

February 19, 2023

“Vision - Community”
Jeremiah 29:1-14

FCF: Confusion as to our posture towards the world

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The LORD is with us - even in Babylon.
(magnet) We must walk in His ways.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Through the years, there has been a great deal of confusion as to the posture of God’s people towards the rest of the world. And I do mean “through the years.” You get a sense of this in the diversity of 1st century Judaism. The Sadducees were willing to accommodate. The Zealots called for violent resistance. The Pharisees leaned upon tradition. The Essenes called for complete separation. There are strands of each of these all through history. And still today.

So what is our posture to be? This is the fourth in our series on the new vision statement of our church. Boiling it all down, here is the short summary sentence at the top of the statement (**READ**): “Christ Presbyterian Church exists for the glory of God and the joy of all people.”

Just below that, there is a summary paragraph, rolling out what this means (**READ**):

We are a **COVENANT FAMILY**
Being **TRANSFORMED** to the likeness of Christ
Rejoicing in and **DISPLAYING** His truth, goodness, and grace
Growing in love, service, and relationship to God and our **COMMUNITY**
For the **GLORY** of God and His kingdom, present and eternal

Each word in that section in bold is explained in a paragraph below. Today, we are looking at the fourth line, “growing in love, service, and relationship to God and our community” (**READ**):

In addition to being a covenant community, we seek the welfare of the city and the world in which God has placed us.

From there, this particular paragraph is unpacked further so as to flesh out the intent (**READ**):

We will share the gospel with our community both near and far by our word and action.
We will seek to uphold that which is good and beautiful.
We will seek to restore that which is broken.
We will shelter the broken-hearted.
We will enable and equip others to use their gifts fully for kingdom work.
We will seek to be good neighbors and bring light to the world around us.
We will care for the outcast and downtrodden.
We will partner with other congregations in our community both near and far.

This is our vision. How is this seen in the Scriptures? What does the Lord say to us about this?

SCRIPTURE READING: **Jeremiah 29:1-14**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

A basic axiom for life. We need to know where we are so we know how to live. Imagine you have been thrust into a new land. It would be good to know something about the terrain. Is it arctic, desert, or tropical? What sort of soil, plants, and animals are there? Are there people? And, if so, what are they like? Again, we need to know where we are so we know how to live.

Put another way, it’s vital that we have the right model, the right paradigm and grid. One helpful approach (not original to me) is to consider three great cities of the Old Testament era and ask which is most like our situation. Is it Jerusalem - where believer and unbeliever alike acknowledge that the God of Abraham exists and that His word is the supreme authority? No. Is it Samaria - where the true God is still acknowledged, even though orthodox belief and practice

has been tainted by years of compromise with pagans? No. Is it then Babylon - were a variety of gods, beliefs, and values compete for acceptance, and where our worldview is only one option out of many? Yes. We are like the Old Testament people of God in Babylon, living in exile.

Now, here's the amazing thing. In the Old Testament, we find a letter from a prophet of God written to the people of God in exile. And what does that letter say? The LORD is with us, even in Babylon. How then are we to live? We are to walk in His ways - to heed His commands and to seek His face. The LORD is with us, even in Babylon. We are then to walk in His ways.

What do we learn of His ways from this letter? Three things, three postures. First, that of faithfulness. Second, engagement. And third, assurance. That is how we are to live in exile.

I. FAITHFULNESS

Again, the first of these is faithfulness. The people were to make Babylon their home (**READ Jeremiah 29:5-6**). As one commentator puts it, the refugees were to become residents.

A) Continuing in the Ordinary

1. The message of the false prophets

This meant they were to continue in the ordinary. That was counter to the message of the false prophets who said, "This is an interval, just an interruption. What we do here doesn't matter. So just set up a tent. Don't invest. Don't give your energy to that place or get to know the people."

2. The message of Jeremiah

But Jeremiah's message was quite different. "Build and live. Plant and eat. Take and give." Make your home there. Fill out the change of address forms. Learn the culture. Settle in.

B) Without Fixating on the Spectacular

1. Just waiting around

They were to continue in the ordinary. And to do so without fixating on the spectacular. They were not to just wait around with their bags packed, waiting for a ride to come take them home.

2. Looking for a big change

They were not to pine about, looking for a big change. Yes, Babylon would get theirs. It would fall. But they were not to sit and wait for that. They were to work and rest in God's timing.

What do we see? Ordinary faithfulness is pleasing to God. And it's part of life in exile.

Illustration:

Some of you know Sarah and I went to the U.K. last summer. We saw a lot (**READ**):

Edinburgh, Scotland, is famous for a story of a dog and his owner that express devotion and tenacity in equal measure. The story began in 1850, when John Gray came to the city to be a gardener. Unable to find work, he joined the police force as a night watchman. To keep him company through the long nights, he would take his small Skye terrier named Bobby with him on his rounds. They became part of the living landscape of the city night after night for years.

John later contracted tuberculosis and died in the winter of 1858; he was buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard. What happened next became legend in the city. Bobby, the Skye terrier, would not leave his master's grave. Except for accepting midday meals from the kind people in the area, Bobby stayed there day and night with his master. The caretaker tried on many occasions to evict the dog, but to no avail. Finally, he provided the little dog with a shelter by the grave.

When the city passed an ordinance that all unlicensed dogs would be destroyed, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, William Chambers, purchased a license for Bobby and had a collar engraved for the little dog. Until his death fourteen years later, the citizens cared for Bobby while he guarded his master's body. If you walk to Greyfriars Kirkyard today, you can't miss the statue that stands across the street. It is a sculpture of Bobby with these words inscribed on the base:

Greyfriars Bobby—died 14th January 1872—aged 16 years. Let his loyalty and devotion be a lesson to us all.

Few walk by that without being moved. Faithfulness in the ordinary. A dog staying.

Application:

What are we to do with this? Consider a question. Why are we so preoccupied with the flashy? Why are we so discontent with the ordinary? Could it be we don't believe that God sees us right where and as we are? Think with me. The impact a mom changing a dozen diapers in a day could be far more significant than the activist on a talk show. The student earnestly pursuing his gifts and studies could bring far more good to this world than the celebrity on social media.

The LORD is with us - even in Babylon. We must walk in ways, in simple faithfulness.

II. ENGAGEMENT

Which brings us to the next point, engagement. The LORD has particular purposes and plans for His people in this place (**READ Jeremiah 29:7-9**). The mourners become missionaries.

A) For the Good of the Community

1. Seeking and praying

Why are they there? For the good of the community. They are called to what? To seek and to pray. To seek - to pursue, care for, work for. To pray - not just in Babylon but even for Babylon.

2. For the welfare

But seeking and praying what? For the welfare of the city. The word is shalom - the prosperity, peace, well-being of this people. Harkening back to Eden, longing for how things ought to be.

B) For Our Own Good as Well

1. Distinct from the people around us

So there is to be a seeking and praying for the good of the community. But note this. It's for their own good as well. Yes, they were called to be holy, distinct from the people around them.

2. United with the people around us

But the LORD says that, even as they were distinct from the people around them, they were also united with the people around them. Your future is tied to theirs. Which meant that to withdraw from them, to fail to engage, seek, and pray for their shalom was to do damage to their own.

Engagement with the people and culture around us is part of life in exile, pleasing to God.

Illustration:

Jesus spoke to this very thing (**READ Matthew 5:13**). Salt both seasons and preserves. It has to remain salty to be of any good. But it also has to get out of the shaker to be of any good as well. (**READ Matthew 5:14-15**) Light cuts into the darkness. If it stays hidden, it's of no use.

Application:

Are we seeking and praying for the shalom of our neighbor? Or have we adopted the stance of Babylon, cynically casting everyone as a potential enemy? Even so, Jesus commands us to love our enemy. And, building on that, Paul goes even further and says that our real enemy

is never our neighbor. Our real enemy and the real battle is with Satan. Having lost sight of that, could that be why we fail to seek and pray for the shalom of our neighbor and our world?

Another question worth asking here has to do with withdrawal. How might we be pulling back instead of pressing in? In what ways are we hiding behind concerns for holiness and the need to protect our children? In what ways are we withdrawing out of fearful faithlessness?

The LORD is with us - even in Babylon. We must walk in His ways and engage.

III. ASSURANCE

But what undergirds all this? That takes us to the last point, a call not just to faithfulness and engagement but assurance ([READ Jeremiah 29:10-14](#)). The victims become visionaries.

A) *The Reality of His Plans*

1. Appearances

Here we need to consider the reality of the LORD's plans - despite appearances. Consider the optics here. It looked and felt like God had deserted them, been defeated by the pagan gods.

2. Actuality

But in actuality, He was on His throne all the while, ruling in and through all things to bring about His purposes. If you listen, you can hear echoes of ancient covenantal promises. "I am your God. I will be with you. I will bring you to myself." "I will" we hear six times in the text.

B) *The Mystery of His Plans*

1. Uncertainty

Oh, how we need to hear the reality of His plans. But the mystery as well. There is a fair bit of uncertainty here. What path will His good purposes take? Verse 11 is too easily sentimentalized. Think with me. Who is responsible for the exile? ([READ Jeremiah 29:1](#)) So it's this pagan king. But wait ([READ Jeremiah 29:4, 7a](#)). It's the LORD working by this king. Mysterious ways.

2. Certainty

So there is uncertainty. Where will these purposes lead? But there is certainty as well. For we know whose purposes they are. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* speaks to this ([READ Q:4](#)):

What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. All that He does always flows from who He is. All that He does always flows from who He is.

We can have that assurance. We need that assurance. It's part of life in exile.

Application:

Such assurances, however, are meant to carry us through hard times and rough waters, not around or over them. They are what enable us to live out that ordinary faithfulness, to press into the struggles of engagement. But how can we maintain such an assurance? How can we hold onto such hope - especially when circumstances send a whole other message? By drowning out those messages with the truth. By abiding with the Lord, walking with Him, carving out time each day to spend with Him. That is what fuels the fire of this hope, of such assurances.

The LORD is with us - even in Babylon. We must walk in His ways with hope.

CONCLUSION:

The LORD is the God of placement. That was something I heard repeatedly in seminary. One of the jobs I had was in the Student Services office. In that office was the Placement Desk. That's where we kept the folders that had the job openings for graduating students. Among other things, our office served as something of a matchmaker. But it wasn't just matchmaking. There was counseling going on as well. I can't tell you the number of times a student would come in feeling the stress of not knowing what their future held only to be gently reminded of all that they had been learning in their studies. "Friend, God is real and He has promised to care for us."

It can be challenging to apply these big picture truths to the paying of bills and providing for your family. But applying these big picture truths, bringing them down to where we are, is exactly what we must do. We must bring it down and go forth. For the LORD is the God of placement. He is the one who has placed us where and when we are. What are we to do with this? These are not two different worlds - one truth on Sunday and another on Monday. They are the same and we have to hold them both together - especially as a people in exile. That's what the Lord is calling us to be and to do - living in faithfulness, engagement, and assurance.

The LORD is with us. He is with us - even in Babylon. We must walk in His ways.

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