

The Days Are Surely Coming  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash  
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Texts:

Jeremiah 29:1, 3b-7, 10-14

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.

It said: <sup>4</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup> For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>31</sup> The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to

each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Prayer

Sermon

The days are surely coming!

The people of Judah, the southern kingdom, were a people facing exile, witnessing the destruction of their homeland. Israel before it was divided north and south, and Judah, the southern portion, had never held power in the region. Their kings switched loyalties between the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians depending on who seemed most likely to next dominate the region. And the prophet Jeremiah called the king and the people to account: Judah, the remnant of Israel, God's chosen people, the folks with whom Yahweh had made a covenant, should be loyal to Yahweh.

The people of Judah were facing exile, experiencing total disruption, separated from their loved ones, wondering where God was.

Jeremiah, an outsider prophet who had more than once faced the wrath of Judah's leaders for calling them back to Yahweh and justice and right living, kept preaching right up until the exile became inevitable: turn back from what is evil. Come back to God's covenant. He channeled God's judgment.

But, in these chapters, 29-33 or so, in speeches and in letters to the leaders in exile, Jeremiah channeled God's promise, God's mercy, God's steadfast love. Even in the earlier prophetic witness, the assurance of God's steadfast love was repeated again and again. But now, to a people in complete crisis, Jeremiah offered hope.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord.

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.

Though it be 70 years in Babylon,

God still has a purpose and calling for you.

God does yet love you.

God's restoration is on the way.

The days are surely coming.

I will bring you back home.

This is a word of tenderness and mercy in the prophets: we fall down, and we get up. Repeat. Human beings and human society are flawed. We miss the mark, things fall apart, we fall down, and we get up. Repeat. Sometimes our actions have natural consequences. When allegiance to power supercedes loyalty to God, things break down. But this is never the end of the story. God is always, always, always trying to draw us back. God is going to help us live into a new way of covenant, by writing it, engraving it, lovingly installing it in our hearts. Some day, some day, we will make it back home. Some day, some day, we will be closer to God's will and God's vision. Someday, justice will roll down like a mighty stream. The days are surely coming, says the Lord.

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We were a people facing exile, witnessing illness and death at scales unknown, experiencing total disruption, confined to their homes, separated from their loved ones, and might we have wondered: where God was? Where was hope? How long would this last?

A year ago, we were a people facing...  
Two weeks, we thought, of disruption.

I remember talking on the phone with someone who had read all the footnotes of the initial public health data. She said, this is going to be more than two weeks. Don't leave any plants in your office.

But I don't think anyone imagined.... 52 or maybe 70 weeks of exile, which seems pretty likely now.

Jeremiah wrote to the leaders in exile, a word of encouragement and challenge...

"to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters... 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."

I wonder what Jeremiah would write to us now, in this metaphorical exile.

I suppose he would ask us to seek the welfare of the city - the welfare of all of our neighbors, particularly those disproportionately impacted by CoVid19.

I suppose he would ask us to settle in, get used to this time, find ways of being useful and ways of being kind.

He would warn us against scapegoating and prejudice, and implore us: don't just survive and return to normal; take care of those around you, that all may survive and thrive. That we might grow, not to what was, but instead toward what we can become. <sup>1</sup>

And I suppose he would ask us to ponder what might have gotten us here: families and neighborhoods and schools already on the brink, pushed too far. Economic disparity, environmental issues, racial injustice.

In the ancient way of thinking, there was direct causality between the actions of a person and their fate and the fate of their children and neighbors. Jeremiah connected the misdeeds of the king and the kingdom to its exile. For our exile today, we don't believe that God sent a virus, we don't believe illness is the punishment for sin, individual or corporate, and we also don't blame a nation or region of people for a virus first discovered within their borders. But we do exist in a system that has made this virus worse for some people than others.

If we are thinking of the welfare of the city, how is this exile a time when we can plan a homecoming that seeks everyone's welfare?

What is the promise that will be written on our hearts?

I think that's the place where the prophetic witness of Jeremiah, writing two and a half millennia ago, speaks to us, a people in a new form of exile.

We have work to do, to live as God would have us live.  
But God is always calling us home.

As Christine Pohl puts it, the "road home [is] shaped by generous and tender care....Wilderness and exile are never the final word; in fact, the final word...is grace upon grace." (Christian Century 2005)

The days are surely coming.

We are in this moment,  
When it feels like we can hear the hopeful words of the prophet,  
The days are surely coming.

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<sup>1</sup> Words from Radici Studios

We are in this moment, when, with hopeful words in our ears and sunnier and warmer days and 100 million doses of vaccines delivered,

Wilderness and exile are never the last word.

The days are surely coming

The days are surely coming, says the Lord.

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.

Though it be 70 years in Babylon,  
Or 70 weeks in CoVid-land,  
God still has a purpose and calling for you, and me.  
God does yet love us.  
God's restoration is on the way.  
The days are surely coming.  
God will bring us back home.

Amen.