

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, October 9, 2016

By - Rev. Paul Dreher-Wiberg

“Life Goes On”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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.

It was Sunday, September 16th, 2001. The day had been declared a National day of mourning. I don't recall whether it was in New York, or Pennsylvania, or Washington DC, but President George W. Bush was speaking at a Memorial Service, and I remember well what he said.

It was one of those examples of a leader saying what needed to be said in a particular situation, and in my estimation, one of Bush's finer moments.

Just 6 days after Sept. 11th, we were all still reeling from shock; we were all still grieving; we were still feeling intense emotions: anger, sadness, confusion, fear. And on that day, the President said to us, “As a nation, we have been grieving. Today, we say goodbye to those who have died. And tomorrow, America goes back to work.”

We all knew what he meant. “In the face of tragedy, life goes on.” He needed to say that, didn't he, for all of us. We needed permission to move beyond the shock and pain, and begin to rebuild our daily lives. And on that evening, President Bush gave us the permission, the direction, the wise counsel, that we needed to hear. Someone had to say it, and because he was our President, the one to whom we look for wise and compassionate leadership in times of crisis, he was the right one to say it.

The same council applies in many different situations. Life has a way of setting aside our plans and our expectations, and dealing us situations we never imagined. A loved one dies, or becomes chronically ill. We lose a job. An adult child or a parent moves in with us. There are a thousand things, unexpected things, that can come along on any day, and say to us and to all our carefully ordered plans, "Tough!" "That was then, this is now. Deal with it!"

Sometime around 597 BC, the Jewish people found themselves torn away from home and hearth, from their cultural and religious center, and summarily carried off into exile in a strange and alien land.

It was true then, and it remains true now that war and political upheaval does that to people. We need only to look to the tragic plight of the Syrian refugees.

Last Sunday, Gary spoke of those reactionary words in the hearts and on the lips of those in exile... they wished revenge. They called upon God to do violence against the people of Babylon, the land in which they found themselves.

It was into that circumstance that the Prophet Jeremiah spoke. In unprecedented fashion for a Prophet of God, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles. In the letter, he spoke the Word of God, perhaps in part to counter the baser impulses of the people.

He said, in essence, "I know that you don't want to be there. I know that your hearts long to return to Jerusalem, but that probably isn't going to happen any day soon.

Now, you can sit and brood, and weep and wail... and that is an entirely understandable response to a crisis... for a time. But the time has come for you to get back to your daily lives. Lives that are changed, to be sure, but lives that still need to be claimed and lived to the glory of God, right where you are today.

So get jobs, and contribute to the local economy. Get married, and give your sons and daughters in marriage. Become a part of the place in which you find yourselves, and do some good there.

You may be in exile, but God has not deserted you. Life still has good and amazing and wondrous things to offer you. So get on with it. Life goes on."

In my life, there have been times when things have happened after which I was absolutely convinced that life could not possibly go on, at least not with any

meaning or purpose, not with any possibility of joy or fulfillment. Have you ever felt that way? Of course, I was wrong.

For a three year old, loosing a favorite toy, or being refused a cookie, can seem an unrecoverable loss. But most three year olds survive the trauma relatively intact.

Remember what it was like to be a teenager? You meet someone... and it feels like the real thing! You feel the giddy exhilaration of young love. Life is good.

Then, comes the breakup. The sky falls. In the hours and days that follow, your world seems dark and hopeless and filled with despair...

...and then you meet someone...

I guess the first "adult" life changing crisis that hit me was when I was 25 and my father died at age 57. I felt abandoned and alone. My world had changed in a way I could not quite pin down, but that I had never before experienced. I felt different about everything, including myself. But we know that it is in the natural course of things that children bid goodbye to their parents.

But my grandfather was still living, and I remember the day we told him that my father had died. 94 year old Grandpa had suffered a stroke some years earlier, and could not speak, but on hearing the news of my dad's death, he shook his head violently, and beat his fingers on his chest, as if to say, "Not him... it should be me!"

Twenty-seven years later, I knew just how my grandfather had felt. When my Dad died, I was 25. Twenty-seven years later, when my son Jeff died, **he** was 25.

I'm not the only one who's lost a child, and I'm not fishing for sympathy. I tell you all this to make a point... the thing that really amazes me in all of this is how resilient God has made us!

We experience trauma at every stage of our lives, and God seems able to equip us and carry us through, and yes, even make us stronger.

I know that the crises I have experienced in my life have made me more able to be present with others in their times of crisis, and I bet it's the same for you.

The central message of the Christian faith is that there is really nothing from which we cannot rise up and reclaim life! Over the span of my life, in the midst of many personal losses, if I have learned anything at all, it is this: life goes on, and life is still good, because God is faithful.

Most of you have faced crisis in your lives. Some of you may be facing a crisis now. The tragedies and crises we face are very real, very painful, and can be devastating! Some of them have the power to permanently change our lives in ways we had never imagined.

But for those of us who are in Christ, for those of us who know that we are embraced in every moment in the compassionate arms of a loving God, no crisis is powerful enough to defeat us! It doesn't matter how powerful the challenge is... God is stronger! And **we** are able to tap into that strength.

When you are brought up short by tragedy, or when you find yourself overtaken by crisis, do this. Imagine yourself as a small child, wrapped and embraced in the arms of a loving, wise, and compassionate parent, even as the world changes around you, and your tears flow freely. Imagine that strong, loving, caring presence, whispering in your ear, "I know it hurts, but I've got you, and I'm not going to let you go. It'll be better. I promise."

That's what Jeremiah was telling the children of Israel, in the midst of their communal crisis. They had been taken from their homes, their city, their temple, their way of life... they had to leave behind everything that told them who they were. Everything, that is, except their faith.

And so they were able to hear the wisdom in Jeremiah's message... "I know it hurts, but God's got you, and God will not let you go. Your redemption is still secure, even though you may not be able to see it now.

In the meanwhile, honor God by continuing to live your life, by continuing to make homes for yourselves, by going to work and supporting your families. And don't neglect to be good neighbors. Babylon is your home now. Make it your community. Work for the welfare of that community, and as you are a blessing to it, God will be a blessing to you.

Don't let the loss you have suffered defeat you. You defeat it by living your life fully, confidently, showing those around you compassion, love, and hope. Your God is still with you. God will never forget you. God will never desert you.

That's a promise we can cling to, a word we can trust, no matter what comes to us. It is the promise that enables us, in the face of whatever comes, to overcome, and to become whole again.

The Bible tells us that we are to glorify God in all things. Why is that?

It's certainly not because God's ego needs stroking! And it's not meant to suggest that we should live in denial. We glorify God in all things, because we acknowledge that, in the midst of all circumstances, God is Lord, and God will not desert nor forget us.

Tragedy happens. Crises come. And life goes on. But more than that: Life is still wondrous and good, an occasion for joy and wholeness, because God is in it with us.

Glory and praise be to God... for ALL of our days.

Amen.