

## Houses and Gardens

Lois and I have still not had the experience of building a house. Although I will say that our major renovation of the house on Lincoln and D, along with the more recent excavation in order to put in an egress window on the west side of the house, and a yard drain on the east, makes it feel like we have built at least half a house! I can't imagine the financial stress that would come from building a house entirely from scratch. Especially if it's in a community to which one has just relocated. What if you don't like it? What if they don't like you? What if the new job doesn't work out? What if you can't seem to make any friends? Are you sure you want to commit yourself to settling in and staying for a while? Wouldn't it be more prudent to just rent a house or apartment, at least initially?

Which makes the prophet Jeremiah's advice to his fellow Israelites in Babylon all the more confounding. They had no intention of staying there any longer than they had to. The phrase "had to" being the operative verb here. They were not living in Babylon by their own choice. They had been taken there by the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar, to live as exiles, far from their friends and family who were allowed to remain behind in Jerusalem, far from their temple, far—apparently—from their God. I mean, where was God? Why had he allowed this to happen?

It is unfortunately fairly easy for us to identify with the exiles in Babylon. Because life sometimes gives us circumstances not of our own choosing, circumstances that if we could we would quickly wish away, circumstances that force us to wonder, where is God in the midst of this? And so I ask you, in what ways do you feel as if you were living in exile right now? What unwelcome hardship are you facing? We'll come back to that.

Something compelled Jeremiah to send a letter to the exiles in Babylon. Back in the sixth century BCE the only way to send a letter was in the hands of a messenger, most likely traveling by foot. Needless to say, it would have taken a long time to arrive.

We get the impression that Jeremiah put a lot of thought into this letter. He carefully addressed it to "the remaining elders among the exiles," implying that they the people had lost some of their elders. Maybe some had stayed behind in Jerusalem. Or maybe some had died.

He decided to address the letter also to "the priests," another category of leaders in the Israelite community. And, to "the prophets." Which is interesting. Jeremiah didn't think much of the prophets living among the people in Babylon. He didn't think these so-called prophets were giving their people very good advice. For example, promising them that their exile would be short-lived, that they would soon be allowed to return home.

Because of which Jeremiah also addressed his letter to "all the people." Because they especially needed to hear what he had to say. They weren't going to like it. But they needed to hear it. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel," Jeremiah begins. To make sure they understood that these weren't going to be his words, but rather God's own words. Verse four: "To all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon." Wait a minute. Their own God had sent them?! Verse one had just stated it was King Nebuchadnezzar. Which technically was still true; it was his armies who had carried them off. But their own God had caused it to happen? Why? Was he punishing them for some reason? Using their sinfulness as

an opportunity for a learning lesson of some kind, a teachable moment that was going to last much longer than a moment?

“Build houses and live in them,” God said through Jeremiah. But we don’t want to build houses. We don’t want to live here. We want to leave, to go back home! “This is your home now,” God seems to be saying. “Make it your home. Settle in. And while you’re at it, plant gardens and eat what they produce.” But that would require an entire growing season! We don’t want to be here that long. “You are going to be here for many growing seasons,” God is essentially saying. “Long enough to take wives, and have sons and daughters.” We’re supposed to get married here, and raise families? “Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughter.” But Lord, hold on; just how long are we going to be here? “Long enough,” says the Lord.

Let’s come back to you. What exile do you find yourselves facing today? Where are you in your life right now, that you would really rather not be? That you want to leave, as soon as possible? Have you recently experienced big transition of some kind? And right now it feels as though it’s not going so well? That it was a mistake? And you really just want to undo it, take it back, and go back home? Or are you facing an unexpected injury or illness of some kind, that threatens to change or already has changed your life dramatically? I think once again of Eric and Danielle Bartel and their boys. I think of Eric’s accident, and how in just a few seconds it changed everything. Maybe even forever. Of how Will said to me just the other night at supper, “I wish my daddy wouldn’t have had his accident. It’s a lot harder for him to run with me.” I think of all the changes they have needed to make in their lives and routines. Changes to their house. Changes to their car. Will things ever be the way they were?

I think of Joel and Nancy Klaassen, and Joel’s most recent diagnosis, this time of ocular melanoma. No, God! After everything else, now this? You’re going to take even my eye? It’s not fair. I want it back! I want it all back!

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” God said through Jeremiah. The Hebrew word for welfare is *shalom*, which can also be translated “peace,” or “wellbeing.” Find the peace that is there with you and around you, in your time of exile, whether it is a cancer diagnosis, or endless rehabilitation following an auto accident, or whatever. Pray for it. “You want me to pray for the wellbeing of my cancer? I want to pray for it to die, and go far away! “Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare”; in its peace you will find your peace.

Is it possible that God is saying these very same things to us today? That our present reality is our new home, our new reality? That it will do no good to think about how we wish it would go away, and that we could just go back to our old home, our old life, and the sooner the better? That instead of longing for a better past or better future, we should just live in the present? Accept it? Embrace it? Find peace in it?

Help us, God. Help us find the peace you promise is there. Because right now we can’t see it. “It’s there,” God says over and over, as many times as it takes. “It’s there. Just keep praying for it.”

And so we pray: show us your peace, God. Right here. Right now. Show us your peace. Amen.

**Questions for pondering or discussion.**

Tell about a move that you or your family made that was particularly difficult or scary.

The dictionary defines “exile” as: 1) the state or period of forced absence from one’s country or home; 2) the state or a period of voluntary absence from one’s country or home.” In what ways are the two definitions (and kinds of exile) different?

According to this passage in Jeremiah, it was God who sent the Israelites into exile. Why might God have done this? Other than God doing it, what other explanations might there be?

In the sermon, when the Israelites asked God “Just how long are we going to be here?” God’s answer was “Long enough.” Long enough for what?

Why did God tell the exiles to pray for the welfare of the city where they were living? What difference might that make?

In what ways are you living in the midst of exile right now? Where is God in the midst of that exile?