

JEREMIAH 29: 4-9

¹Here is the text of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the leaders of the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had deported from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat the produce; ⁶take wives, and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so they too may give birth to sons and daughters; multiply there, do not become few. ⁸Seek the welfare of the city where I've exiled you, and pray for it to the Lord, for in its welfare is your welfare.

⁸For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Do not be deluded by the prophets and diviners who are among you. Do not listen to the dreams they get you to dream. In my name, they are preaching a lie. I did not send them. Oracle of the Lord!

I have substituted "Lord" for YHWH out of deference to the Jewish community. And I have used "leaders" for elders.

A Sermon at Duke University

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Some years ago Life Magazine published a pathetic picture. The pictured showed an Arab prisoner of war standing behind barbed wire in a Middle Eastern prison camp. His clothes: A pair of shorts and battered canvass shoes. Around his neck on a chain was a large key, the key to a house in which he had once lived. He stood with his hands spread helplessly, saying, "How can I live here?" Well, nowadays the question seems to echo in our churches. "How can we live as displaced people in a secular land?" So listen to the prophet Jeremiah writing a letter to exiles. Listen, for perhaps he

is writing the letter to us.

I

Exile: "Exile" does seem to be a metaphor for Christians in America these days. We live as exiles in a secular land. Oh, once upon a time America was settled by true believers -- Puritans in New England and Catholics down in Spanish Florida. In between there were the Dutch Reformed in New York City, German pietists in eastern Pennsylvania, and aristocratic Anglicans sprawled all over the state of Virginia. But now, to borrow Stephen's Carter's phrase we live in a "Culture of Disbelief." Church bells used to ring out on Sunday mornings, but now we've got champagne brunch in Durham's fashionable restaurants or stay-at-home, bathrobed breakfasts with the New York Times crossword puzzle. Once upon a time atheists had to rally to defend their position, but subtly times have changed and nowadays anyone who believes in God must argue for the conviction. So Tony Kushner on Broadway pictures American religion as a crowd of old Angels clutching a big Bible-sized book wondering when and if God will come back to America any time soon. Exile: "How can we live in a secular land?" The question troubles us these days.

Well, listen to the voices all around; voices in our churches. "How do we live?" -- there's no shortage of advice. Some Christians are still chasing the bright dream of religious revival. Every now and then Time Magazine does a feature on baby-boomer faith and our churches swoon! Or there's a rumor of charismatic laughter spreading in suburbs of Toronto, and church people here start listening for giggles. But somehow revival never seems to happen.

Other Christians have joined a militant "Christian Coalition," eager to recapture the land from secularists by political power. Although you do wonder how an outfit that supports military spending, favors slashing welfare for the poor, wants an absolute ban on abortion, demands imposed prayer in school rooms, is anti-feminist, gay bashing, and eager for the death penalty can claim to speak for Jesus Christ? Of course, most churches are simply trying to hold onto themselves for dear life; survival is the name of the game. Did you see that Doonesbury cartoon some months ago. It showed an almost empty Gothic church. Two little old ladies in a front pew with a decrepid old gentleman behind them. And in the pulpit, a young priest with an arm raised up, saying, "Our day will come again!" We laugh but not too loudly because the promise does seem unlikely. Exiled in our own land. How can live for the Lord in a alien secular world?

II

Jeremiah speaks. Jeremiah, the prophet, has a word for us. Listen: Build houses and settle down, plant your gardens and harvest them. Get wives, he writes, and breed children, yes, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Look, even in exile we are in God's creation -- a world filled with good things for human pleasure: Build your house, breed your young, feast on the harvest of earth. Notice you will not get Jeremiah to support Christian ghettos, even stained glass ghettos on Church Street, USA. For everywhere, yes, even in exile, we live in God's good creation, human beings with human beings on the earth together. A new

neighbor moved into our neighborhood. A corporate wife, she'd moved too many times in too few years. But she had a picture book with photos of all the houses she has had. In every picture there was a same table and always a flower garden. "I move in the same my old kitchen table," she explained, "and then I plant my garden." Build and breed and feast on the earth." So Jeremiah writes to the exiles. Says Jeremiah to us, "Join the human world!" For everywhere is God's creation.

Now stop and ask a question: What prompts his faith? How can Jeremiah be sure he's handing out the word of God? Look how the letter is addressed: The Word of the Lord "to all the exiles whom I have exiled!" We talk of the secular world as if it rose up separate from God. But no, somehow God has been involved all along in shaping our exile. Was God delivering us from religion triumphalism? Perhaps. Or had God decreed that if we insisted on wandering from God's will we would end up in confusion, the strange confusion of unbelief? Maybe. But the secular world is still God's world, and incidentally a world God loves! So old Dr. Brown, an early century missionary leader, stood on a platform before the fledgling National Council of Churches, and shouted his faith: "I do believe," he exclaimed, "beneath the surface of things moves the mighty current of God's eternal purpose." For heaven's sake, secularism began with the Protestant reformation. In mid-nineteenth century, it became an "ism." Secularism has spread, emptying churches all over Europe and now here in America. The secular world has been shaped by science, by industry and labor unions,

universities and political parties, and yes, by churches. But God somehow has been involved in all. "To the exiles whom I have exiled." The secular world is still very much God's world.

III

So, guess what, we can serve God in a secular age. "Seek the welfare of the city," sings Jeremiah, "Pray for the welfare of the land where you are." We cannot withdraw into our Churches and pull the covers of faith over our heads. No, we are to be active in the worldly world working for the common good. So you will not devote yourself full time to a Church School class, but also to the School Board. God knows, we need good schools for everybody's kids. And you do not simply be a Church leader, but work with secular people politically to plot a better world. The danger now is that Christians may clutch their Bibles and retreat into a safe, sweet, sheltered churchiness. No, we must speak the word of God to the world, the secular world in which we live. Speak to congress -- An irony: think of a hundred rich senators trying to legislate morality for the welfare poor. A double irony: Think of churches saying nothing about it! A few years ago there was a big book of pictures done by Sunday School kids. In the middle of the book was a centerfold, a big picture of stick figure people in pairs bending down toward each other like waiters waiting on take, all over the pages. Underneath in crayon letters was a caption: "Kingdom of God." Every pagan place is still the kingdom and every moment a usefulness to neighbors. Work for the welfare of the city; pray for the welfare of the land.

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So how do we live in a secular world, exiles in faith. We settle down yes, and breed our children and work for the welfare of all. And we feast, yes, feast as the family of God, trusting in the providence that so surrounds our lives.

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