

Gardening with the Enemy

Jeremiah 29:1-11

Sermon by Jennifer Schrock

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Jeremiah 29 is not a text that I chose. Nor is it what the lectionary prescribes for this morning. This scripture comes to us from Daniel and Brenda Grimes, who won the creation care raffle a couple of months back by getting their energy audit done. Thank you, Brenda and Daniel, for bringing this powerful text to our attention.

(Their second choice, by the way, was Balaam's donkey, which would have made for an interesting morning also, but we can't do both.)

I. Jeremiah 29 is one of the great comfort texts of the Bible.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

People in many walks of life cling to these words. They speak to our failures, they speak in situations of despair; they speak to the sense of cluelessness many of us experience even when our options are good. My first encounter with this passage took place when I was a teenager and my sister-in-law asked me to make a calligraphy wall hanging of the "Seek the peace of the city" verse for a friend who was undergoing a painful job transfer.

A couple years ago, the Bible Gateway web site crunched some numbers to see which texts people search the web for most frequently. Jeremiah 29:11 came in second, right behind John 3:16.

When I followed up with that fact on Amazon, I didn't read through all 20 pages of items for sale featuring Jeremiah 29:11, but I did learn that you can get it on mugs,

graduation cards, key chains, bracelets, rings, T-shirts, photo frames, plaques, coasters, tote bags, I-phone cases, license plate frames, granite blocks, bumper stickers, Bible covers, wallets and doggie apparel. For the guys, we have Jeremiah 29:11 running gear, flashlights and trailer hitch cover plugs. And, if you need a gift for one of our upcoming baby showers, plan now for a Jeremiah 29:11 onesie. Pink, blue or green, \$18.

I don't begrudge people their inspirational mugs. We all need a plan. We all hunger for a future with hope. But there is more to this verse than fits on a mug. In Hebrew, the "you" is plural: it's not all about our personal lives; it's about the life of the community. And "the plan" includes your worst enemy. The one who has just kicked you in the face. You and them: trading onion starts over the back fence.

II. Jeremiah 29 is really one of the most challenging texts in the Bible. When Jeremiah spoke these words about seeking peace, he was speaking them to a conquered people deported to enemy soil. As I thought about how we might hear this text in its context, I decided not to rehash 2500 year-old history, but rather to share some images that parallel the experience that Jeremiah's hearers had. Warfare, exile and loss of what we hold sacred are not unique experiences; they have happened to many people in many times and places, within the living memory of almost all of us. In 2010, for example, there were 33 armed conflicts in process, and in the year 2011, according to the Red Cross, over 1% of the world's population was displaced for one reason or another.

What we are about to see is a disorderly collage of photographs ranging from Korea to Rwanda to Kosovo and places in between. These pictures do not include human carnage, but of course that was a part of the Babylonian exile and these wars as well.

SLIDE SHOW

Into a milieu like this comes a letter from Jeremiah, offering gardening tips and advice on family planning. Settle down, stay awhile he says. Marry! Have children and grandchildren! Invest in your community. Pray for your neighbors! In short, seek the welfare of the city where God has sent you into exile, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.

This was not the message that the Babylonian exiles were hoping to hear. No one was putting Jeremiah quotations on pots and jewelry in 597 B.C.E. In his own time, he was about as popular as road kill. People much preferred the voice of Jeremiah's competitors, who were promising that God would break the yoke of the Babylonians and send them home within two years. Jeremiah, meanwhile, was an unpatriotic heretic who had the foresight to see that armed revolt wasn't going to work, and it didn't. Three times, the Israelites tried armed revolt and each time the Babylonians came in and crushed them.

As I looked at what Jeremiah is offering instead, I wondered why he framed his message in terms of gardens and marriage. For one thing, they are both long-term commitments. Planting grapes and olives has a way of anchoring you to a place. Secondly, I think Jeremiah is deliberately using language that parallels the creation stories: be fruitful and multiply; till and keep the land. It's as if he is saying, "Let go of the old world. It's gone. *This* is a new creation. God is recreating you as a people *here*. Fulfill the original vocation that God gave you in a whole new context.

III. What might Jeremiah 29 have to say to us at Berkeley Avenue today?

Where do comfort and challenge meet for us? Is there a word for us if we're not in a war zone at present? Four things came to me as I listened to this text.

Thing 1: What if we are the *empire*?

Typically, this text is interpreted by asking in what sense are we exiles? People ponder how this passage speaks to their own spiritual or psychological experiences of exile. You may wish to play around with that, but I'd like to go a different direction today.

Let's admit that most of us are not exiles, politically speaking and have never known what it is like to have to be uprooted to another country. We are citizens at home in a world empire and we wield at least some power there.

What would happen if the Christians of the United States embraced Jeremiah 29 as the lens through which we view immigrants to our own country. What if we made a conscious effort to see the immigrants in our community as **people sent to us by God seeking peace?** What if we imagined that every Latino immigrant in Goshen, IN, had a big orange sticker on their foreheads that said, "Sent by God. Seeking Peace." That may not *always* be true but it is likely truer than some of knee jerk assumptions I make sometimes, even if I'm too politically correct to voice them.

I bring this up partly because our whole denomination is thinking about immigration right now. The first week of July, Mennonites from all over the U.S. will gather in Phoenix, Arizona and one of the primary issues under discussion is immigration. For those of you who are not up on your church politics, the Arizona location was a controversy awhile back. In 2010, after our sites were already booked, Arizona passed a senate bill that made it a crime to be an illegal immigrant. It also gave law enforcement the right to demand proof of legal residence of anyone who might be suspected of being illegal. Some members of the Mennonite Church, Latino and otherwise, felt that we should boycott this state. Why should go where some of our brothers and sisters would not feel welcome

and could be harassed? Others pointed to the huge financial consequences of cancelling and suggested that we find creative ways to make this a teaching moment for the whole church.

The latter is the direction things have gone, and the planners have done a thorough job of it. I will be attending the MCUSA convention with MCCN, so I've been reading up on what's happening there. I've never seen such a themed conference. There are many, many opportunities to engage with immigration issues and the experiences of real people. There are Bible studies and storytelling sessions and a film festival on immigration themes. Each day, a group of Mennonites will be visiting the border itself with an organization called Borderlinks. And, for the first time ever, you can learn salsa dancing at a Mennonite convention.

Please pray for the work of our denomination in Phoenix the first week of July, and for our youth who are attending it. And don't forget the orange stickers here in Goshen.

Thing 2: Look for mentors who can help you seek the peace of the community in the broadest sense of the word.

The Hebrew word that Jeremiah uses in this text is shalom. The NRSV translates it as *welfare* in this case; the NIV describes it as peace and prosperity. I prefer the NRSV's wording in this case because I think "prosperity" implies something about social class and materialism to us. What both translations are trying to get at is the fact that shalom is broader than just an absence of war; it includes physical, mental, spiritual, and ecological well-being. You are not experiencing shalom if you are hungry or stressed, or if your soil is eroded.

While I was waiting for Daniel and Brenda to choose the scripture for this morning, I wondered what they would pick, but I really had no idea. Then when I got this text, I thought, “Why didn’t I see this coming? This text is sooooo Daniel and Brenda!” They embody this text. Never mind the fact that they take marriage very seriously, plant a garden, have sons and daughters and are giving a daughter in marriage this summer. More importantly, I see Daniel and Brenda as people who very much seek the peace of their city: Brenda, through her work as a teacher with young children of all backgrounds and Daniel with his interest in politics and his involvements with local government. I did not grow up with parents who modeled civic engagement so I am grateful for members of this congregation like Richard Aguirre or Darin Short; Ruth Roth or Claire Kraybill who show us how we might seek the peace of our broader community in Christ-like ways. Look around you and find the mentors you need: they’re here.

Thing 3: Sometimes, it's okay to let the old faith die.

For the ancient Israelites, what was at stake in the exile was not just a physical crisis; it was a crisis of faith. They lost all the props they thought were essential to their religion: The temple... Its gold and silver furnishings...The Davidic kingship...The sacrificial system...and the idea that any self-respecting deity would not let bad things happen to its followers. They were willing to fight tooth and nail for those things, but that wasn't where the Spirit of God was moving.

Sometimes the old faith needs to die. Looking at it as heirs of this tradition with 2500 years of hindsight, we gained a whole lot more than we lost in the Babylonian exile. So we're down one ancient temple and a bunch of gold antiques? What emerged out of the exile instead was a new understanding of the character of God and portable new ways to pass on the faith. The God of the exile is a God of recreation and resurrection; one who brings life out of death. There's also a transition here from a narrow nationalism that would have excluded us to a bigger understanding of God as the God of all nations. We can see it budding in Jeremiah's words to his people about seeking the welfare of the enemy's capital city.

It can be painful when we hear about churches dying, or the decline in churchgoing in America, or when our children reject the faith. Or when our own faith feels ridiculous or irrelevant. This text challenges us to trust the God who brings life out of death, even when that death seems to include faith.

Lastly, I have a present for those of you who are saying, never mind all that, I just need a plan. God may know the plans God has for me, but I don't!"

Recently I was sitting with one of our outgoing grad students at Merry Lea as she was considering her next steps. She said to me, "I just know that if God wants me

here, I'll end up here, and if God wants me there, I'll end up there." Well, maybe. But in my experience, God is not much of a micromanager. Most of us would not tell our children, "You must become a veterinarian," or "You *must* go to Goshen College," and most of the time, God doesn't either.

But that doesn't mean there's no plan. The plan is that we will flourish and be fruitful in whatever ways come most naturally to us. The plan is that we will always seek our own personal good in relation to the good of the broader community. The plan is that we will live in peace, even if that peace must be crafted across enemy lines.

While I was preparing this sermon, I got a *Sojourners* email from Jim Wallis that echoed this morning's scripture. It is a list of 10 personal decisions that you can make to foster the common good. I thought it was so practical and so well stated that I made a copy for every household, with Jeremiah 29: 7 & 11 at the top. It won't tell you who to marry or whether to move to Boston or New Orleans, but there is sound direction here for anybody who cares to read it. I tied them up with ribbon to look like a gift, because this text is a great gift to us.

May you be blessed by the faith and words of Jeremiah this week.