

“Seeking Shalom in a Hated City”
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
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Jeremiah carries perhaps the most unpopular message of any prophet in the Bible. Israel - your present, painful situation is the result of your own sin, and it's not going to get better anytime soon. 70 years is what it's going to take to get home. By then it won't feel like home anymore. So the best you can do is dig in where you are, bloom where you've been transplanted, and settle in for the long exile.

That is a very unpopular message to a people who have just had their treasured temple destroyed and with it their deepest national, theological and personal convictions. The situation itself was painful enough. The injustices inside the nation, the departures from neighborly norms were too much for God to tolerate. There were limits to God's fidelity to Israel at least in the “blank check” that some had understood. And God enacted those limits in a painful way through the instrument of the hated empire to the north, Babylon. The temple lay in ruins, the monarchy exiled – a situation unthinkable, unfathomable to a people whose primary narrative was that God would always be faithful. God's fidelity was conditional. The situation itself was painful enough.

And now, Jeremiah was adding to that pain by saying, the only way forward was to seek the shalom – translated here as welfare – the wellbeing – the wholeness of the very city-state that had destroyed all the foundations of what they had believed in. To some, Jeremiah's message must have sounded as treasonous as it was painful. Seek the welfare – the shalom of the city you hate. Because there is where you will find your own shalom.

We don't have to imagine that this message was highly unpopular. We know it from Jeremiah's own experience of battling false prophets and kings who tried to put a positive spin on their present circumstances rather than accepting them. In the previous chapter, a more popular prophet, Hananiah, was proclaiming a more prosperity-oriented Gospel – within 2 years, Hananiah said, the Lord will bring back all the exiles from Babylon along with the government, and everything that was taken from the temple. (Jer. 28:2-4, 10-11) God will break Babylonian Empire just as God has done in the past. The new Pharaoh won't last long. Prepare for imminent deliverance! God is about to make Israel great again.

And let's be honest. That's the message that plays better with most of us. It's the message that any reasonable person would choose if it was up to us. It's the message that people of faith often choose and not for bad reasons. Elsewhere we are told that weeping last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. Elsewhere we are told that there is a time for everything and your current predicament is just a fleeting moment in time. We tell it right here in worship each week. If you confess your sins, God who is faithful and just will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. “We are forgiven, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.”

But Jeremiah says, “Nope. You’re going to be here for a while. Get comfortable in your discomfort. Get situated in the land you didn’t choose. Some kinds of pain have to deepen before they begin to alleviate.”

We prefer Hananiah’s prophecy to that of Jeremiah – this won’t last long. It’s not all that bad. Don’t listen to the people who tell you it’s worse than what you first thought. We prefer Hananiah’s prophecy, I think, because we live in a culture that has a low tolerance for pain. We like our drugs – over a hundred billion spent each year on the illicit ones. We like our TV preachers pushing the prosperity gospel that God rewards you here and now in a quid pro quo kind of way – you do for God and God will do for you. And if we’re honest many of us sometimes treat church the same way. We long for this place to help us *escape* what’s going on in the world – a *sanctuary from all the pain*. I’ve heard people talk about going to church to “*get my weekly fix*, so I can get through the week.” If that’s what church is about, that makes me just another drug pusher, pushing spiritual heroin instead of the powdered stuff.

Jeremiah is living through a time when this human desire to avoid pain is what led the nation to where it is. This desire to make my own comfort and enjoyment the focus at the expense of others’ comfort and security always comes with some kind of cost to somebody else. For Israel it came with a cost to the poor, the oppressed, and the social contract itself. And the temple establishment, according to Jeremiah – the religious leadership - conspired to keep Israel from avoiding the truth about themselves. We prefer Hananiah to Jeremiah. We prefer the two year exile plan to the one that lasts for 70. We prefer people who tell us that we can have more for less, that less immediate pain is always better.

It’s the prophecy that our nation has chosen too often in recent years about a whole host of issues inclusive of, but not limited to the environmental crisis.

“The earth isn’t really warming all that much. The predictions are overblown or not certain. We really don’t have to stop our addiction to fossil fuels. Technology will automatically solve the problem. No sacrifices are required from us.”

“Racism has really been overcome as soon as we elected a black President. Our work was done. No reparative work is required from us. No more affirmative action. No more voting rights concerns. We’re all equal.”

“Social Security isn’t in trouble or the church for that matter. We can just keep spending, keep behaving, keep acting like we’ve always acted in the past.”

And I can almost guarantee you that as the Kirwan Commission on improving education in the state of MD comes out with its financial models no politician will be eager to deliver the news to the citizenry that if you want to make change we’re all going to need to pay for it together.

The irony, of course, is that this fear of pain in the short term is what compounds the pain over the long term. The more we shrink from facing what is actually happening in our world, actually happening in our community, actually happening in our lives because we are afraid of what it might cost us, the more it actually costs us the long run. That’s exactly what’s happening in the climate fight. The more we ignore the perils to our world, protecting ourselves from short term pain, the more we magnify the pain that will be required next year and the year after, and the year after that.

The good news is that *Jeremiah's message is the honest one that leads to life*. Dig into the painful place where our ancestors dropped us, or where most of us have had a hand in constructing, the painful place that can't be fixed with saviors or scapegoats but can only be addressed by a community willing to face the challenges of our contemporary situation without fear of what will be required from us together. It's like Rabbi Edwin Friedman said in his book on leadership in the age of the quick fix, "*There is no way out of a chronically painful condition except by being willing to go through a temporarily more acutely painful phase.*"¹ If you want to change your community, the global environmental crisis, or just your own life, sometimes things have to get harder before they get easier.

When it comes to healing the planet, we have a great deal more capacity for sharing in the sacrifice, sharing in the societal changes that are necessary, sharing in the approaches to the climate crisis than we may think. We have clear solutions, strategies and plans that the world could cooperate on together, not only stop the warming of our planet but to begin to reverse some of its effects; but only if we face the truth of our situation instead of denying it.

Paul Hawken, author of *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming* has created a team that has modeled and ranked 80 solutions that could reverse global warming. When they modeled the data using a "plausible scenario" meaning a fairly conservative "reasonable but optimistic" scenario, society actually makes significant strides toward drawdown, "the point where greenhouse-gas levels in the atmosphere begin to decline." And if we were to go a bit beyond the conservative scenario we could actually hit the drawdown point by 2050.²

As hard as it is to hear Jeremiah's prophecy – let go of the blame game of how you got to where you are. Dig in and work for the benefit of everybody today. Forget those who tell you "peace, peace" when there is no peace. Accept the realities of divisions, and injustice, and oppression in our midst. Forget the messages that pain is to be avoided at all costs, that faith is the opiate of the people. Accept your exilic moment.

As hard as it is to hear that message, it's the honest one for anyone who trusts in the God who loves Israel enough to see the long view of their redemption. After 70 years, God says through Jeremiah, "I will let you find me. . .and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you. . .and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jer 29:14)

¹ Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing), 1999, 2007, 2017, p. 214.

² Paul Hawken & Tom Steyer, *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2017. For a helpful summary of the book see "The 10 Most Viable Global Climate Change Solutions," <https://www.onepercentfortheplanet.org/stories/2019/8/21/10-most-viable-global-climate-solutions>.

Which means that the real role of any honest prophet, like the role of any good leader – political, religious, or otherwise – is not to attempt to alleviate people's pain, but *to help them increase their capacity for enduring it*. It's not to pretend that we can live in the world as it should be but to accept our current reality so that we can participate with God and each other to transform – *and be transformed by it*.

Jean Vanier died this past May. He was founder of the L'Arche Community, established in the 1960s with the core conviction that people with developmental disabilities are teachers, rather than burdens to their families. Vanier was a big believer in the core of the Christian message that it is our weaknesses that teach us about strength, and not in some romanticized way. It is in facing the realities of our own situation our own weaknesses, rather than running from them, or wishing them away, or blaming others for them where our salvation and our calling can be found. In 2007, he told interviewer Krista Tippett, "You see, the big thing for me is to love reality and not live in the imagination, not live in what could have been or what should have been or what can be. . .[but] *to love reality and then discover that God is present.*"³

Perhaps that is as unwelcome message as it was when Jeremiah delivered to his own people. The thing is, it turned out to be true.

³ Jean Vanier interviewed by Krista Tippett, aired December 20, 2007, *On Being*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/jean-vanier-the-wisdom-of-tenderness/>