**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

INTRO w/story

One of my favorite things to do is to putter around the garden. I grew up with a large garden at home in Ireland. I learned plant names, kinda. My granny and my mom are gifted with a gardeners-memory – for both the Latin names and the common names of wildflowers, shrubs, and trees. But as I began to move away from home, first to the city of Belfast, then to St Andrews in Scotland and finally across the Atlantic. Starting a garden seemed kind of silly. Particularly, when I was still living a very transient life in my 20s, moving every couple of years and mostly from one rental property to another.

Planting a garden didn’t seem like a very portable hobby for a 20-something year old. I had in my mind that gardening was something you did when you found your forever home, when generations would live on the same plot of land, and become familiar with all the variations in soil types, weather patterns, and what insects to look out for. Starting a garden was a sign of settling down, of not just allowing plants and vegetables to put down roots, but for you as a human to do the same. It’s a symbol of ‘home,’ of finding your place, of stay-puttedness.

LINK

This symbolic meaning of planting a garden has not changed much in centuries, or millennia. Which is why when the prophet Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel who have been taken into exile, to (in verse 5) “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. (Verse 6) Take wives and have sons and daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters…” The people hearing these words would have been dismayed, they were going to be in Babylon for a while.

TEXT & CONTEXT

You see, it was for all intents and purposes ‘the end of the world.’

At least that is what it must have felt like. It was the end of life as it was known in Jerusalem, in Judah, in all that was left of David’s monarchy. Imagine if *their* story was our story:

Our national government has just collapsed as the result of an invading foreign power. There is no remnant of the military. There is no government. The President, First Lady, Cabinet and Congress have all been exiled. All of the artists and financiers in New York, steel workers in Pittsburgh, professors and researchers in Boston, auto-workers in Detroit were all separated from their families and exiled as well.

To these terrified and shell-shocked exiles, the prophet Jeremiah sent a pastoral letter. That the letter came from Jeremiah at all, was a sign of just how bad things were. Jeremiah is *now* a major prophet due to the size of the scroll that bears his name and words. But *in his time* he was a small town boy trying to make it big in the big city, and by all apparent measures, he was a failure.

Jeremiah had tried to make it as a prophet, but things did not turn out quite as he expected. In chapter 26 he was nearly put to death for his sermon in the temple court. He was slapped in the face and bound into stocks (chapter 20), imprisoned (chapter 37), and thrown in a cistern (chapter 38). In addition, he was apparently illiterate; his messages were preserved by the scribe Baruch who even accompanied him into *his* eventual exile.

Jeremiah was in a position to send this letter because he was left behind in the deportations; the Babylonians did not think he was worth the effort of deporting. When Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, he razed and looted the Temple, took the chief priest hostage, and exiled (or killed) everyone else. Verse 1 of our reading says that the surviving elders, priests, and prophets were all in Babylon. The religious establishment was disbanded, traumatized, and in need of a prophetic word themselves. Jeremiah was never a formal part of that establishment. He was an outsider prophet. And now he was in a position to serve God by serving the people who beat, imprisoned, and rejected him. And the message he delivers is, “Well, you might as well get comfortable, plant a garden even, settle in, you’re going to be away from home, in exile, a while.”

LINK

It’s the kind of news that you don’t really want to hear. News you might need to hear but don’t really want to hear. You know the kind: The doctor gives you a good report but says your next step for healthy living requires lowering your cholesterol. The financial adviser says we’re on target for meeting our goals, however now it’s time to cut back on eating out and cook at home more often. We might not like it, but we know they’re right. So, hesitantly, we agree.

This kind of reluctant acceptance may be what the exiles felt when they received the letter from Jeremiah. Hoping against hope that Hananiah, who prophesied a short two year stay or the false prophets among them, might be right after all, that their stay in Babylon would be short. To them, Jeremiah’s message would not be welcomed. Who would want to stay in exile, miles away from home, for generations? Who would want to go to all the effort of planting a garden? Investing in the soil. Marrying the locals. Who would want to be commanded to bless the oppressors because one’s welfare is connected to theirs? Who would want to be told to make the best of a bad situation?

TODAY

Although we will never likely experience the trauma of exile like the Israelites, we do find ourselves in a world that looks and feels a lot different than when and where we grew up. If you had told us 5 or 10 years ago what 2020 or 2022 would look like, many of us would have thought it a complete fantasy, a good plot for yet another dystopian young adult novel. And yet here we are! And I feel the words of the prophet Jeremiah come-to-the-fore again in their significance: Build houses, plant garden, stop waiting, and stop moping around.

POINT 1: ACCEPTANCE

Jeremiah’s letter asks us: Can we accept today for what it is? The beauty, the terror, the possibility, and loss? And, from there we can choose to live differently.

The days ahead for us as a species cannot look the same as it has, and we need to start figuring out what that means in our everyday lives. Part of this entails practical changes, yes, planting gardens, maybe even eating less meat, or investing in solar panels. Moving into action, from the place of acceptance for what our world *is* right now, means wrestling with things like racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and ableism *and* how these forces and values continue to adversely impact people lives. This ‘*acceptance for* *the way things are*’ is the foundation for a healthy and purposeful life. It entails ensuring we are nurturing and nourishing our spiritual lives as well, so that we can be our most loving, most courageous, most grounded selves. Which is so important as our culture undergoes necessary shifts. And we navigate shifting our own practices and approaches to relationships.

For like the Israelites in exile, God is asking us to ready ourselves. To shed - but not to forget - the ways things were done before. But to take up something new together. To settle into this new reality of ours long enough to recognize what got us here SO THAT we can build and plant and grow something different.

The task is serious, but it is also one of incredible possibility. New things will be born among those who are willing, who are finally able to take a realistic view of how the world is, and rather than pine after what is lost or what might-have-been, to choose to accept things as they are. And from there choose to live differently.

POINT 2: HOPE

There are times in our personal lives when it can feel like everything we depended on to understand ourselves, our roles in the world, or who our people are, fall apart or are taken from us. Maybe the kids grow up and we struggle to find a new identity outside of parenting. Maybe, after decades of loyalty to our work, we find ourselves laid off. Maybe we face significant barriers to connections with others because of discrimination, leaving us isolated in our communities. Maybe it’s caring for an ill and aging parent, or trying to build a new life with a criminal record, or simply trying to survive in an economy not meant for our economic bracket to thrive. There are so many different ways to feel lost in a suddenly “new land.”

Eventually, the time will come for acceptance. For the openness to what is. For moving from survival mode to something else...planting a garden is a practice acceptance, but it also a practice in hope.

God encourages the Israelites not to succumb to their despair, not to settle for merely surviving in this new world they are living in, but to choose life in the midst. Though they may still have more weeping, more grief, more loss to confront, so too they are encouraged to let God birth something new among them. They are reminded of the capacity within them - despite everything - to still create new life together. To hope for the future. To invest in it. To build. To plant. And surely those things would feel painful at first. To re-invest is no easy work. To come alive again after death is a miracle, but one God can bring about in us together. This is what hope looks like, this is what faith is. As it says in the book of Hebrews (11:1): “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

When life - whether because of our choices or external circumstances - has brought us into a land we’d rather not be in, there is a time for survival, a time for acceptance and a time for hope, for excitement, for imagining what could be.

CONCLUSION

Dear friends, the Autumn Equinox and this journey into a new season (not to mention, moving house myself just this last week) has got me all reflective. We have truly found ourselves in a ‘new land’ these last few year. And the state of that land is likely not how we wished it would be, and for that the prophet’s voice resounds again, calling us out of survival into to acceptance, and calling us to hope. Calling us to sit in the discomfort of our own *un*knowing of the future. To assess not only what was lost but also what we have left - who is still with us - and what holy capacities remain within.

So, in the words of our opening prayer I’ll close: God of new life, even when we find ourselves in situations once unimaginable, you give us reason to hope. In the midst of destruction, you enliven our capacities for building community and connection. In the midst of evil’s reign, the gifts of your Spirit remain with us. So, by your grace, make us creators of justice and planters of peace in whatever land we find ourselves in. Amen.