

Sunday September 5, 2021
 Lesson 1: Hospitality to Strangers
 Scripture: Jeremiah 29: 4-14

Context:

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. The first unit focuses upon hospitality and the role hospitality should play in our Christian formation. The first lesson, titled “Hospitality to Strangers,” invites the reader to explore how God called the people of Israel to show hospitality to strangers and extends the invitation to Christians today to show hospitality as well.

The lesson is set in the book of Jeremiah. Placed after the book of Isaiah, the book of Jeremiah also shows a complicated literary history.¹ As there are repetitions in the book, there are also differences in the writing, indicating how the book was found in fragments. The complicated history of the book may be an indirect reflection of the chaos of the time, but also reveals a kind of open-ended understanding of a “book,” a hypertext which subsequent authors and editors felt free to revise and expand.² This is quite similar to several other biblical books, yet stands more pronounced in this case.

The particular passage for today’s lesson comes in the middle of the book. This prose narrative gives an encounter between Jeremiah and members of the establishment fitting in with the surrounding chapters.³ Before this particular narrative in Jeremiah chapters twenty-seven through twenty-eight, Jeremiah wears an animal’s yoke on his neck as a gesture towards the kings of Moab, Edom, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, who had come to Jerusalem to form a coalition with the king of Judah, Zedekiah, against the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar; the scene is being set for how all these nations will become subjects to the Babylonian empire.⁴ This leads to a conflict as a prophet rises up and says Jeremiah is wrong and how the exile will be more of a short period, like two years.

The response in chapter twenty-nine is a response as Jeremiah names how there will be a longer exile and the people will indeed be uprooted. Yet the people of God will be divided and in either place, they are to continue their lives and their traditions. God will be with them as hard and difficult as the time may be. And one day, there is the promise of reunification and a time where the Israelites will flourish. This exhortation is meant to give the people hope as the generations after them will be given a future, even if it is not what previous generations had seen before.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 364.

² Ibid., 365.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 371.

Application

There are certain verses to be used as personal favorites because they appear so uplifting. This scripture passage today contains one of those with the verse from Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you...,” as one to appear at numerous graduations, motivational paraphernalia, and even an occasional wedding. While it is a beautiful word of encouragement from the Lord, what’s interesting is the context of the passage.

As discovered in the context piece, Jeremiah speaks to a people in a chaotic time. The Babylonian conquest and exile was not something the people wanted or expected. As other biblical books will narrate, the rebuilding was painful as people saw the past and reflected on all the time lost along with the devastation. The word of Jeremiah may have been beautiful yet also somewhat hard to internalize with all to have happened in their midst.

Another part of the Babylonian exile is how once the court and select families were carried in Nebuchadnezzar’s capital city, there were others left behind. As a result of the population being diminished, other groups began to come into the region and settle beside the Israelites. There was the question of what to do and how to be in community with them.

As we read and think of the context of the Israelites, we might see our verse a little differently. It is no secret the landscape of where western Christians live has changed, even in the United States, a place where the population still remains majority Christian. Yet these numbers are changing as younger generations find different places of belonging and an understanding of institutions.

There are other factors taking place as well. We are seeing the rise of technology lead to people being more connected and yet disconnected at the same time. Rural America is changing with some thriving whereas others remain either stagnant or are in decline as there are no jobs or development in the area. Cities have seen growth, as well as the suburbs, with people seeking job opportunities. Yet as they arrive, there are so many places to connect than ever before. People are more apt to move somewhere new than ever before.

The church stands at a time where there is the question of who we will be in all these changes. As Diana Butler Bass contends, we in the church understand the way we come into the church is to believe, behave, and then belong.⁵ Yet if we want to understand what the church might do to live a new life and experience resurrection, we may need to focus upon reversing the pattern to belong, behave, and then believe.

This is not to say we should not have expectations for discipleship or membership in the local church. Yet it does invite us to reflect on what we understand the role of the church and how God could be leading us to new places. God is always at work per the words of Jeremiah, even during exile and change.

Often, I hear people bemoan the good old days when things were different, especially with the church. While nostalgia and tradition are beautiful, they lose their flavor if we don’t see the needs connected to those. As we reflect, God might be calling us to try new things or maybe revamp those traditions.

⁵ Bass, Diana Butler, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, (Nashville, TN: HarperCollins), 2012.

So maybe the Christmas pageant was great when the church had a whole gaggle of kids. Who is to say you can't pull out the costumes, adjust and form a live nativity with an open invitation to the community to come and sip hot cocoa? The need to belong is met just a little differently.

I think while Christians certainly do have the changing tides in front of us, we also have great opportunity. We have the privilege to see how God's goodness might reach out to those who are looking for a place of love and mercy. We might see how diversity is a gift and how people we may have once feared can become great brothers and sisters in Christ. God may challenge us to see our plans do not always line up with God's plans.

How have you heard this verse Jeremiah 29:11 used? Why do you think the prophet Jeremiah wants to remind people of both the hardship and the promises to come? Who are the people in your community God may want you to be in relationship besides? What are the gifts of radical hospitality? How have you seen plans changed and realized later on God was at work?

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