

The Prophet Jeremiah was no stranger to uncertainty and grief. He lived in a time of great upheaval and change – beginning his life as a prophet when the great temple stood in Jerusalem, seemingly unassailable, but ending his life in exile. Here was a man who watched his home and his beloved city be burned and utterly destroyed by the Babylonians, and this after having sat with the heavy knowledge that it would occur! Jeremiah warned his people to surrender or be killed and was finally forced into Egypt, leaving behind those who did not listen, but he was also taken there against his will. In today's passage from Jeremiah 17, he has the unenviable job of speaking out of his own trauma to those who listened – to the people who are still alive but empty of everything that was once cherished and familiar – and telling them that exile would be the new normal. Once again, Jeremiah pleads with the people to save themselves. Instead of waiting to go back to what was but could never be again, he urges the people to adapt.

It is this context that causes Jeremiah to ask his people whether they will choose to be a shrub in the desert, not seeing relief, or whether they will trust in the Lord to nourish and protect them, even in a situation difficult to comprehend or accept. Jeremiah equates the desert shrub with those who turn their hearts away from the Lord, constantly seeking for that which cannot be found, while the faithful hold fast to God even during drought and oppressive heat, using their deep roots to draw water into their thirsty branches. Jeremiah knows that it is not easy to imagine a green and flowering tree in times of transition. I think each of us here today knows this intimately because we, too, are living in a liminal space. We are struggling through our own time of change and transition.

Perhaps we can relate to the worn-out and heart-heavy exiles Jeremiah speaks to because the pandemic has held the threat of exile or the reality of exile over our heads in real and devastating ways. Some of us have faced exile from our jobs, schools, or families.

There is the exile that is homelessness, or exile from good health to poor health or from security to instability. Each of us faces our own jarring encounter with what it means to be displaced, and now we must ask ourselves which path we will take – pining for the familiar past which can no longer provide shade or water, or leaning into the uncertain present, which is the only option with the capability of bearing fruit, even in the middle of drought and anxiety.

I faced exile once as a young woman watching her parent's marriage fall apart, and their eventual divorce led me to conclude, for a time, that the solution to the instability I experienced through childhood was to control everything I could tightly. If I were successful, I told myself, my willpower and discipline would lead to the outcomes I wanted. Unfortunately, this attitude spilled over into my spiritual life. Every Sunday, you could find me dutifully checking off a list of prayers and activities I had convinced myself were necessary for spiritual safety. I had talked myself into believing that I could only claim myself as a righteous person and therefore trust in God's promises to me if I was faithfully doing these specific things. In the process, I had turned entirely inward. This kind of behavior is one risk of fearing change and transition – it can tether us to our worries and practices, attitudes, and beliefs that are rightly intended and may have worked once but no longer serve the present moment. It can lead us to look for God in only the places we recognize, all the while missing God's presence with us now, in our searching.

It took me time and the experiences of adulthood to help me realize that my attempts to control every outcome in my life limited my vision of what was possible, even going so far as to determine what I thought about God. It was only through the painful process of letting go of much of what had once held me safely – even reexamining my faith – that I began to change into a fuller version of myself.

Like Jeremiah's tree, I began to send out roots, but I only flourished as I learned to be comfortable with grey areas, multiple answers to the same question, the validity of competing realities, and saying and hearing the words "I don't know." In doing so, I embraced an identity and a vibrant faith that I would have never before envisioned. I discovered that even when change is not self-initiated or desired, it can yield fruit.

It is important to pause here and acknowledge that grief is serious business. It matters, and it's valid. When we find ourselves in parched places of wilderness, it is expected that we will feel disoriented, overwhelmed, and perhaps even angry. We can trust in God's presence in our world, and God's investment in us and our future and still hurt right now. Lament is a faithful response in times of grief as we mourn together, speak openly and honestly about the struggles we face in our world, and then call on God to repair it. *(insert quote)* The challenge is to remain open to the movement of the Spirit during these times and then to eventually act.

Sometimes the griefs we face push us to look too hard for straightforward and quickly achieved solutions to problems and rely on hoped-for outcomes instead of beginning with thoughtful and flexible reflection. Much like a youthful me, Jeremiah's community were people whose grief bound them so tightly that they could only imagine relief in the form of control, which was for them, outside deliverance. God would intervene through kings or armies, and meanwhile, the people had only to be faithful to what they already knew. Jeremiah knew that redemption would not be coming in the way the people expected or desired, and he reminded them that God would "test the mind and search the heart." In other words, deliverance would come in the form of healing and would begin inside each human heart, just as it had for me.

Jesus' ministry is also closely concerned with the transformation of the human heart and the possibilities inside it.

In today's gospel passage, we hear him say a series of statements that appear to simply name a condition with a corresponding outcome or result. Far greater than formulas for spiritual success, these statements are much more about the things made possible by conditions that are out of our control. In other words, they tell us how to flourish in exile.

Listen to this translation by Eugene Peterson:

"You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding.

You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.

You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it."

You see, these are not contingencies that must be met to receive specific blessings or consequences. They describe the characteristics of exile as contexts that create opportunities and risks. They represent the difficult places we find ourselves, most frequently without choice and often out of our control. Yet Jesus reminds us that it is in losing everything that we carve out enough empty space inside us to go searching someplace unexpected for God. Hunger makes us appreciate the gifts of God, long for the day when we will all sit down together to feast and to work for that reality. Grief helps us recognize joy when it returns to us. Jesus, like Jeremiah, wants us to know that challenges and setbacks are gateways into either powerlessness and despair or growth and development.

Conversely, we stifle our growth when we assume we already have all we need or that we can't get what we need because we stop looking for anything outside ourselves or our own comfort. When we're overly satisfied with who we are, we stop attending to how we influence or affect others. When we expect life to be a continual celebration, we do not develop the spiritual resources to weather inevitable disappointments and frustration.

Jeremiah and Jesus both urge us to choose the path of trusting that God is present in times of uncertainty and that new life can grow where we see only desolation. We are asked to trust that uncertainty and change can create the conditions that arouse us from complacency and slumber. When we are tempted to dream of a life without hardship or romanticize the past, it is God's word that calls us back to the present reality of the world we live in now.

At our annual meeting last week, Kurt engaged this very question when he asked what it means to be the church now. He invited each of us to enter into a period of discernment together to discover our way forward as a community. His invitation is an acknowledgment that we find ourselves in an unprecedented place with unique challenges, profound grief, and more questions than answers. But more importantly, his invitation is a recognition that we have possibilities and opportunities before us that we may not have had the ability to dream of before. While the mold that shaped us has now been cracked, we are still pliable and capable of being modeled into something beautiful that is more than capable of holding us all. Now is the time to discover what form that will take. And it is work that begins by taking root in each of our hearts, working for our collective transformation. Exile is hard, but it gives us the gift of unclaimed territory that we get to decide together how to fill, and this is exciting! In the next few weeks, as we pray, study, and consult with one another and our families, we can trust that God is helping us generate the

strength and resiliency we need to grow new branches on our already loved and well-watered tree. Thanks be to God!