering word it's like you're returning to God's presence. It's not the easiest of practices but it does have its reward in the rest of the day.

I've also stumbled on to a surprisingly helpful practice. Practicing gratitude has been found to be a significant tool in improving everyone's mood and thought habits. It can be a useful addition to therapy and medication in the treatment of mental health issues.

I found that gratitude for very ordinary things has been especially helpful. I am of course grateful for family and friends and my work and for Jesus and all, but with those, I can sometimes go down a rabbit hole of worries and regrets if I'm not careful.

Since early November, I walk around my house most days and notice at least one little thing I'm grateful for – things like coffee or a cup of spiced Bengal tea on a cold evening. I think it's played a huge role in preventing the little sink in my mood that tends to happen this time of year. It helps me stay in the present. And when I stay in the present, I generally find I'm more present and connected to God.

God is the alpha and the Omega – the past, present and future. We can trust that God is moving creation to a future with hope. But it's in the present where God longs to meet us and fill us with hope. And that hope is what brings joy and peace to our present moment, no matter what's going on.