



Sermons at Burke Presbyterian Church

SHARE THE WORD

A Ministry of Burke Presbyterian Church
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 29:1-2, 4-11

Burke, Virginia
September 24, 2017

Home: Exile on Main Street

The Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin and Christopher Fay, Executive Director of Homestretch

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1-2, 4-11

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon:

Jarrett:

One of my three year-old twins is a collector. She loves to gather her "treasures." It used to be rocks, pinecones - interesting bits from nature. Then she moved on to Mom's jewelry - so that was fun. More recently though, she seems to be drawn to the most fragile things in the house. You can catch her absconding with pieces of pottery, glass bowls - I just know she's eyeing my vinyl records.

A few weeks ago I overheard Meg intercepting her as she was making off with yet another highly breakable object - she said to her "Zanna - now that's fragile can you give it to Mommy?" Then Zanna looked at her with those big blue eyes so earnest and said "But Mommy, I love fragile things."

Don't we all love things that are fragile. Sometimes the things we love most are perhaps the most fragile.

In our sermon series we've been exploring the idea of Home: What it means, where it is and finding God there. Home can be *very* fragile.

Your 18 year-old daughter leaves for college and the silence in the house is nearly deafening - Home is fragile.

A child is told that Mommy and Daddy are going to try living apart for a while - Home is fragile.

An aging husband kisses his wife good morning, but she no longer remembers his name - Home is fragile.

Not to mention the more sudden ways people have lost their homes in recent weeks. Hurricanes and floods wash homes away.

In Burma, Syria and Sudan refugees have their homes snatched away in an instant. For these and a hundred different reasons, Home is a *very* fragile thing.

That is why I've asked Christopher Fay to share the pulpit with me this morning here at Burke Presbyterian. Thus church also loves fragile things - and we want to help Christopher's friends who come to Homestretch seeking to build a Home for themselves and for their children.

The mission team here at BPC spent much of 2017 asking ourselves, "How are we going to engage the issue of homelessness here in Fairfax County?" We did site visits to the many different ministries we have supported over the years - seeking out the one that we believe to be doing the most transformational work in our community. We are thrilled to partner with Homestretch's Sacred Homes program. Homestretch understands that home can be a very fragile thing...that people lose their home all the time.

It's not just *over there* - in *those* places - happening to those people.

Christopher:

It happens right here, too. It *is* happening right here at this very moment.

A young mother of two toddlers, beaten into a coma by her boyfriend. Unable to work while in a coma, she lost her job. When she awoke and pressed charges against him, she had to leave her home and go into hiding when his family threatened to kill her.

A young father discovers that his 8-year-old son has cancer. The boy's mom, a recovering alcoholic, relapses, loses her job and abandons the family. The dad is now unable to pay the mortgage on his own and when he spends too much time at the hospital bedside of his sick

boy, he loses his job, too and the family becomes homeless.

A family with seven children chased from their homes by the Taliban, with nowhere safe to go except a nation halfway across the globe.

A family of four who lose everything due to the raging hurricane – their home, their church, their jobs, their dog, and their extended family and friends.

Loving parents, yet homeless, penniless and scared, right in our midst. These are real families that came to Homestretch for help.

Homes are more than just fragile. Sometimes, Home gets completely broken.

Jarrett:

The Israelites understood that.

Our reading from the prophet Jeremiah this morning comes from the time of Exile.

In the year 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Israel - Jerusalem was sacked, the great Temple was torn down, and the Babylonian King deported the most valuable among the Israelites to his capital. Our reading even gives us a short list of the kinds of people who were taken: King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the priests, the prophets, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths. Basically - anybody who had lucrative skills or leadership experience.

Whether you were hauled off to Babylon or whether you were left behind in a shelled out Jerusalem - Home was gone.

But for those in Babylon - they were now aliens in the heart of the great Empire.
Exiles on Main Street.

Now - imagine for a moment the attitude among these exiles - forcibly removed from their homes, forced to live and serve among their captors. We sang that song as part of Bridges to worship this morning to get us in that head-space.

The lyrics come from Psalm 137, also written in the time of Exile: "By the waters of Babylon we laid down and wept when we remembered Zion."

The Psalmist goes on to say "On the willows we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth saying 'sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" And if you really want to see what may very well be the most human response in all of Scripture, the final verse of Psalm 137 reads, "O daughter Babylon, you devastator, happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

It's a graphic picture. To say these exiles are bitter and angry is an understatement. It's not hard to imagine them simmering in resentment, carefully crafting their revenge fantasies.

What's more, there was a prophet among the exiles named Shemiah who said "This will only last for two years - the Lord has shown me Babylon will fall quite imminently, and so soon and very soon we will all go home."

Those Exiles loved Shemiah for prophesying this.

But Jeremiah said something quite to the contrary.

Christopher: Jeremiah said "Build houses."

Jarrett: Jeremiah said "Plant gardens and I promise you will eat what you grow."

Christopher: Jeremiah said, "Start families and get used to your sons and daughters having Babylonian accents."

Jarrett: Jeremiah said settle in for the long haul...it's going to be 70 years before this is all over. And those Exiles hated Jeremiah for saying that.

What's more, Jeremiah didn't stop there.

His message from God really tested the metal of these exiles:

Christopher: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, AND PRAY TO THE LORD ON ITS BEHALF, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Those exiles really hated Jeremiah for saying that.

"You want me to lay down roots...here?"

"You want me to raise my son and my daughter to be Babylonians?"

"You want me to hang up the 'Home Sweet Home' sign here in this accursed Empire?"

"And as if that weren't enough, you actually want me to pray for *these* people...pray...for my enemies?"

(See - Jesus wasn't the first person to say that)

Jeremiah tells them to make peace with their circumstances - to make peace with this new normal - and find ways to keep on living.

In doing so, Jeremiah reminds us of an incredibly challenging truth - that peace is always, ALWAYS - found within.

The circumstances of our lives cannot be the foundation of our peace - we're always going to have to dig deeper.

That is no easy feat when you are in an exile state of mind.

When you're in an exile state of mind - all you can see is what is wrong.

Jeremiah points beyond that - and I believe Homestretch does too.

Christopher:

At Homestretch, we have the honor to work with families whose lives have come unwound, whose dreams have shattered, whose experiences of loss and failure and disappointment have left them bereft of both resources and hope. But we remember the words of the Psalmist, who said, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you will not despise."

Our work is to help them turn their crises into opportunities. From the roots of despair, a tree of hope.

Our mission is to provide an environment where these families, all homeless and in crisis, and all with children under the age of eighteen, can find the means and the hope to completely redesign their lives. Some families, born into generational poverty or steeped in dysfunction, may have no memories of healthy living to build upon and must start from scratch. This means they must become engaged in writing new endings to what feels to them like old and predictable stories.

We start with love. And hope springs from love. Their first day in the program we give them a home, furnished with everything they need, including bedding, kitchen utensils, food and toys for the kids. And the second day the real work begins.

We identify all the barriers and obstacles in their path and help them create individualized plans to overcome those obstacles – by securing jobs, enrolling in academic or vocational schools through scholarships that we provide, paying down debts and building up savings, increasing their incomes and improving their credit scores, by restoring their health and resolving legal problems, by developing healthy relationships and learning how to care for and guide their children.

The families that come to us are not always ready for such hard work. After all, like the exiles who resisted Jeremiah, many of them prefer to remain mired in victimhood. Sometimes, the identity we know is more appealing than a new potentially healthier identity, even if that old identity is rooted in pain and despair. Change is hard, and sometimes frightening.

But change ignites hope and hope that is actualized brings achievement, and once you taste achievement, your appetite expands. So does willingness, and with willingness, anything is possible.

The families stay in Homestretch for various lengths of time; the average being two years. Albert Einstein said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving." People move forward at different rates, but the important thing is to keep moving forward toward self-sufficiency.

The remarkable thing is this: God has instilled in us a resilience that is deep and renewable. The deepest root of our resilience is knowledge of God and His promises: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Do not look backward, but plant yourselves where you are. Build families. Learn new skills. Grow strong in faith and invest in your future with hope. Release old wounds, old identities and old resentments, there is no room for that now; for you'll need both hands for the spring planting. This is God's charge to the exiles and it is our charge to the homeless families in Homestretch.

They say that in some languages, crisis and opportunity are nearly the same words. In the past ten years, parents in Homestretch – all of whom came to us homeless, broke and in crisis – have become nurses, accountants, realtors, mortgage brokers, pastors, social workers, dental hygienists, pharmacy techs, retail store managers, commercial drivers, master plumbers, daycare owners, restaurant owners, teachers and chefs. One recent graduate became a licensed pharmacist, another a gynecologist. From homelessness to a doctorate degree.

Homestretch has won much acclaim and numerous awards for our outstanding outcomes. Much of this is due to our design. But I think the most important feature of our program is that which is inspired by our faith in God and Christ: the belief that no one is ever lost, every life is sacred, and every person has the ability within themselves to get back up, turn and go in a new direction.

With the help of the congregation of Burke Presbyterian Church, we will partner together this coming year to help a homeless family turn their crisis into opportunity, through our Sacred Homes program.

In the words of Jeremiah, "In their welfare, we will find our welfare".

Jarrett:

Last Saturday night I was here for the youth lock-in - Adam put me in charge of making a campfire for s'mores. It was a good time to catch up with many of our young people, but it was especially fun to meet the friends they brought with them. I hope and pray that in some way that was our young people inviting others to experience the way this church community might be something of a second home.

I saw somebody I hadn't met before standing across the fire from me – I introduced myself and learned her name is Kat. Her T-shirt proudly declared "I Speak Fluently in Show Tunes." It was a conversation starter for sure – but I think show tunes have been working on me this week.

With the sermon title being "Exiles on Main Street" you might expect some Rolling Stones reference, but instead I've had *Les Miserables* on the mind....specifically I've had the song that the impoverished, single mother Fantine sings – "I Dreamed a Dream:"

*There was a time when love was blind
And the world was a song and the song was exciting.
There was a time.
Then it all went wrong.*

I dreamed a dream in time gone by

*When hope was high and life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.*

*I had a dream that my life would be so different from this hell I'm living.
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

Fantine sings this song from an exile state of mind.
From that place where you are sure there is no coming back from this;
From a trauma so severe that it threatens to define you forever.

And there are many ways to lose our homes
So many ways the dreams we have for our life crumble into nothing

And Christopher has given us a glimpse into the world of Homestretch where they encounter so many exiles desperately seeking something resembling home.

But through the prophet Jeremiah – God told those exiles and he tells all of us in exile to keep on living.

This new partnership with Homestretch is one way that we keep on living and one way we can be a part of encouraging our fellow exiles to keep on living. After all, our welfare is tied up in their welfare more than we could possibly realize.

And besides – we're all fragile...more fragile than we care to admit.
And everything that makes up our homes is fragile.
But God loves fragile things – and that is good, good news. Amen.

Home: *Today we continue our sermon series on "Home," with a focus on how fragile home can be. To help us deepen our reflection, Pastor Jarrett is co- preaching with Christopher Fay, executive director of Homestretch. Homestretch is a transformational housing ministry in Falls Church. Christopher brings a wealth of knowledge about homelessness and a passion for serving the homeless in our community, along with a deep spirituality that shapes his conviction. Christopher will speak about Homestretch and the Sacred Homes program, through which area churches commit to a particular home. BPC has committed to this program, and beginning this month, we will be paired with a specific housing unit. We will supplement the support provided by Homestretch for any families that live in that housing unit in the months and years to come.*