

**“Bloom Where You Are Planted”****August 11, 2019****Jeremiah 29:1-7**

Now, we are in the book of Jeremiah this morning, but I've got to set the scene a little bit. See, this circumstance begins with the story of the three kings. You see, Joshua followed Moses as the recognized leader of the Hebrews. That was back when God had one specific person to lead His people. First Moses, then Joshua. After Joshua died, God did not have one primary leader; instead, He would raise up what we call Judges – Judges not in the sense of the black robes and the gavel that we think of in police shows. It was more of a president or a prime minister, or a general. There was a need in the community. God would raise somebody up to be a leader, they would take care of the situation, and then they would fade back into the population.

Then, after a bunch of Judges went through, Samuel arrived, and he was the final Judge in the United Kingdom of Israel, and in 1 Samuel 8 we read this:

*As Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons to be judges over Israel. Joel and Abijah, his oldest sons, held court in Beersheba. But they were not like their father, for they were greedy for money. They accepted bribes and perverted justice.*

*Finally, all the elders of Israel met at Ramah to discuss the matter with Samuel. “Look,” they told him, “you are now old, and your sons are not like you. Give us a king to judge us like all the other nations have.”*

*Samuel was displeased with their request and went to the Lord for guidance.*

They already had a king. They had the King of Kings. But they wanted a human king, like all the other nations.

*“Do everything they say to you,” the Lord replied, “for they are rejecting me, not you. They don’t want me to be their king any longer. Ever since I brought them from Egypt they have continually abandoned me and followed other gods. And now they are giving you the same treatment. Do as they ask, but solemnly warn them about the way a king will reign over them.”*

(1 Samuel 8:1-9)

And that's exactly what Samuel did. He told the people, “You do not want a king, but if you insist, this is exactly, specifically how a king will treat you.” To no avail. They insisted on a king, so they got a king.

The first king was a man named Saul. Saul looked the part. He had the physique, he had the demeanor, he had the presentation of a leader. And at first, he was pretty good. Faithful. But after a while, he became disobedient, unfaithful, and did the things exactly as predicted, and God removed the kingdom from his rule and handed it to the second king, David. David as well, in the beginning, did very well. He was a hero, remember? He conquered Goliath with a little sling and five stones. He was a warrior, successful. Remember the chant? “Saul killed thousands, but David has killed tens of thousands!” The kingdom of Israel flourished under his rule. But then David, too, because unfaithful, disobedient, and disloyal. He had an affair with Bathsheba, murdered her husband Uriah to cover up his sin. And so, God gave the kingdom to his son, Solomon, the third king.

Solomon, at the time, was the wisest man that had ever walked the earth, and he proved that to be true – again, for a while – and then he began to make decisions that were unfaithful and disobedient as well. Primarily, he allowed foreign pagans idols to be brought into the temple and displayed alongside the sacred objects of Israel. God warned him specifically that if he married outside the faith – if he married these pagan women – they would influence him to do this. He did not listen, and so, in 1 Kings 11:9 we read:

*The Lord was very angry with Solomon, for his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. He had warned Solomon specifically about worshiping other gods, but Solomon did not listen to the Lord’s command.*

What is commandment number one? *You shall have no other gods but me.*

*So now the Lord said to him, “Since you have not kept my covenant and have disobeyed my decrees, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants. But for the sake of your father, David, I will not do this while you are still alive. I will take the kingdom away from your son.”*

(1 Kings 11:9-12)

So, we had three kings. Just what the people wanted. After Solomon died, the kingdom was then divided. Ten tribes formed the northern kingdom of Israel; the tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom of Judah. Both Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom, had twenty kings that ruled over each. All twenty kings in the north were wicked, were evil, were disobedient, were unfaithful; and because of their unfaithfulness, God allows the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Judah lasted a little longer, because out of their twenty kings, they had at least eight who were good, who were faithful, who did good things. However, after Josiah – who was an especially good king, who led a revival throughout Judah to return to God and His Word – after Josiah, it just got progressively worse. Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and finally Zedekiah – finally God had had enough, and He allows Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, to invade. Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem, destroys the temple, and takes people prisoner back to Babylon.



These people, now in Babylon, are like fish out of water. They are completely surrounded by a different culture, by a different language, by different customs. They feel lost. They feel defeated. They feel demoralized. They didn't know what to do. They eagerly await word from their God, and finally, His prophet Jeremiah hears from the Lord and writes them a letter. Please join me in the unison prayer as we prepare to study the Word of God.

**Lord, upon the pages of this book is Your story. It is also our story. Open our eyes that we may see, our ears that we may hear, our minds that we may understand, and our hearts that they may be transformed. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

*Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the elders, priests, prophets, and all the people who had been exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. This was after King Jehoiachin, the queen mother, the court officials, the other officials of Judah, and all the craftsmen and artisans had been deported from Jerusalem. He sent the letter with Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah when they went to Babylon as King Zedekiah's ambassadors to Nebuchadnezzar. This is what Jeremiah's letter said:*

*This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem. "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."*

(Jeremiah 29:1-7)

So, they finally hear from God, and they don't understand the response! "What?!" This is not what they expected. They are captive. They are in a foreign land, amongst foreign influences, and God says build homes? Plan to stay? Plant gardens? Marry and have children? Pray for Babylon, their captors? "But God, we want to return to Jerusalem! We want to rebuild our lives there! This time, cross my heart, we will do it with new leadership that is faithful and just! We are lost in this culture. They don't believe what we believe. They are a poly-theistic culture. They recognize thousands of gods, such as Anu, god of the heavens, or Enlil, god of the earth. And Enki, lord of the subterranean waters. Lord, they worship astral deities like the sun god, Shamash, the moon god, Sin, and Ishtar, goddess of the morning and evening star – she had a major temple in Babylon and was very popular as the queen of heaven. Lord, it is like we are living in an alien world, and you want us to stay? And you want us to build families?!"



What must that be like? I thought of an example. One of the places we love to visit regularly is in Pennsylvania – Lancaster county. It's kind of like the Pennsylvania Dutch Amish. If you have ever been out there, or seen photos of them, the Amish were chased out of Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, persecuted for their beliefs. They kind of want to stay in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and 18<sup>th</sup> century. They don't want to be modern, which is why they dress as they dress. They don't want to blend in, they want to stay almost like in a time capsule. Certainly, this may seem like Babylon to them – strange and unusual. Now, think about it from the Amish perspective. To them our world certainly seems alien; and yet, what have they done? They have built homes. They have planted gardens. They eat the food they produce. They have married and had children. They have multiplied and not dwindled away. To this day, you can still go visit

Pennsylvania, Lancaster county, and see almost as if a people in exile amongst a foreign land.

Yes, times have changed. Not always for the good. In fact, on April 15 this year, we watched Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in flames. It was sad. Notre Dame was built in 1163 and took about 200 years to finish. But as this story ran all over the news, I began to wonder: Except for tourists, how many people actually attended church there? So, I went and looked it up. I couldn't find the information; it was really hard. A Trip Advisor website answered a question for a tourist. A tourist typed in and asked, "I'd like to visit Notre Dame Cathedral. When is a good time to go? Do you have to wait in line? Do you have to get a ticket? I want to make sure I'm not there when the congregation is there." And the answer is so sad. "It doesn't matter when you go. You can go whenever. Hardly anyone attends anymore. The congregation is so small. Don't worry about it." Pretty much, that was the answer. I was saddened to hear that. And it got even worse as I continued my research. Did you know that Catholic France – it was once known as Catholic France – the Catholic France that built Notre Dame and supplied 17 French Popes; today, practicing Catholics make up only 1.8% of the total population. 1.8%! That's negligible. You wouldn't even make it to the second round of debates. 1.8%. In fact, less than 10% of the entire French population attends church of any denomination. The French just don't go to church. Europe doesn't go to church. 90% of French people don't go to church. Less than 2% of French Catholics go to mass.

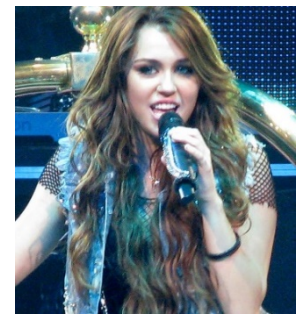


So, why, I wondered. Why is everyone so sad about Notre Dame being in flames? It doesn't seem like anybody cares. Nobody goes. I don't understand. The European continent seems to have rejected Jesus. So, who cares about a 650-year-old building? Now, I do understand, and it is true, that sitting in church does not make you a Christian any more than sitting in your garage makes you a car; but it does reveal that things have changed, does it not?

Things have changed a lot. Sometimes I feel like I am living on an alien planet. Not only are we surrounded by selfishness and greed; what is sinful and immoral according to the Lord is now considered righteous and moral, accepted and commonplace. I mean, I know there are some people of the right age, but does anybody remember the show *I Love Lucy*? Well, back when *I Love Lucy* was on television, did you know that when Lucille Ball became pregnant, they could not use that word? They were not allowed, on television, to say she was pregnant. They had to use the phrase, "she was in the motherly way." Have times changed?

I grew up with Dick van Dyke. Who remembers *The Dick van Dyke Show*? I love Dick van Dyke! When they went to bed at night, they slept in separate beds! They were not allowed to be in the same bed! Have you seen TV lately? Anybody watch *Game of Thrones*? Things have changed. Sometimes It feels like an alien world.

I don't know if you remember, in 1956, Elvis Presley made his debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I don't remember that, but I'm an Elvis fan, so I know about it. Ed Sullivan told his people on the camera, "Only film Elvis from the waist up! I don't like the way he shakes his hips!" So, that's what you saw when you tuned in. Has anybody seen Miley Cyrus perform? That's all I can show you!



In fact, in 1963, there was a group called the Kingsmen who released their version of the song "Louie, Louie." Did you know that that song was subject to an FBI investigation? The FBI looked into that song. Why? Because supposedly, at the 0:54 mark, the drummer (it's always the drummer) dropped his stick and supposedly yelled out the F-word! FBI investigation! Does anybody listen to rap or hip-hop? Things have changed!

Even in my lifetime, I remember – we've got a couple people here going through driving school. I know Miss Haley's going through driving school. And Macy's going through driving school. And Jeremiah's learning to drive. When I learned how to drive, they used to show us these films – remember these films? – where they'd literally be scraping people off the road. You would see the result of accidents of when you did not wear your seatbelt. It was gross. It was meant to shock you and it was meant to convince you to wear your seatbelt. And it worked on me, my right hand to God, I wore my seatbelt ever since. When my kids went to driving school, I asked them about the films. They said, "What films?" They don't show them anymore. You know why? Kids were laughing at them! They didn't have any impact at all. They saw that stuff all the time – television, movies, videos. It had absolutely no effect. Scared me crapless! I remember, when I got on my first motorcycle, I hopped on my motorcycle and I reached for my seatbelt. And I went, "Oh yeah, that's right. I'm on a motorcycle. Doesn't come with seatbelts." That's how much it was drilled into my head! (Of course, if it was drilled into my head that much, I probably never should have bought a motorcycle, but that's beside the point). Times have changed. Things seem alien. From the time of David, fornication and adultery have always been considered a sin. But today, we have ashleymadison.com, where you can go online and meet someone who might also be married and meet someplace. That's their tagline: "Life is short, have an affair. ®" Notice there's a little ® after that? That's registered. That's their trademark. They don't want anybody else to take that. Times have changed.

Are you still not convinced? You still don't feel like you live in an alien world? How about this. In the state of Connecticut, it is illegal for a sixteen-year-old girl to get her ears pierced without parental permission. It is illegal. But she can abort her baby without ever telling them. I'm not done. How about this one? Jessica Yaniv is a transgender Canadian LGBTQ activist. Last month, she tried to throw a pool party, a swimming party, for kids in Canada, 12 years old and up. On the application, she specifically requested, *For participant privacy and safety, parents and/or caregivers are not permitted into the event*. Parents and caregivers were not permitted into the event. Why? Because she wanted the kids to be able to go topless – both the boys and the girls. Now, that's not advocating for LGBTQ or transgenderism. That's just twisted.

This is the same person – you see, in Canada, they have something there that we don't have. We have freedom of speech. In Canada, they have something called the “Human Rights Commission” that has the right to prosecute you if you're not saying or doing the right thing. Jessica wanted to have a Brazilian bikini wax. Do all ladies here know what a Brazilian bikini wax is? I didn't. I had to look it up. A Brazilian bikini wax is when you go in and have all the hair from the waist down removed. All of it. Ouch. Anyway, Jessica is going to these salons to get a Brazilian bikini wax. The challenge is, she still has all her man parts. So, some of the women who work in these salons don't want to give her a Brazilian bikini wax, because all the man parts are still there. Reported them to the Human Rights Commission in Canada, got those businesses shut down, closed, because they would not give her a Brazilian bikini wax.

Now, look. I am not judging Jessica. I am not judging the LGBTQ community. That is not what this is about. I am simply pointing out that I live in a time when there are people who defend topless swimming parties for twelve-year-old kids that parents cannot attend, and shutting down businesses that don't want to deal with the opposite sex parts. I sometimes feel as if I'm living on an alien planet.

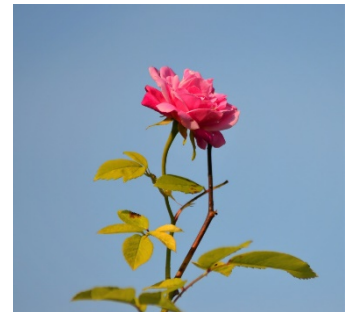
So, what do we do? What did God tell those in Babylon to do? We build homes. We plant gardens. We eat the food that we produce. We marry and have children. We have grandchildren (someday!). We multiply. We work for the peace and prosperity of the city. We pray for it. That's right. We are not here to judge. We are not here to condemn; that is not our job. We are here to be salt and light. Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:13:

*“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

*You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”*

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Salt seasons food. That's the point of salt. It makes French fries taste better. It has an effect on whatever you tap it onto. Even caramel tastes better with salt. It has an effect; that's the purpose of salt. If salt loses its flavor, it's of no use. Jesus is saying if a seasoning has no flavor, it has no value. If Christians make no effort to affect the world around them, they are of little value to God. The Bible says *don't copy the behavior and customs of this world* (Romans 12:2) for a reason. This is a fallen world, filled with fallen people like me. If we are too much like the world, we are worthless to God. Christians aren't supposed to blend in with everyone else. We are supposed to affect others positively, just as seasoning brings out the best flavor in food.



So, if you feel sometimes like you're living on an alien planet, don't surrender. Don't retreat. Don't hide. That's what God told the exiles in Babylon. Bloom where you have been planted. Build homes. Plant gardens. Work for peace and prosperity of your town, of your community. Pray for it. Be salt and light. Share the message of the Good News of God's love and mercy and grace and forgiveness. And don't just tell people. Show them. Salt and light, right? Light is something you see. When people see that you are different than everyone else, like salt seasons food, it has an effect. They'll notice that you are always helpful and understanding. You don't use foul or abusive language; instead, you always offer a word of encouragement. You are not cranky and miserable all the time, always moaning and groaning, complaining and criticizing; you look at the best in everyone and every situation. What's wrong with you? Nothing is wrong with you! You are salt and light. And even in a world that has seemingly gone completely mad, you have a choice. We have a choice to bloom where we have been planted. We are Christ followers.

So, friends, be light. Be salt. Be joy. Be love. Be Christ to this community. You will make a difference. You may feel like you're in exile right now, but you can have an impact on the world around you just by being Christ followers. Would you pray with me?