

Resident Aliens

When I preached last month, I selected from the Methodist Lectionary the verses from Jeremiah 2. This was about the message from God transmitted through the prophet Jeremiah that God was extremely displeased with the Israelites worshipping idols and forsaking Him and rejecting everything he offered. He used the metaphor of the cracked cisterns that cannot hold water. You remember right? Just smile and nod your head....

Well when I looked to the lectionary for today's sermon, I found that one of the texts was again from Jeremiah. Maybe this was more than a coincidence. Typically, when I feel God is giving me direction I try to follow along. So, it seemed like a good idea to use the Jeremiah text for today's sermon. In addition, it certainly seemed that this text about a message God sent to people living as exiles in a foreign land can apply to many, maybe most of us. Actually, I am going to try to convince you that it applies to all of us, even if you were born a Bavarian.

I am sure you recall from last month's sermon that Jeremiah was a prophet to Israel that lived around 600 years before the birth of Christ. In chapter 2, God through Jeremiah lamented about Israel turning away from Him and worshipping false idols. God loved his chosen people Israel. For centuries He had guided them, protected them, strengthened them and gave them the land of milk and honey. But now, they had forsaken him, turned away and focused their attention on things with no lasting value. Israel was using everything that God had provided for evil and not for good. Because of God's great love for Israel and because Israel was to be a blessing to the whole world, God in His infinite wisdom decided He could no longer protect them from the outside forces. Israel would have to face the consequences of their actions. Without God's protection, Israel was no match for the power of Babylon and its King Nebuchadnezzar. The armies of Babylon invaded, destroyed Solomon's temple and took many people captive. Nebuchadnezzar knew the Israelites were strong willed people so his strategy was to take large numbers of them back to Babylon expecting that over time they would blend in with the others in the city and eventually lose their belief in the one, creator God they called YHWH and then become more tolerant of Babylon rule. It seemed like a good strategy, but the Israelites resisted. They lived outside the city so as to avoid all the temples in the city for worshipping

Babylon's many gods. In summary, Israel turned its back on God, God said I love you dearly, but I can't continue to protect you and you have to face the consequences. Babylon conquered Israel, destroyed the temple and took many Israelites back to Babylon to soften them up to Babylonian rule.

Now we come to our old testament reading for today. God directs his prophet Jeremiah to send a letter to these people in exile in Babylon. You'd expect this letter to say "Be strong in the Lord, stay away from those evil Babylonians who worship false gods". But that is not what it says. God tells them to settle there, build houses, have families, have a garden and enjoy the produce. He is telling them to stop living in tents outside of the city. He is saying they are going to be there for a few generations so accept this and make yourself comfortable, But, But don't become like the Babylonians. God tells them in verses 10 and 11 that you are still my beloved people. In 70 years, I am going to bring you back to "this place" meaning Israel. God says, "I have plans for you". These are the same plans he had when he spoke to Abraham. Plans to make a great nation that will be a blessing to the world. So settle down here, make your life here, do the normal things of life, but don't, don't forget that you are my chosen people.

God addresses His people in this letter as exiles. His beloved people that are living in a foreign land. This concept and the term "exile" are used many times in the old testament. It's also an important idea in the New Testament. In 1 Peter, the letter is addressed to the "elect exiles" and then addresses them as "sojourners and exiles." To me the term "exile" has a bit of a negative feeling. The sense of being thrown out. Another term that has the same meaning but sounds more positive is "resident alien". If we break that down, it starts with resident. Which means you live here. You are going to be in this place for a long time. As a resident, you are meant to be part of the community. The second part is alien. Meaning there is something about you that is different. Something unique. Something maybe a little strange. Peter, and other writers of the new testament have a strong sense that we as followers of Jesus Christ are aliens here on earth, wherever we are. If it's in Munich, New York, London or the city in which we were born. Christians should always think of themselves as resident aliens. Here to live. Here for a long time. While we are here, we should build houses, have families, have gardens. But we are to live in the tension of knowing that our real and eternal citizenship is not here. Our real citizenship is in the kingdom of

God. Don't get confused by that term "kingdom". Often, we think of the kingdom as some far away heaven. No, it's the kingdom we belong to. The kingdom is the blood line we have to Jesus Christ. Through Christ and His redeeming work we are members of His holy family. We are members of his KINGdom. As we saw in the all age story, we are all directly connected to Jesus Christ. Through our baptism we are given a holy blood transfusion; so we now have royal blood in our veins. We are reborn as sons and daughters of the King. While we are here as residents in this foreign land, we must never forget who's we are. We need to remember we are heirs to the kingdom. As Christians in many ways we are like those exiles in Babylon. We are going to be here for a while, so God tells us to settle in, be part of the community. But be resident aliens. Be alien, be a little different.

What do I mean by different? Let's go back to the Jeremiah passage. In verse 7, God says to them "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it". In the original Hebrew text, the term translated as peace and prosperity is Shalom. We don't have an English word with the depth of meaning of shalom. Shalom means peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. So, God tells his resident aliens to seek the shalom, seek the peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility for the city. It's not God saying, "just get along with the people." He is telling his people to work, to strive for the peace and prosperity of not themselves but of the citizens of the foreign land to which they have been brought. God even goes so far as to instruct them to pray for the shalom of the city. Praying means calling on the power that is far stronger than you to bring forth this shalom to the people of the city.

We as followers of the Lord Jesus are called to be just like the Israelites in Babylon. We are to seek and strive for the shalom of the city. In the new testament we are called to be salt and light to the world. Salt is a preservative; salt brings out flavors and it can aid in healing. Light shines into darkness, it guides, it warms, it provides growth. We, as members of the royal family, are to bring the blessing of salt and light to the foreign place where we reside.

The new testament reading I selected for today is the beatitudes from Jesus's sermon on the mount. I think all too often we look at the beatitudes as an equation.

If I do this, I will get that. If I act like I am poor in spirit, I will inherit the kingdom of heaven. If I am merciful, I will get mercy. But look at it more closely, all the “for theirs” and the “for they” gifts are the gifts we have already received from God through Christ. Ours is already the kingdom of heaven. We have already received mercy from God. We are already comforted by Christ. We must turn the equation around. Because we have been adopted into the kingdom of Christ and because we live in this world as resident aliens the first part of the statements, the blessed are part, are the blessings we freely give that bring forth the shalom to the city and to the world.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Another way to say it is blessed are the humble – who, no matter their stature humble themselves to serve others.

“Blessed are those who mourn” – who weep with others in their loss.

“Blessed are the meek” – who while knowing the truth, speak through love.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” – who work tirelessly to end the exploitation of the powerless.

“Blessed are the merciful” – who forgive others as we have been forgiven. Not 7 times but 7 x 7 times.

“Blessed are the pure in heart” – who don’t follow the desires of the flesh, who don’t follow the desires that bring hurt to so many.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” – who will not abide by the world’s rule of “might makes right”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake” – who give up everything to bring salt and light to the world.

As members of the royal family, children of the God of the universe, who live as resident aliens in this place may we seek, strive and pray for the shalom, the peace and prosperity, of the city and of the world in which we live.

Amen.