

Living Outside the Walls of the City

Luke 17:11-19

Jeremiah 29:1; 4-7

Clearly, the good folks who put together the lectionary do not realize that it is stewardship season. Each year as the temperature begins to drop, and leaves begin to turn, and the hearts of men turn to football and wood-burning fires, the church wants to break the spell and talk money. And not just money in generic terms, they want to talk about money in very personal terms; they want to talk about your money.

But the crafters of the lectionary, bless their hearts, do not care about this high and holy season of the church. They do not take kindly to us darting off the road in pursuit of shiny objects, or greenbacks, or any other such distractions, but instead they have us continuing our slow, methodical journey through the gospel of Luke. This week, instead of money, it brings us the subject of wholeness.

Luke begins this story by giving us what seems like nothing more than an interesting geographical reference: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and was passing through the area between Galilee and Samaria. But think with me, for a minute, about all that he has just told us. Jesus has left Galilee, the place where he was raised, the place where he called and prepared his disciples, and nurtured the faith of many, and he is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will die. And for now, he is neither here nor there. In fact, he is in the border area between Galilee and Samaria; an in-between place, neither a wholly Jewish territory, nor a Samaritan one; an awkward place, perhaps even a place of unrest. And this is where he encounters ten lepers.

The lepers are also in an awkward place, an in-between place, a place of unrest. Not quite in the land of the living, but not yet enjoying rest from their labors. And to add insult to injury, not only are they sick, they've been booted out of the city; forced from their homes and into encampments outside the city walls. Their disease has robbed them of life as they knew it, and the future they had always dreamed of. It robbed them of the use of their bodies, and peace of mind. Until the day Jesus came to town, that is.

Sometimes when we aren't well, whole, God heals us and sends us on our way. But sometimes, for reasons we never really understand, we are left to live in our brokenness for a while.

And that was the case for the people Jeremiah was writing to. They weren't sick, but they were living outside the walls of the city, too. A *long* ways outside the walls. The prophet himself was still in Jerusalem, locked up in a prison cell, but the people he was writing to had been carted off to exile in Babylon after a humiliating military defeat. And the worst part of it for them was that their exile seemed to be divinely ordained. God had given them the land, but they had failed to hold up their end of the bargain, which was simply to be true to God. So God had taken it away from them, or to be more accurate, had taken *them* away from *it*, and had no plans to bail them out any time soon. They had no way of knowing it at the time, but they would be left to cool their heels there for several generations, miles from home, miles from everything comfortable and familiar and safe. They didn't know if they would ever see home again. All they had been

left with was their questions and doubts and their misery. They were living outside the walls of the city both literally and metaphorically.

Exile can take a lot of different forms, can't it? Leprosy. Cancer. Infertility. Unemployment. Workplace stress. Financial problems. Family issues. Grief. Anything that takes you away from 'home,' that place where we feel at rest and whole. Anything that steals your peace of mind,

your sense of belonging,
your ability to sleep through the night,
or pray, or find comfort in the familiar.

Anything that causes you pain, or anxiety or doubt. Living in exile means living with anything that takes you away from life, from home.

Now, Jeremiah would be the first to admit that he wasn't the chirpiest guy around. There is a reason that the book of Lamentations was attributed to him. He didn't want the job to begin with, and he would probably tell you that the no-so-good folks of Israel were only getting what was coming to them. It didn't seem to bring him any great sadness that his countrymen were about to meet their doom under his watch.

And that makes the content of his letter to them just that much more remarkable. Jeremiah isn't writing to berate them, or jeer, or to harp on them about how good they needed to be if they had any hope of God forgiving them and bringing them home. He was writing to encourage them, and to give them some surprising advice about how to survive their life in a foreign land: Dig in. Put down roots. Start a family, build a house. Make your life here.

Just the opposite of the kinds of things we tell people who are going through a rough time – Hang in there. Tough it out. Remember the good old days. We might even say that it was perfectly natural and fine to indulge in a little whining, or to ask, 'why me?' Why did God let this thing happen to me? This illness? This house fire? This financial catastrophe? This divorce? Or, we might grit our teeth and wait for a better day.

But Jeremiah's advice to them? Multiply, and do not decrease. Do hopeful things, like have children. In the very place you don't want to be, plant a garden, or even better, a farm, and expect a harvest. Settle in. Meet your neighbors. Have them over for coffee. Don't pine away for the past, or give in to despair about the future. Live. Really live. Even in the midst of hardship and heartache, even when you feel like a stranger occupying your own skin and life, even in the middle of what looks for all the world like a hopeless situation. Dig in. Don't wither away in despair or doubt.

And it's not an, 'Oh well, might as well make the best of it' thing. He's not telling them to keep their chin up, or keep a positive attitude. I think I've mentioned a college classmate who was forever encouraging us to 'play the glad game' when we were homesick, or a guy dumped us, or we bombed a test, as if thinking of the happy things will make the bad things go away. That's not what Jeremiah is endorsing.

What he's telling them to do is called symbolic action. Your living doesn't reflect your reality, it reflects what you believe. You aren't living like prisoners, like exiles, you are living hopefully because you believe in a God of hope. You build houses in your captor's land and bring children into a scary world and do things that defy reason because you believe God is a God who never looks back,

who never lives in the past, in the so-called 'good old days,'
who never gives up.

God is a God who always increases, never decreases (to use Jeremiah's own words). With God, there is always a future. You do things that don't make sense to the rest of the world because your hope has substance. It isn't just wishful thinking.

Not long from now the session is going to give you a chance to do just what Jeremiah is talking about. There are a lot of people who would say that the church is in exile these days. Church membership is dropping, giving is decreasing. Most churches are operating with a deficit right now. And what are we going to do? Well, first of all we are going to ask you to pledge, and we are going to ask you to increase your pledge, even if it is only a little bit. But we are also going to ask you to make a special gift so we can refurbish our playground. And most of you are going to ask, 'why?' Why do you want us to give even more money when we're already operating under a deficit and we don't even have many elementary school or pre-school children to use this playground? That doesn't make any sense.

And you will be right. It doesn't make sense. At least, it wouldn't make sense if we weren't the church. But we are the church, and we don't believe that God is done with us. We believe that children will, once again, fill these classrooms and swing on those swings and come to know themselves and Christ's disciples right here in this congregation. We believe that we should increase, and not decrease – in our faith, in our numbers, in our giving. We believe that, because we believe that God is faithful.

How about you? If you find that you are living through one of those times of exile, when you aren't well and whole and at home in your life, my prayer is that God will come along and heal you and send you on your way soon. But even if God isn't always quick, God is faithful. Don't just limp along, trying to survive. Live like Easter people who know that, no matter how bad it looks on Friday, Sunday is coming. It may not make sense to people watching you, but that's okay. Live your faith. Live your hope.