

Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
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Jeremiah 29.4-14  
Home (Not So) Sweet Home  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

### **The Journey From Home (RVA)**

On the next-to-last Sunday of August 2003, my husband Nathan and I, with the help of supportive family and friends, loaded a questionable U-haul truck with our worldly possessions and a Saturn VUE with two slightly tranquilized cats and a basset hound named Lucille. We began the slow crawl from Birmingham, Alabama, to Richmond, Virginia, made slower by said questionable U-haul that died twice along the way. During our second unexpected delay, this one with two nights in a hotel, a mechanic in Greensboro, NC asked us, "Did anyone tell you this truck has been on fire before?" No. No they did not. We began to add up the number of seminaries and divinity schools between Birmingham and Richmond, wondering if our sense of call to Virginia was mistaken. Had we overlooked an easier, more convenient way to pursue my theological education? But we shrugged that wondering off because this was an adventure! And we, just two years into our marriage, were endlessly patient with the journey. We finally arrived in Richmond, days later than scheduled, to set up our temporary home with full expectation that we would stay no longer than my three-year MDiv required; practically an extended vacation.

Well, that degree stretched into four years of coursework, another (and final) stint as a youth minister, the birth of our son, a waiting year before completing a mission immersion travel requirement, then graduation, then the birth of our daughter, joining another congregation to love and serve, and now a full decade has passed. Poof! Ten years blinked by. Richmond became the home that was never meant to be home. A friend and pastoral counselor in our Birmingham church took me to lunch back in August 2003. Knowing that Nathan and I were preparing for the move and aware of my not-so-secret plan to return both to that city and that congregation in three short years, she gently and wisely said to me, "Go to Richmond and let it be your community. Let it be home." For ten years I have tried to listen to her. I have sought to be at peace, to allow myself to learn from the present, and to accept that beautiful place as home.

But for most of my ten years in the historic city of Richmond, with its numerous Civil War monuments, busy tattoo parlors, and abundant farmer's markets, its lively James River coursing through the center of town, stately, historic homes, and dear, dear friends who love us so well, staying put has been a life practice.

## **Be Here Now**

What that friend in Birmingham knew, and trusted I would learn the hard way, was that we cannot be fully present in real time when we are always looking over our shoulder to go back to another place, another time, another life.

Jeremiah gave similar instruction as he wrote to the exiles:

Build houses and make yourselves at home.

Plant gardens and eat what grows in that country.

Marry and have children. Encourage your children to marry and have children so that you'll thrive in that country and not waste away.

Make yourselves at home there and work for the city's welfare.

While I certainly cannot and do not draw too strong a parallel between my move from the Deep South to the mid-Atlantic and Israel's exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, I have found myself living inside these words from Jeremiah for quite some time as the prophet's guidance settles deep into my bones: make home in the place where God has sent you.

We know that one of the struggles of exile for Israel was that they believed God's presence on earth was limited to the structures within the temple in Jerusalem. If the temple had been destroyed and God's children had been carried off to a foreign land, it followed that God was no longer with them and not strong enough to prevent such destruction and scattering from happening to God's people.

This passage in Jeremiah is likely a letter to exiles who had been in Babylon a short time but thought Babylon would soon fall, paving the way for their return home. This particular group of exiles were living as a stable community, and the writer and prophet seemed to know that they would remain in that community in Babylon. He knew what my friend knew, that their longing for that old life over there would prevent them from living good, full lives in the present where they had been sent.

Jeremiah's words to this group of exiles has a different tone, a different purpose than when Isaiah whispers comfort, do not fear—God is with you—you still belong to God—take heart and know that God will fight for you to bring you home. Jeremiah knows that some of these exiles will not see “home” again, but if they shift their gaze to the life that is before them, they will discover God in new places and in new ways as they allow Babylon to be

their dwelling place.

Of the many prophetic messages carried to the exiles, this word from Jeremiah assures that God is not lost to that old place and that that old life, God also exists in the ordinary places of life today. Be in the place where you find yourself now, and live there with great intention.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus also knew that looking to the present is the antidote for anxiety.

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We must name the goodness that is around us, name the ways we see God present. As our focus shifts, we begin to see the details of our new story and new home, and we can be sincerely grateful for this place, this time, this moment, today.

So we make a home for welcoming and feasting and being a neighbor. Plant a garden and spend some time with our hands in the soil. Get married, have children, slow down to the rhythm of life that demands, watch them grow up and release them into the world. Seek the welfare of the city where God has sent us, for in its welfare we will find our own.

### **Seek Welfare Together**

There are seasons in life that may feel like exile. The unexpected death of a loved one, the unwanted demise of a marriage, a shocking medical diagnosis, a physical relocation, a crisis of faith, a season of depression and isolation. We know what it feels like to long for something that no longer exists or is no longer ours to have. We carry this isolation and longing with us.

But we must also remember that exile was very much wrapped up in the story of God calling not just individuals but a people. The reminder to focus on the communal life around you requires exactly that: a community. So this work of shifting our focus to the present and accepting the call to pursue the

life before us is a call for us both as individuals AND together as a faith community.

I have been thinking about you, the brothers and sisters of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, for quite a while now. Though I do not yet know each one of you individually, snapshots of your story have been passed to me through people who know you and love you dearly. As I have thought and prayed and sat up at night thinking of you and this beautiful space, and this amazing city, I have heard the words of Jeremiah.

If I may be so bold as to make a few assumptions, I suspect that Israel's story of exile may feel a bit like your own at times. There were seasons in years past when this room was full, when the name of this place and its pastors was as much a presence on the Avenue as the grand old trees bending across to reach the streetcars. Those were good, good days, and God was at work in them.

You are not alone in these memories of sacred space and sacred time. Every congregation has a slightly different story, but so many other beloved brick & mortar churches around the country also know that circumstances and times have changed. There are empty pews everywhere, and people of faith are looking at each other and their pastors asking, "Where are we? How do we get back to the place where we were? How do we get back home? "

These are important questions, and they are rooted in deep love and great affection for the people who have shaped us and the things God has done through us. It is important to sit with these questions, to tell the stories of times that made us who we are, and to acknowledge the truth that something has changed forever.

But like the exiles, we in the modern church must reach a point that we shift our gaze from fondly remembering that great life over there to this present life before us because God is here, too. God is with us in this place at the beginning of a new story, and God has great plans for our future.

Jeremiah's words compel us to act today. I believe that the call on the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to shift our focus to the present; to the life and needs within and beyond our walls. As we move through the next decade, more and more of us will experience our salvation only in seeking the welfare of the cities and communities around us.

*Christianity Today* spent much of the past two years studying Christian communities around the United States who are committed to healing and

vitality in their cities. They focused on people and churches who speak of seeking the welfare of the city as seeking God's *shalom* for all, and they defined *shalom* not simply as "peace" but more robustly as "comprehensive flourishing." They shared stories again and again of deep faith and of vibrant congregations whose primary focus was seeking the comprehensive flourishing of both stranger and friend until that *shalom* rippled through every part of the homes to which God called them.

### **Reimagine Home**

The congregations who will thrive in the era to come will each tell a story as unique as the church's context. The residential, neighborhood church will find life differently than the one in an urban, industrial setting. The small church in a farming community will come alive in a way far different than the small church in the city. As I continue to remember you in prayer and imagine what your next story may be, I think about how well-positioned St. Charles Avenue Baptist is in the city of New Orleans. This city is known around the world for its joy and its celebration, its food and its music, its architecture and its people. People know that New Orleans is a place for everyone and anyone. More than Austin or Portland, this city is known for welcoming the peculiar and the eccentric as just another next-door-neighbor.

But there are complexities alongside the assets. New Orleans, much like Richmond, has its story in American history as a major player in the slave trade. That legacy weaves its way into modern day in subtle and powerful ways. This is a city still recovering from the destruction of Katrina. Like much of the South, there is a disparity here between rich and poor that lives its way out through schools and resources and public safety. So a faith community living into its present and future story here, in this place, must ask: What does seeking the welfare of the city look like for us? Where is God leading us next?

Frederick Buechner, one of my great heroes in life and faith, calls this work of seeking the welfare of the city, vocation, and he famously defines that life's work saying, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

As we people of faith (the great big churches and the ones barely eking by) move into a new phase of being church, we do not do so by losing our identities, forgetting or grasping at our past, or taking on a new way of being that is foreign to us but worked somewhere else. We move into this new story by being most fully ourselves for the sake of the world. We pay attention to the goodness of God and the movement of God's spirit in daily life. We take on work and projects and causes and conversations at the intersection between our own gladness and the world's hunger. In that sweet

spot, as individuals and as the body of Christ, we find our welfare, and we find our home.