

The exile of Judah took place in two stages. The first time the Babylonian army only selected the leaders for exile. The tactic was to remove all persons of influence – artisans, merchants, political leaders – so that the general population left behind would be submissive and not put up a fight. It's ***interesting to note that the prophet Jeremiah wasn't in that first group of exiles.*** His message to repent had been ignored, as was his recognition as a person of influence. Jeremiah wrote this letter from Jerusalem to this first group of homesick exiles. For the record: *Eleven years* after the first exile, provoked by plots and insurrectionist activity, Babylon returned and destroyed the entire city, including the Temple, taking virtually everyone into exile (Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses*). We enter today's biblical story right after the first deportation of exiles and after two men from Judah were sent by their king with some business for Babylon's king but first they detour to deliver Jeremiah's letter. While letters were common in the New Testament, they were more rare in the Old Testament and even rarer than that was a letter written from a prophet. Before reading today's scripture, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ. Jeremiah 29: 4-14.** Hear the word of the Lord.

Pulled from their homes and lives in Jerusalem and now living in captivity in Babylon, the home of their enemies, the Judean exiles were without a place or home. The significance of a place is what makes exile so threatening as well as living in constant uncertainty. Lack of place puts into question one's very identity, making one an outsider. Of course the exiles wanted nothing more than to return home, and the false prophets profited from their misery. "Besides being false, these prophets' messages and dreams were destructive. False dreams interfere

with honest living. As long as the people thought there was a chance to go back home at any time, it made no sense to engage in committed, faithful work in Babylon” (Peterson, pp. 145-146). Just before today’s story, a false prophet, Hananiah (28:3, 11), told the exiles that within two years God would bring them out of Babylon and return them to Jerusalem, but it was a lie. It was false hope. Jeremiah called him out for speaking rebellion against the Lord, and within that year Hananiah died (28:17). In Jeremiah’s letter, he delivers the hard reality that it’s going to be a while before the exiles can return to Jerusalem so go ahead and put down roots in Babylon. In other words, don’t wait to live your lives faithfully in Jerusalem (which you didn’t always do), live your lives faithfully now in Babylon! Remember that Jeremiah was called by God as a prophet to tear down and to build up. To uproot and to plant. Jeremiah’s letter was both a rebuke and a challenge. “The aim of the person of faith is not to be as comfortable as possible but to live as deeply and thoroughly as possible- to deal with the reality of life, discover truth, seek justice, create beauty, and to act in love” (Peterson). Jeremiah gives God’s instructions for them while they remain in Babylon: build houses; plant gardens; marry and have children; promote the welfare of the city where you are and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare (vv. 5-7). I confess that I really wrestle with God’s instructions to the exiles and to us. These aren’t individual instructions; they’re communal. Like Eric said so eloquently last week- it’s “All Y’all” instructions. I especially wrestle with the instructions to build homes and to promote the welfare of the place where God has you, praying for it. That’s like Jesus saying to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). Welfare here means “shalom,” which means wholeness. Welfare looks like the dynamic, vibrant health of a society that

oozes with divinely directed purpose and blossoms with life-transforming love. Now these are especially tough instructions for me when I am reminded daily that not all of the “all y’all” can afford to build a home in exile nor is it easy to promote the welfare of those who oppress knowingly or not. I don’t want to just sit around and accept my place in an unjust world and then pray for those who are oppressive. Maybe God isn’t instructing the Judeans in exile nor us to just sit around and accept our place? No. Maybe settling down is digging in our heels- putting down roots- getting involved- challenging the status quo- making a difference as we try and live faithful lives where find ourselves? And the praying for our enemies part? Well, Jesus **does really** tell us to do that, and I don’t know about y’all but I’m a work in progress.

One of my roles here at Triune Mercy Center is as an advocate for the disadvantaged in our community. I hope that you all also join me in that role as followers of Jesus. As a church we believe that God calls us to treat everyone with dignity and respect, as we’re all created in God’s image. Because Christ calls us to do so, we advocate for the most vulnerable in our community, including those who have no place to call home. As Eric preached last week, justice and righteousness is a big deal to God, as are society’s most vulnerable. One of the most proven ways to improve society as a whole as well as showing dignity and respect for individuals is to make housing available for everyone who wants it. “Greenville County is in the midst of a make-or-break moment with regard to affordable housing. The county must produce 10,000 new affordable units and preserve 3,000 more before the end of the decade if it wishes to meet the needs of residents” (*The Greenville Journal*, [June 3, 2021](#)). This past week the Greenville County Council unanimously approved to allocate an additional \$10 million to the

already committed \$2 million from Prisma over the next two years to affordable housing. But how does the county define affordable housing? Their definition of affordable housing, which don't get me wrong, is also needed, is to help "close a housing gap for middle-class residents that is projected to widen to as many as 20,000 units if action isn't taken each year over the next decade" (*Post & Courier*, [June 29, 2021](#)). That's affordable housing for middle-class residents. Some of our parishioners here at Triune, many of whom don't fall into the middle-class status, are also in need of affordable housing; however, many of them also need what's called PSH or Permanent Supportive Housing, which is what Church St. Place at Poe Mill will be. PSH is particularly for the most vulnerable in our community, those with challenges such as domestic violence, mental or physical disabilities, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress- all which make sustaining housing impossible. Through ongoing case management which connects individuals to benefits and community resources, people in PSH have more chance for success at a place to call home. If you're interested in more information, GAHC, the Greenville Affordable Housing Coalition, in collaboration with Furman University, recently published the [Affordable Housing Digital Map](#). This map serves as a tool offering the clearest look yet at the scope of Greenville county's affordable housing needs and opportunities. Through the work of the Greenville Housing Fund nearly 600 affordable units have been produced and another 200 preserved. Nevertheless, we continue to advocate and to seek the welfare of the city because more work is needed "to ensure that new construction and preservation reaches all income brackets, especially those in the 30% AMI (Area Median Income) and below" (*The Porchlight* (GAHC's e-newsletter), June 2021), which

includes some of our parishioners here at Triune. We're talking monthly rent they can afford being \$250-\$400 max.

Last week I traveled to Charlotte with Susan McClarty from the Greenville Homeless Alliance and Mata Crawford from Community Fresh Start to look at the newly purchased motel that A Roof Above is converting to PSH. It was an older Quality Inn that the community of faith bought and are renovating to accommodate over 80 units. Donning hard hats, we toured the facility where God's promise for hope in the future lived. As I walked down the halls under construction, I heard John saying that "Having a home makes you feel like you're human- like you belong." I smiled remembering Beverly inviting me, Tandy, and Robin to tour and pray over the first home she's had in over eight years of living on the streets. We celebrate every time one of our parishioners gets housing and that housing is never guaranteed. We must continue to advocate and work for safe and affordable housing for all.

As followers of Christ, we find our identity and freedom in Jesus, even when we feel like outsiders, because we're all one in Christ Jesus our Lord. On this 4th of July, as a country we celebrate our independence and freedom- yet I am reminded that not everyone feels free in that sense just as I am reminded that not everyone can afford a home. Langston Hughes, poet and prolific writer, wrote a poem entitled "Let America Be America Again" in which he writes about his own experience.

Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be. Let it be the pioneer on the plain seeking a home where he himself is free. (America never was

America to me.) Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—Let it be that great strong land of love—Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme that any man be crushed by one above. (It never was America to me.) O, let my land be a land where Liberty Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real, and life is free, Equality is in the air we breathe. (There's never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Notice how Jeremiah, even though he delivers the news that the Judeans will be exiled in Babylon for seventy years, offers a future with hope to the people. Though they won't more than likely live to see their homeland again, their descendants will. More importantly, God tells them through Jeremiah that when they call on or pray to God- that they will be heard. And when they search for God with all of their hearts, God will be found. And God will restore their fortunes as well as offer a homecoming back to the land of Jerusalem. God isn't only in Jerusalem residing in the Temple alone, as they thought. God is in Babylon, too, and calls them to love and serve God there. The challenge is to trust that God is there and at work.

Just as Jeremiah leaves the exiles with disturbing hope, so does Langston Hughes at the closing of his poem. *O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath—America will be!* Jeremiah's letter reminds us to throw ourselves into the place in which we find ourselves, but not on its terms, on God's terms. Pray. Not just pray but act. Attend to the needs of others ...promote the shalom for all of God's children, whether in our city or state or nation or world. And may we live into God's promise of a future of hope- where God will act for the salvation of all God's people and homecoming. As we wait in faith, know that as God's beloved children, we are debtors to God's amazing grace.

Because of grace, we belong. Because of grace, our neighbors belong. Because of grace Christ's table is large enough and the bounty generous enough for all to eat and be strengthened for this challenging and beautiful work to which we've been called. Thanks be to God! Amen.