

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

1/19/25

Sermon Title: About That Exile

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 29:1-14

Jer. 29:1 ¶ These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Jer. 29:2 This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.

Jer. 29:3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said:

Jer. 29:4 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Jer. 29:5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.

Jer. 29:6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

Jer. 29:7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jer. 29:8 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,

Jer. 29:9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

Jer. 29:10 ¶ “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

Jer. 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jer. 29:12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

Jer. 29:13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Jer. 29:14 I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Main Point: The life of an exile means that God’s people are distinct from those they live among, while also seeking the good of the place in which they live.

Outline:

1. “In” vs “Of” (Tourists vs Locals)
2. “Assimilation” vs “Isolation”
3. “Celebration” vs “Hatred”

Introduction

You might wonder what’s going on. I mean, we were doing so well, right? We were humming right along. We were in Daniel, we were in Daniel, and then what? What is Jeremiah 29 doing here?

Well look: we need to take a step back and remember what’s going on. When God’s people were taken into exile in Babylon, a whole cottage industry of false

prophets popped up. In particular there was a false prophet named Hananiah, and essentially his prophecy was that the exile was going to be super short, and the exiles would be brought back to Israel very soon after being taken away.

And the prophet Jeremiah spoke to him and said this: “Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie,” and God killed Hananiah.

In fact, the exiles *don't* have a little two-year stint in Babylon. They actually need to prepare for a seventy-year exile. When people claim to speak for God and say, “Your exile is almost over” when it's not, that is harmful to God's people. They check out, they don't invest, they just sort of wait for things to end. That's a problem Paul had to address in 1 Thessalonians, because people were so checked out that they stopped working and taking care of themselves.

Not long ago, there were false prophets like Harold Camping who over and over again said, “Jesus is coming back on this date,” and truly people sold their homes and had their lives ruined and their children's futures ruined because they believed these false prophets. And then in Camping's case, he changed the date, and many believed him again.

People want to hear that the exile is almost over. But it's wicked and harmful to convince people that their exile is almost over when we don't know that it actually is. There's always someone willing to tell us that our exile is almost over, and there's always someone willing to listen to that message. That's what Hananiah represents: the false prophet who will tell you it's almost over, and who will convince you to check out entirely and see yourself merely as a tourist in this place.

But it's also harmful for God's people to believe that the place they live is their new permanent place forever. That turns into worldliness and loving the world and the things in the world. Both of those notions have to be disabused for Christians.

And that's why we have this letter that we've read here this morning. This letter is God's way of letting Daniel and all God's other people know what a long exile in a strange land is supposed to look like. God's people aren't tourists in Babylon; they

are exiles. But this letter helps them and us to understand: what does it mean to live as an exile?

Everything we have seen in the book of Daniel so far has stemmed from the status of God's people as exiles. They seem to have always been at the whims of the king, they are always vulnerable to people who hate them. They don't control the levers of government. They really don't even have the ear of the king, either, except when the king gets really desperate. In many ways they are sort of slingshotted around and deeply unstable, at least from a worldly perspective. But it's also been amazing so far to see that even though things have been crazy, at no point have they been abandoned. God has been with these exiles every step of the way.

Now, we did talk briefly about exile in the first sermon on Daniel, but I also did not go as deep on this topic as I thought was needed. And what better way to help us understand exile than to hear God's direct instructions that were sent to these same exiles we've been reading about that has sustained them through their time in Babylon.

The king in Daniel 6 (as we'll see next Sunday) is going to pass a deeply unjust law that is going to endanger God's people. And that is possible precisely *because* these men are exiles. They are *not* in a position of superiority. In some cases they have responsibility, but they are never in a position to truly determine the laws of the land of Babylon, or to tell the king what to do. Instead, it's almost like they are riding on the wave that is the mood of the Babylonian culture and the Babylonian kings. So when there's a king who loves them they're doing great, and when the king gets manipulated or turns against them, things get rough.

And I think this is relevant enough for us that rather than continuing to move through Daniel I instead wanted us to take sort of an excursus to think more deeply about the life of an exile and what it really means.

And this is valuable because we are exiles.

Peter calls us "elect exiles" in both of his letters.

James addresses his letter to Christians but calls them the "twelve tribes of the dispersion." And this exile status isn't even just about physical land.

King David, in Psalm 39 is praying to God and says, “For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers” (Ps. 39:12). In this case, David is old and weary and knows that this life is temporary.

Being an exile is about more than the physical place and the politics where we live; it’s about whether we’ve arrived at our final destination yet.

Or think of it this way: what best describes our own moment and our own lives right now in 2025? It is hard to argue that we as Christians are victorious Israelites debating how to rule God’s land with God’s law right now. I feel *much* more like Daniel and his friends, but instead of getting tossed from king to king, we’re just tossed up and down left and right from one Presidential administration to another. Back and forth from one party to the next, like a game of Tennis. Some administrations *seem* friendlier to Christians than others, perhaps, but they’re always a mixed bag.

I’m going to suggest that rather than God’s people in the promised land, the paradigm that the New Testament writers encouraged us to see ourselves within is that paradigm of elect exiles – much like Daniel and his companions were.

How are we meant to live as elect exiles, as sojourners with the Lord like all our fathers were?

If we don’t get this idea of what it means to be an exile right, then we might fall into one of two extremes. Christopher Watkins I think spells these extremes out:

“Some (most?) Christians in the West today are more in danger of treating this world as our home than we are of taking our residence here too lightly, while others are too detached from this world, hunkering down and waiting for the [return of Christ] in a way inconsistent with the great commission.”
(*Biblical Critical Theory*, p. 483)

We’re like the exiles in Babylon who need this letter from Jeremiah. We also need to have a recaptured vision of what it means to be a church of elect exiles. We need to know that we’re not here forever, and this isn’t our permanent home... But we also need to know that we’re here probably longer than we might be tempted to think.

So on the one extreme, we might see ourselves as tourists. On the other extreme we might see ourselves as already at our true home. But as exiles we're neither tourists, ultimately, nor are we true residents, either.

And so today's text is what I want to think of as a bit of an intermission. And this is what I want to spend this sort of intermission talking about. Because the letter that God sends to the exiles in Babylon from the hand of the prophet Jeremiah is hugely helpful for us. He spells out for these exiles exactly how they should think of themselves and how they should live while they are in exile.

My plan today is for us to reflect on what it means to be an exile. And I want to do so by looking at a series of possible extremes. First, let's ask the question: as elect exiles, are we "in" the world, or "of" the world? Second, are we meant to assimilate or isolate? And then third, are we meant to celebrate the culture we are in, or hate the culture? Obviously I'm setting up some extremes here so we can see that we're really people with a foot in both. Yes, we are citizens of this earthly place where we find ourselves, but we are also citizens of heaven, and so we're supposed to live in both. I hope this will end up helpful for you, and will maybe help us as we get back to the Daniel narrative next week.

1. "In" or "Of"? (Tourists vs. Locals)

First, we would be greatly helped to think through this question: if we are in exile, should we think of ourselves as "in" the world, or "of" the world? Or is there some other better way to think of ourselves?

Remember the letter that God sent them through Jeremiah. Build homes and live in them. Reproduce. Have children. Get married. Invest yourself in this place that is your home for the time being. Do you see the tension here? This isn't your permanent home, but it *is* your home *for now*.

It's almost a cliché for Christians to describe themselves as "in but not of" the world. I say "almost," because Jesus nearly says this in John 17:14-19. And I just think it's wrong to say something God has told us is a cliché. No matter how many times it gets repeated. Look what the Son of God says in this prayer as he's talking about his people to the Father.

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Jesus here says that he *himself* is not “of the world,” and that his people are so fundamentally different that even though we are here, we are – like him – not “of” this place.

But then keep going. He starts with that idea of what we’re *not*. We’re not “of” the world. But then what are we? Well we’re of *him* rather than the world. We’re his people now, not the world’s people. That’s our core identity. Just like the king of Babylon put new names on the exiles, so the world tries to put new names on us. But even still, we must hold on to our old names, our true names. That’s who we really are: we’re of him. We’re not of the world because he’s claimed us, adopted us, and united himself to us through the Spirit. That’s who we are. Christian, never forget your true name, your true home, your true dwelling place.

He then says that he also doesn’t pray for us to be taken “out of the world.” In other words, he doesn’t want escape for us. Many Christians want that, they yearn for it, but Jesus doesn’t pray that for us. In verse 18 he says as he prays to the Father, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

Jesus has “sent” them. Sent us. This is the opposite of escapism.

Jesus sends us. Where we are is not an afterthought, it is *the* thought. This is the plan. We’re sent here. This sent language is used of the disciples. And he sends us. Jesus sends us. We are sent.

This language also applied to the exiles. In verse 4 of our reading, God explicitly addresses himself to “all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” And then three verses later he speaks of Babylon as “the city where I have sent you into exile.” Almost a dozen times God says that he sent them to Babylon. Someone does not “go” into exile, they are “sent” into exile. They aren’t

dragged into exile. They are sent there by their loving covenant God who never breaks promise, wherever we find ourselves.

And look: Jesus uses this language of us. Jesus says in John 17, “I have sent them into the world,” using the same language by which God sent Israel into exile.

The New Testament idea of the church is that we are to be engaged in the world, but also to not feel permanently at home in the world. The way Augustine puts it in his book *The City of God* is that we are part of this world, but we still “dwell by faith as a pilgrim among the ungodly.”

Now, a passage like today’s shows us the dark side of exile. Because here we are in a land where we as God’s people don’t have control of the laws of the land, we don’t have a dominant voice before those in positions of government. We’re ruled by people who seem to be nominal Christians at best, and don’t seem interested in being guided by the Bible. And they’re certainly more interested in earthly prosperity than in the kingdom of God.

We really are exiles. And it’s not as catchy, but maybe instead of saying “in but not of,” we should say something more like **“sent into but not of the world.”** I doubt that ever catches on.

We’re more than just passing through and indifferent to this place. Right? That’s a tourist mindset. Tourists are just passing through, they’re sight seeing, but they don’t ultimately care what happens to this place. But Christians are exiles. We aren’t tourists. An exile is more invested than a tourist. He lives in the land. He benefits when things are good and hurts when things are bad, but he doesn’t love the place for its own sake.

When I see Christians who don’t even care about these earthly kingdoms, I’m concerned that they don’t realize what it means to be an exile. We should care. We should be invested. We’re not supposed to check out.

But when I see Christians who seem to put all their hope in the earthly kingdom they live in, I’m also concerned. You see this in the apocalyptic language around every American election, almost as if the entirety of our life and salvation and all our hope hinges on how we vote and how things turn out.

When I see that apocalyptic language of biblical proportion being deployed and applied to earthly kingdoms, and I see Christians participating in that kind of talk, I do want to shake brothers and sisters in the faith awake (because I love them) and ask them: “have you forgotten that we are on our way to our true homeland, and that this isn’t it?”

Vote. Participate. Be a part of politics. Serve in government. Be public servants. Labor for the good of this place. We’re not tourists, after all. But we’re also not really locals, either. We’re exiles. We need to embrace this mindset, so that we’re protected from the two nasty extremes of being disconnected and being idolatrous. Both extremes are huge mistakes and a misunderstanding of life as exiles.

2. Assimilation vs Isolation

As exiles, we’re left with another question: we live in this place that is not our home. So how are we to cope? Assimilation, or isolation?

Here’s what I mean: are we meant to go full Amish and set up our own separate Christian society in the wilderness that never makes contact with the outside world? Like technically we live in the bounds of whatever nation we’re in, but we pretend that no one else is around. That’s one type of approach, right? The isolation approach.

The other approach is assimilation.

I’m a huge nerd, so I always think of the Borg from *Star Trek* – this techno-race of alien machines that are always looking for people to absorb into their civilization. When that happens, they take over the bodies and the thinking of the crew of the Enterprise, of course. The true nerds know that they even captured Captain Picard and tried to make him one of them! But he fought back, of course, because he’s Captain Picard.

But really assimilation looks like people in our own day who are baptized church members, they say they are Christians, but they adopt all of the world’s lifestyle and worldviews hook line and sinker. Christian teaching and biblical instruction

become a sort of gloss or coating, but deep down all of the machinery is from the world.

You can tell someone has assimilated because they think like the world and want the approval of the world.

They may adopt the attitudes of their co-workers towards sex and marriage.

The young man whose co-workers objectify women may begin to see things like his co-workers see them.

Or the woman whose co-workers can't imagine someone being so bigoted as to think that two men can't be married to each other. The pressure to assimilate is incredible, and most of you live with that pressure.

Those who assimilate may uncritically have the same media diet as everyone else. They see what the celebrities say, and want to have the same views as that crowd, so they post on their social media or hang in their window the rainbow flags when February hits... they put up those secular creeds in their yard (you know, the "in this place we believe" signs) but don't spend much time thinking about *Christian* creeds...

The young man or woman who becomes obsessed with "owning the libs," but not in being a witness for Jesus to hurting people from across the political spectrum. That's assimilation too.

I know the pull of assimilation well. I feel that pressure all the time. And I'm a *pastor*. The rest of you probably feel that pressure even more keenly than me, I'm sure.

When we assimilate, the world's thinking becomes our thinking, and God's thinking becomes an afterthought or a sugar-coating. But deep down, assimilated Christians have no beliefs that truly distinguish them from the respectable elements of the society in which we live. That is assimilation.

So are we supposed to just pick between one of these approaches? We get to go full Amish or full secularist? Is either of them really acceptable for a Christian?

Well again, go to the text. Look at Jeremiah 29. Do these instructions look like assimilation or isolation to you? After all, they're still Hebrews. They're still

worshiping Yahweh... and most importantly, they're coming back. They're still distinct from the Babylonians. These instructions are for the Israelites, not the Babylonians. Because the Hebrews' real citizenship doesn't change. They're distinct from everyone around them. Their ethics and morals don't change, but the situation is what changes.

Instead of an assimilation posture, or an isolation posture, what if we took this passage in Jeremiah to heart? What if we looked to bless Babylon with our best work, with our best service, with our insights and wisdom from God? Let them see the greatness of Yahweh through us. If we did that, we wouldn't be assimilating or isolating. That seems to be what God is instructing the exiles to do.

Christopher Watkin again: "What can society do for me? Assimilation gushes, 'Everything,' and isolation scoffs, 'Nothing.' But Jeremiah 29 starts from a different question altogether: What can I give to the city, to the culture, hostile to God though it is, to help it flourish according to God's vision?"

3. Celebration vs Hatred

The third question that our status as exiles creates is a difficult choice regarding the attitude we should live with: should we be characterized by celebration of the culture we live in, or hatred of the culture?

In Scripture, you do find out that there is hatred when it comes to the world. But to be more specifically, it isn't Christians that hate the world, but rather the world that hates Christians.

There are many examples, but let me mention two:

In John 15:19 Jesus says, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." So notice there is hate here, but notice who does the hating. Yes, there is hatred, but it's the world that hates, not Christians.

Or 1 John 3:13, where John says, "Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you." Again, there is hatred. But Christians do not hate. The

world is always the one the Scripture speaks of as hating. The hate goes one way, not both ways. There is antipathy, but it doesn't come from us.

Okay, but if the world hates Christians because it hated Jesus first, then why *shouldn't* we hate it back? Why can't there be symmetry here? After all, we love Jesus, and they don't. Well Jesus says in Luke 6:27, "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

We don't have time for a whole theological discourse on this, but may I give a simple answer? Jesus says pray for them. Why pray? Because the very thing by which they hate you is the very thing that God can change. They bear the image of the creator, and to hate them is to hate the creator. An unconverted person carries the image of God, but also the potential for redemption, just like us. We ought to see ourselves in the person who hates us.

There is another issue here. Look at Jeremiah 29 again: this letter arrives in Babylon from the hand of Jeremiah. I would expect the message to be like battle plans for destroying Babylon. An inside job. Why doesn't God tell the exiles to just go full guerilla warfare in Babylon? "Sabotage the water supply. Assassinate the king and his cohorts." Right?

But instead, he perhaps surprises the exiles. God tells the exiles, seek the welfare of the city, then he tells them to pray to Yahweh on Babylon's behalf. Why? I think the key is in verse 7, specifically in the purpose clause that begins with that word "for." The text says, "For in its welfare you will find your welfare."

There is something in this city that isn't completely worth destroying – at the very least because we're here. In fact, there is something good here for the exiles. They can live in an evil city and still see their own welfare served.

Now, the argument of Yahweh continues. In verse 10 God gives a date and says that after seventy years in Babylon he will send his people back. So this was never supposed to be a suicide mission. Their return was always a part of the plan.

Then we see those well-known words in verse 11: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Now, there is a chain of argument here: because God has plans for welfare, and a future, and a hope, he will call them back to their homeland in seventy years. And because of this, they are supposed to survive and thrive. He has a purpose for them, and they need to be alive for that to happen. Here is Christopher Watkin again:

“The problem with this dichotomous choice [between celebration and hatred] is that it paints on too small a canvas. Within the biblical narrative, the culture in which we live...both contains echoes and traces of God’s plans and has also set itself up in rebellion against God.”

That’s Babylon in a nutshell: absolutely it set itself up in rebellion against God. But yet it has a place in God’s plan. It might hate God’s people, but God’s people are not meant to hate this place as long as their welfare is tied together.

Many Christians overcorrect here: they don’t just refuse to hate the culture, but they celebrate it. They celebrate the present worldly order and end up absorbing it and loving it. And yet the Bible also cautions against a celebration of the world:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

How do we strike this balance? It takes wisdom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about what he called a “better worldliness,” and what he meant by that was a presence in and knowledge of the world and what the world’s systems believe, but in such a way that the Christian is able to critique the culture neither entirely from within it, nor completely outside of it.

The key for the Christian is what this letter from Jeremiah indicates: we can live within what is going on because we know where it’s going. In the case of Daniel and his friends, they know that after 70 years God is going to bring them back. And we as Christians don’t have a number that we’re given, but we do know we’re not here permanently.

One of the best illustrations of this critique from within is Augustine's City of God. Because in that book, Augustine absolutely savages the pagans of Rome. They think that Rome is weak and falling because of Christians. But Augustine takes the fight to them and says, "You have been worshiping demons and false gods for hundreds of years. What did you think was going to happen?" He's incredibly direct. And he writes from within the Roman system; here he is in north Africa, and he is a Roman himself, yet he can see clearly that if he steps into their world and sees it their way he'll be adopting their demon worship and their deep confusion.

We have to work to do this, and it isn't always easy. So yes, critique our rulers, and invest in politics. Christians can and should run for public office. We should invest in this place. But we do so with one foot in this kingdom, and the other foot in the heavenly kingdom. We know where we really belong. The world doesn't get to define us; God does.

This has been the story of Christians and their earthly kingdoms ever since the ascension of Jesus. Christians have lived under nearly every form of government you can imagine.

We have lived under pagan emperors and Christian emperors.

We have lived under despots and under parliamentary monarchies.

We have lived under Ayatollahs and tin pot dictators.

We have lived under representative republics, communist autocracies, and everything in between.

Some of these lead to far more misery than others, but in every instance, God called Christians to be exemplary citizens where they were. Our call has never been, as the church, to facilitate political overthrow, but instead to live under leaders who are always more or less friendly to the gospel of Christ.

When rulers are friendly to God's people (like we see with Darius, for example), then we rejoice.

When we are put to death, we rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer for the name.

When we survive and thrive, we are glad and thank the Lord for the season we enjoy.

We aren't like the rest of the world. We live here, but when earthly kingdoms collapse we haven't lost our whole reason for existence. We are invested, but not disconnected.

In our own day, we should take these lessons to heart. It is tempting to see the antipathy that exists against Christians and to think, "Okay, we've got to topple this place," but we forget that our welfare and the ability of the gospel to go forth leans a lot on this place and its own welfare.

Conclusion

Christian, we are not of this world, but we have been sent into it.

We aren't meant to blend in and assimilate, but we also aren't supposed to hate it and try to topple it.

Instead, let's take our cues from Jeremiah here: let's bless the place where we live. Let's give our best to the world around us. But let's also never forget our place in it. We are resident pilgrims whose destination is the heavenly kingdom of our God.

Even in exile, God tells his people, "Call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you... seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (29:12-13). This is our defining characteristic in the place where we live: we are hopeful. But it's not in the place we live in that is our hope. Our hope is in another kingdom, which our God is calling us back to in his time.

Let's pray.