

A Letter to the Exiles  
Jeremiah 29.4-14  
November 19, 2017  
119th Anniversary  
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In the weeks before Nathan and I moved from Birmingham to Richmond, 14 years ago, a friend and pastoral counselor took me to lunch. Aware of my not-so-secret plan to zoom through a master's degree and return Birmingham as quickly as possible, she gently and wisely said to me, "Go to Richmond and let it be your community. Let it be home." For ten years I held onto her words and worked to be at peace in a place that often felt really good but never fully felt like home. Being present in the place where my feet are planted became a life practice.

What that friend 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. We cannot open ourselves to the lessons and possibilities life offers when we are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fixed to a point in the past.

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. Bless 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. 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. They could not imagine their faith could be lived out and expressed in any way other than what they had always known. Their imaginations were completely stifled by a theology of place that left them with only a false dichotomy—either they worshiped God in *this* place in *this* particular way, or they just couldn't worship God at all. Either God showed up in *this* place in *this* particular way, or God just wasn't real at all. If their experience of faith couldn't look like it had always looked, then they just wouldn't be people of faith anymore.

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 at lunch 14 years ago knew: 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 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. Live there with great intention and watch your life expand. You will not just discover the life that is really life, you will discover something new about yourself, new about your neighbors, new about the God you thought was fixed and unchanging.

In September 2013, I came and visited you here in this place for the first time and shared this words when I barely even knew your names:

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 all across our country, 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. For a time, it was 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 have now reached a point at which we must 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 21st century is to shift our focus to the unfolding story of now. In this new story, we tend to the life and needs within our community just as passionately as we tend to the life and needs 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. We must ask: What does seeking the welfare of the city look like for us? Where is God leading us next? What houses do we build? What gardens do we plant?

Today we mark the 119th anniversary of the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church and take our first steps together into our 120th year. What does seeking the welfare of New Orleans look like for us in our 120th year? Where is God leading us as we look toward our 125th year? What houses do we build? What gardens do we plant?

I don't know a whole lot about building houses, but I do know something about planting gardens. And a big part of that process is preparing the soil. Before good seeds or seedlings go into the ground, you must get the soil ready. My personal style of gardening is one part trial-and-error to three parts neglect. Everything looks fantastic in April and May, but August and September are pretty iffy. So when the next Spring rolls around, I have a lot of weeding to do. Some of the tropicals I think I've dug up and moved to another place still resurrect where I'd hoped to have zinnias instead. The garden bed I'd painstakingly ridded of grass needs to have that slow work done all over again. When I'm doing it right, each year I find less of what I don't want growing and the best of what I've planted is established and thriving.

As we step across the marker of 119 years into our 120th, it's time to do some weeding. And soil amending. And carving out some new beds that will expand in ways we never quite imagined before. But as we dig up grass and follow that curve as the shovel guides a new design, suddenly the new thing is what makes the most sense. This is why the work of discernment matters. We must ask together what the new thing

is. What are we called to plant and what must we dig up to prepare the soil and make room for what God is doing here?

In our 120th year, I think it's time to examine a 20th century structure for organizing and being church—bylaws and committees and the way it's always been done. In what ways is that our temple in Jerusalem? In our own lives and in the life of our congregation, the question cannot be: how will God bring some new thing into this very comfortable structure I have created and am determined to maintain no matter what? No, the question is how is Spirit moving? How is God calling us? If we really, truly open ourselves up to these questions, maybe we open our imaginations to re-making the whole thing: Bylaws and committees, gathering here in this building at this address for 100% of our small and large group activities, a 119-year-old name that means an awful lot to us but may be a tremendous barrier to others, the way we use and think of this physical space, the work of paid staff and the work of the people who are the church, the role of the pastor. I think we must consider each and all of these things as we ask how Spirit is guiding us into year 120 and toward year 125.

Discernment work is not strategizing, thinking work. There's a place for that later. But first, we must imagine and see together in a holy way where we are going. I'm just a really amateur gardener who likes to play in the dirt. Before I get started in the Spring, I stand in the leaves and leftovers of fall and winter and imagine what can grow there. As I stand beside drooping canna lilies and too many elephant ears, long before grabbing a shovel, I can visualize the way I want that long stretch of fence to look when I'm done. We must do this creative, vision work together through the spiritual practice of discernment because we can't simply THINK our way *into* a new story.

We are leaning into a particular and peculiar way of being church that isn't fully articulated but is rapidly emerging. How do we lean fully and freely into that way of being? Discernment requires we follow the passion. What is giving you life right now? Where and when do you feel most alive? What drains you and zaps your energy? What breeds resentment and makes you want to throw in the towel? Hold these questions and apply them to your life. Hold these questions and apply them to our faith community. Spirit is moving us toward the passion and away from the exhaustion.

A plan will come together for what all of "this" might look like at St. Charles, but discernment **MUST** come first. For highly educated, thinking people who hang out comfortably in a mental space—strategizing, analyzing, researching feels like the first step in all things. And it's ok to do some of that to begin building a framework for making plans in a responsible way. But the shovels and trowels and compost don't hit the garden before there's a vision of what is going to grow.

We are, first and foremost, people of faith. We are gathering here because of a story we can't prove, crying out to a God we can't see (and maybe sometimes aren't altogether convinced is real), giving ourselves to a way that can ONLY be lived out. We make the road by walking, remember? Not thinking or pondering or reflecting. We live this faith out with our feet and our hands and our words and our heartbeats. So what makes us come alive?

For more than a little while now I have said that if I were to start a church from scratch today, it would be the church under the oak tree. And I'll bring a bottle of wine, a loaf of good bread (and the grape juice and some gluten free for those who prefer). I'll bring the prophets and the gospels alongside the poetry of Mary Oliver and John O'Donahue and Wendell Berry. And we'll meet beneath the oak tree and find courage and comfort together there. Then when we're done, we'll head out together to make some good in this world. When I distill the whole thing down and ask myself what matters most and what I want to keep of ALL OF THIS church thing we have been doing for centuries, I imagine the church under the oak tree.

Well, Tuesday morning I received a flurry of emails and a direct phone call asking me to stand beside my neighbor Jose. I'd only met Jose once, weeks before at the Mayoral Accountability Forum hosted by Together New Orleans, and Jose stood to share his story as an undocumented worker from El Salvador who survived tremendous abuse and trauma, made it to the United States, and came to New Orleans 14 years ago to help rebuild the city after the storm. He was an exile. He lost all sense of home and found himself in a place that didn't look or sound anything like what he had always known, but there was no going back for him because going back meant danger and scarcity while staying here meant life. So he literally built houses and made himself at home. He married and had daughters who are growing and thriving in this place that is fully their home. He gave himself to the welfare of this city, and in doing so he found his own. But he doesn't have papers. And deportations have increased 380% in New Orleans in the past 10 months. And 10 days ago he was given a deportation date.

Tuesday morning I received a call asking, "Will you stand beside Jose?" So I went on Wednesday morning to First Grace United Methodist to stand with Jose, and the first person I saw was Anza who is organizing and advocating through Stand With Dignity. He's the one who has hosted the warrant clinics, working with neighbors with crippling traffic and municipal warrants, fees, and fines. His work is loving neighbors and setting captives free, the stuff of prophets and gospels. And he saw me across the crowd and said, "I knew you'd be here. I knew St. Charles would be part of this." The crowd grew as the Congress of Day Laborers gathered, and Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Unitarian

clergy gathered, and nonprofit organizers and pro-bono attorneys gathered. And we surrounded Jose and his wife and his beautiful daughters, 2-years-old and 8-years-old, a third grader just like my daughter. And we stood beside our neighbor as he announced he was taking sanctuary at First Grace United Methodist Church because New Orleans is his home. I stood there taking all of this in, looking at the faces of the beautiful people gathered to be neighbors, gathered to be sanctuary for Jose and for one another, committed to making good in this world. And I looked up and realized we'd all gathered beneath a great big oak tree right there on Canal as the red streetcar rolled by. The church under the oak tree. Now I will give my feet and hands and words and heartbeat to that.

What is giving you life right now? Where and when do you feel most alive? Now is the time to ask these questions so we know what kind of garden we are planting. We move into our new story together by being most fully ourselves for the sake of the world. We don't have time for church selves and real selves anymore. I'm not interested in getting to know our best mannered, most proper, holy talking church self. I want to know what makes you come alive and sets your soul on fire. Let's make space for THAT self here. Forget the way it has to be done or has always been done. It's time to let that go. Let's be the church under the oak tree and give our feet and hands and words and heartbeat to the goodness of God, the path of Christ, and the movement of the Spirit. Everything we take on—our work and projects and causes and conversations—must meet at the intersection between our own gladness and the world's hunger; our passions and the world's needs. In that sweet spot, as individuals and as the body of Christ, we find our welfare, and we find our home.