

Babylon has won. Two times the army has come to Jerusalem and two times the people of Jerusalem have rebelled, have tossed Babylon back out of town. Only this time, this third time, Babylon is done messing around. The land is devastated and made unlivable. The people are scattered, peasants to Egypt and the Ruling Elite, the wealthy, are taken into exile in Babylon itself.

God has sent a messenger, a prophet called Jeremiah. While Jeremiah warns the ruling elite of what is about to take place, and explains the tragedy in clear words of condemnation, God's words are not limited to cold rebuke and horrific acts of punishment. God goes into exile with the people, through Jeremiah, and God's words are also intended to comfort the exiled, to give hope for restoration, to re-assure that there will come a time for a return to home and a restoration to life as people once knew it - only perhaps not the same life and not the same people.

Exile is going to take a little while, God tells the people through Jeremiah. Settle down. Build houses, plant crops. Find wives and husbands for your children and your grandchildren. It's the third generation that returns to Israel, which is interesting to note.

Over the last few decades we've all been learning more about how migration works, about how we settle into new homelands when we move across borders and oceans. We know that the first generation remembers home, not just in the stories they tell around the dinner table but also in the food they cook to put on that dinner table. Culture and how it shapes us as children is a very powerful force and not easily shaken off. Second generation, children born in the new country, move between the culture of their parent's home and the culture of the new homeland expressed in classroom and work place. When a second generation child enters and exits the front door of their home, they are making a crossing between their parent's homeland and the land they live now. The second generation may or may not directly experience their Parent's homeland culture by visiting or returning to live in the Parental community but the second generation is still heavily influenced by their parent's culture because that's the culture of the dinner table.

It's the third generation, the one that God is promising to send back, that has the least memory of their grandparent's homeland and their grandparent's ways. They might enjoy Sunday dinner at Grandmother's who is still rolling out the strudel dough so thin you can see through it, but they are shopping for that dough in the freezer section at the local grocery store. Actually, they are probably just buying the complete apfel strudel.

So why is God waiting for that third generation, the one with the least memory, to send back to Jerusalem? It could be that God is wanting the fresh start of a generation that does not remember the old, "bad" ways.

But here's another important question: What is God doing with the first and second generation? Is God just ignoring these generations? Is God just waiting the clock runs out and the third generation has reached adulthood? Is God discarding the first and second generation as being basically useless?

No. Here is the truth: We are always useful to God.

Through this passage, God is asking the first and second generation to care as much about their new home and new community as they care about the one they left. Build Houses, plant seeds, seek the welfare of the city they now live within.

God has an interest in Babylon. Babylon is not outside of God's passion for the well being of the whole world God has created.

The people in exile in Babylon may feel hopeless, abandoned, powerless, isolated, and even - somehow deserving of this great punishment - but that's not God's intent.

Make use of yourself God tells the exiles. Build the houses, plant the crops and work for the benefit of the city you now find yourself. I have a purpose for you here.

I think there's a reason we've held onto this story across all these generations.

I think that it is a part of our life to find ourselves sooner or later in exile. Away from home. Somewhere we didn't expect to be or even want to be. Exile is more than just the address on our residence permit.

Exile can be our health. Once we were young and strong and powerful and now, we think twice about going out after dark. Sickness creeps up on us and we find ourselves confined to home or hospital bed, cut off from our day to day life, our community because we can't get out. We fall into exile from our strong, independent selves.

Exile can be our employment. Once we were young and smart and the golden boy or the golden girl, the one full of promise about how to change the future, the one who will set the world on fire. Only we get a bad transfer or a really bad new boss. Or the lay off notice comes or the economy goes topsy turvy and the promotions start passing us by. We get stuck somewhere we didn't want to be. We fall into exile from our dreams, we fall into exile from whom we thought we were going to be.

We can fall into exile from our families, our loved ones. Relationships end and suddenly we're single again after 19 years of being married. How do we date now that we're well into middle age? How do we go out to dinner with other couples now that we are no longer a couple? Why do our old friends start to slip away and how can we make new ones? Our parents grow old and die. Our children grow up and move out. Once we knew what we'd do on the weekend, on the extended holidays. We'd travel or see friends or walk in the park. Now we just hear silence in our rooms. Now we eat standing up rather than face one more table set for one.

Exile is all around us. We are constantly moving into unfamiliar territory, we are constantly recreating ourselves as that first generation in all the changes that roll through our lives. We remember home, but we have to figure out how to live in new home. How to build new houses, plant new crops and how to care for the new city.

Here is God's promise: We are not left to enter into exile by ourselves. We are never discarded as being unworthy. God comes with us into exile. When God sends us into Exile, God holds us, helps us get orientated and then starts making us of us where we are. And we are always useful. Here is a small story: My mother had memory loss in her last years. But even as limited as her life was becoming, she knew she could be helpful. She had a standing date with a woman down the hall. My mother's self assigned job was to escort this other, more physically limited woman, to the community dining room upstairs.

Exile changes us. It challenges us, and we grow because of our experiences in this strange new land. And then, because we have been changed, we become change agents to everyone around us. If we are foreigners in a new land, we offer long established residents a chance to reconsider their ways - is it time for the long term residents to make some fresh changes?

Let me give you another small example of how an outsider can change the patterns of long term residents. For years I sang in a small choir in a small Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon. We rehearsed at night, and after locking up the front door we had to walk through near complete darkness to exit a side door. Then one night, a new person joined our choir, watched our tentative passage, and went to buy a night light that activated in darkness. Such an obvious solution - but one that we who had been engaged in the old walk for years could not think of because we were too deep inside our pattern. We needed someone from outside to see new solutions to our problems.

I'm giving you small examples from real life because I think that's where we live. Not big heroic moves but small changes, small offers that transform our communities none-the-less. I offer small examples because I want all of us to realize we have something we can do, no matter how deep the exile we find ourselves within. God is here with us. And when we are ready, God will put us to work wherever we are no

matter how big or small our actions become. With God's help and direction, we can always care for the communities we find ourselves within. We are never useless.

In this ancient passage we have God's promise. We are home wherever we find ourselves because God is with us where we are and everywhere we are. We are always a part of God's restorative work in this world. We are always of value and use at all times and in all places because we are called by God and we are loved by God.

Let us give thanks to God.