

September 15, 2019

Great Expectations

Shepherd's Grace Church

⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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.

⁸For 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, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I 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 29: 6-14)

Last week, we began a four week sermon series entitled *Great Expectations*. As we studied the book of Joshua last week we learned of a group of people being led away from slavery and oppression. We talked about the devastating effects of W kind of bondage on the mind and body of the person enslaved. Those of us who have never experienced this kind of oppression can never fully appreciate the ways it motivates and affects another person. That is why we can never fully comprehend the generational nature of this kind of abuse.

People who experience slavery think differently, act differently and teach their families differently from generation to generation. In part, that explains the differences between people of color in our nation and the slim majority of people who are called white. From generation to generation, different peoples have taught their families from the perspective of their background; from perspectives of slavery or suspicion or superiority. These perspectives have permeated cultures and have colored the views of those cultures right up to this moment.

Great expectations are not expected to eradicate cultural stereotypes, however they do help us see beyond the moment and imagine a world filled with possibilities. In this world, we can begin to look past the problems of today and think of the options for tomorrow.

Joshua told us about what it means to be strong and courageous. His message offered us the possibility that God's word can and will guide us to great places. Our great expectation is that God will guide and God's great expectation is that we will remember God's word, holding onto it as our guide. The promise is that when we do this, we will be successful and prosperous.

We, on the other hand learn that our prosperity and success are irrevocably intertwined with God's message to us. Our strength comes not by ourselves and not solely at the hand of God but when we work in concert with God, seeking God's will and willingly working to accomplish the tasks God invites us to. The link in all of this great expectation is that we will be inseparable from God. God will be with us wherever we go.

We see this carried out as the people are commanded to gather provision. Remember this is the second generation of Jewish people wandering in the wilderness. They never had to provide for themselves as their fathers and mothers did in Egypt. They have always just stepped outside their tents and gathered manna that was provided for them. In the evening, they hunted quail (and here I use the term hunted loosely...the quail were right there at the edge of camp!) and ate enough to be filled.

Now, they are ordered to gather their provisions and prepare themselves. No doubt, the request would have filled them with great excitement. The possibility of the new is often a great source of excitement. The possibility of the new is frequently a source of fear as well.

This group of people would have experienced both of these feelings as they responded to Joshua's command. How do you respond to the new? Do you react with boldness and confidence or do you instead react with a tentative reluctance to change. Great expectation must call us to great change. Doing things the same way over and over will only yield the same results.

So, how do we change? This is the week of 9/11, a day etched forever in our collective memory as well as the memory of most adults in the United States. It is an event that defines us, much like slavery defines us.

Does that statement surprise you? Think for just a moment. An attack of the magnitude of 9/11 enslaves the minds and orders the fears of the people impacted. All of us who are adults in this nation were impacted. We remember the three day embargo on all air traffic. We noticed the silence in our skies, a silence that stifled our freedom, a silence that stilled our very abilities to live and move in ways to which we were accustomed! For a time, we were enslaved to the restrictions imposed on us, not by our government, but by others who believed it was within their power to impose their will on our lives.

This slavery, to be sure was short lived and while we can reflect upon it as an imposition on our freedom, we still cannot conceive it as a permanent condition of our lifestyle and culture. It did not define us and it does not define us, but it does remind us that people deserve to be free to make their own choices and live with the consequences of those choices. When others interfere with those basic rights, they are living into an immorality that borders on the obscene.

As we think of the great expectations we have of ourselves, we must remember the obscenity of imposing our will upon others and of craving the power that would allow such an imposition.

That great expectation is the least we can do as we consider our relationship with other people. But what about that expectation as we imagine our lives in relationship with God? The people of Israel were confronted with that question as they found themselves the victims of decisions they made with respect to their own relationship with God.

The people found themselves exiled and confronted with a slavery that was of their own making. Because of their own unwillingness to hold the word of God in their mouths and meditate on it day and night...because of their unwillingness to be strong and courageous in the face of other religious influences in their culture, the land that had been given to them was in effect, taken away from them. Historically, it was taken by the Babylonians but theologically, it was taken by God.

In Isaiah 39, the message is revealed to the Israelite King that the land will be taken because the people did not, had not and would not keep the commands of the Lord with regard to religious practice and care for widows and orphans. Isaiah makes it known that that the land will not be taken in the time of the current King but rather at a later date.

This morning, we meet the Israelites at that later date, approximately 578 B.C.. The exile is already underway and many of the prominent priests and government officials find themselves ousted and marched to a place far from their homes and possessions. They are confused and confounded at the prospect of being dislodged in such an unseemly manner.

The passage of Jeremiah we are considering this morning invites us to know that God has carried out God's promise (as God always does) and is now providing instruction to the people about what they are to do in the place in which they find themselves. The simple fact that God is still communicating with the people of Israel provides for us two expectations.

First, we can expect that God keeps God's promises. God promised the people that because they did not obey his word, they would be sent into exile. Today, we read that this has taken place. When God tells us that something is going to happen, it is going to happen. God may hate doing what God has to do, but God will do what God says.

God's actions are filled with grace and mercy but they are also filled with justice. Justice demands that actions always have consequences. When human actions are laudable, the consequences are pleasant. When human actions are evil or hurtful, unfortunately so are the consequences.

In this case, the consequences are as a result of the people's failure to care for the needy among them and the result is to put them in a place where they will be in need. The strange land in which they find themselves leaves them without their possessions, the comfort of their homes and in most ways, cut off from the customs, traditions, rituals and knowledge to which they have become accustomed.

The second expectation we discover in God's plan to exile the people is that God will never leave or forsake us. Even though God sends God's people into exile in Babylon, God does go with them. God gets them settled in, provides basic levels of protection

and safety for them and establishes ground rules for their actions. God does not leave them stranded.

Instead, God communicates through the prophet Jeremiah that the people are to settle in. In the verse just before our reading today, God tells them to build houses. This indicates a certain permanency to their situation. When they wandered in the wilderness, God did not have them build permanent structures. God himself traveled with them and resided in a tent just like his chosen people.

In this instance however, God is communicating a lengthy stay...a long time for the people to contemplate their sin and the consequence of their action. (If you were in church for this message, you know that I used a video from a 9/11 presentation to demonstrate in a more dramatic fashion the way this communication might have looked to the Israelites. I will attach a link at the end of this message that will take you to the youtube presentation of that video.)

Imagine a situation where your world is turned upside down. Where everything changes in an instant and where you are forced to live an entirely different life. For me, the first part of that imagining would be darkness. I would be looking for a path, a light that might guide me to places of familiarity. I imagine that in the darkness, I might stumble and struggle. I imagine that the path would be wandering and crooked as I tried to find my way.

This week, as we remember 9/11, my recollection of the first news of that attack was that same kind of darkness...a kind of total confusion. I sense of disbelief. Our world, a world I thought I knew was suddenly removed from us and the future that seemed so certain only a few moments before was now shrouded in uncertainty.

Jeremiah told the people as they stood on the precipice of certain disaster that they were to move onto a path which must have looked very crooked to them. He shared God's words from the edge of the path. Take wives, have sons and daughters, take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so that they may have sons and daughters. Move on with your lives from this point. There is no turning back.

What God was saying to the exiles, God is also saying to us. In a sense, we are exiles also. We are 18 years removed from 9/11 but we are still exiled to a situation that is very different from the one we knew prior to that attack. If anyone has traveled by airplane, they know that. Security checks that are intensified to the point of greater security but also to invasions of some of our privacy.

We have willingly sacrificed privacy for security. We have given up our freedom to move about carrying whatever we might want to carry in order to be certain that others cannot carry whatever they want. We just think it is common sense that when others can harm us, their ability to do harm should be restricted to the greatest degree possible.

Interestingly, this same argument can be made by those wanting greater restriction on firearms in this country. The proponents of unlimited or currently slightly restricted gun

access argue that to surrender to greater restriction invades privacy and violates our rights.

Those who argue on the other side argue that restriction of the law-abiding is also restriction of the criminal. The sacrifice of some privacy is necessary to protect the innocent from those who would perpetrate violent crimes against them.

The struggle is perpetual and as we hear in Jeremiah today, has been ongoing for centuries. For those of us living in a post 9/11 world, the struggle is to recognize that this is where we are.

Jeremiah would argue that this was and is exactly the point God is making when he instructs his people to create families and homes in the country to which they have been exiled. Simplified, the argument is that "wherever you go, that is where you are." It is an argument that reminds us that many of us, if not most of us are not in exactly the place we would like to be. Some are exiles of 9/11, some are exiles of relationship problems, some are exiles of financial difficulty. Whatever your struggle, you and I are not where we would ideally like to be.

God says to the Israelites and to us, get used to it. You are where you are. Many of you are there as a consequence of the decisions of others that have affected your lives. Some are there as a consequence of the decisions you have made. Regardless, live your life where you are! Live your life to the fullest right where you are. You may feel like this is a sacrifice but live your life to the best of your ability.

Support the community you live in, Jeremiah says. Get involved. Work for the welfare of the world that surrounds you. Be a part of the government, the business community, the church family. Do all you can to insure the welfare of the place where you live because the welfare there is directly tied to your welfare.

In the second part of the video I have linked, we see people living and moving and going on about their business. Some are connected, some just go through the motions. Those who are connected invite a full and vital life. Those just going through the motions find themselves suddenly under attack. At once, those involved, involve themselves more deeply.

They act and respond when the community is attacked. They do not care if we have been involved or if we have stood on the sidelines. They care that there is an attack on their world and they want to do what they can to help. This is God's encouragement of us. God's expectation is that we get involved.

Jeremiah reminds those of us who are involved to beware that others will be working for their own selfish interests. He says beware of the false prophets, those who would speak for their own gain and not for Me! God says he did not send them. We should not listen to them.

Who are those working for their own interests in your world today? Are they members of the local, state or national government? Perhaps, however probably those who are

speaking to you are much closer to you. Perhaps they are friends or family or even church members who want you to choose the easiest course of action in your daily life.

The ones I find speaking falsely are those who tell us that you should want to spend our resources on newer, nicer, bigger, better things. They present these things wrapped in physical beauty or financial gain. We are enticed because all of us would like to have the worldly things our friends and neighbors have...and what harm can there be in that?

The answer lies in the reason we find ourselves exiled. God exiled the Hebrew people for their failure to provide for the needs of those who could not provide for themselves. God exiled the Hebrew people for failure to care for the widow and the orphan. See Isaiah 1.

In our quest for bigger and better we have listened to the prophets of our time and have ignored the cost of our quest. The cost is often not to us. The cost is to those who cannot keep up, cannot provide for themselves.

There is nothing wrong with having nice things but when our neighbor sits hungry in the home they live in and we do nothing about it, we have failed at fulfilling God's prophecy. When our neighbor has their utilities shut off because they lost their job and we do nothing to aid or assist then we have failed at fulfilling God's prophecy. When our neighbor stands outside the door to our church and cries out for food and we do nothing to aid or assist then we have failed at fulfilling God's prophecy. When we do nothing as we see our neighbor sleeping in the street, then we have failed in fulfilling God's prophecy. "If we are not where we are, then we are nowhere!" As Jeremiah says, our welfare is tied to the welfare of the place in which we live and God's expectation is for us to get involved.

In another segment of the video, we see first responders as they react to the reality of exile. People who were working in the places they expected to be were suddenly displaced and in danger. These first responders got involved and risked everything, even their lives. They recognized that their lives and welfare were tied to the lives and welfare of those to whom they were responding.

Our response is God's expectation. It should also be our expectation even if we are responding from a place where we do not want to be. Whether we are free to respond because we are called, or we are exiled and find ourselves thrust into situations, we are where we are!

The consequences of our actions have and will continue to define the locus of our lives. All of our decisions have brought us to this moment and we are benefitted in this moment only if we are called to action. This call does not change the consequences of our decision, it only serves to help us move on, to live. God's great expectation is that we live!

This living is in the face of our consequences as God makes known to the Hebrew people today. He says that Babylon will occupy their land and impose His exile for 70 years. This is no doubt, a great disappointment to the exiles. 70 years means that most of them will never be allowed to return to that from which they were exiled.

The reality is that we never fully return from exile. We can come back but things will have changed. Things will be different. Our exile will forever influence our lives. We may be frustrated that 9/11 changed our airport security and many other elements that exiled us from our simpler and perhaps gentler past, however we cannot deny it and we cannot escape it. We are called, dare I say, expected to live it. This is where we are.

God promises that God will return and bring us back to the land, back to the places that are familiar, however we must recognize that that familiarity will no longer be ours. Everything in our past has been changed as well. Our past is changed to a future that mirrors our current reality.

God's promise brings us to one of the most quoted passages of scripture in the Bible today. "Surely I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to bring you to harm...plans for a future with hope." We want to cling to this promise. We would like to believe that God will lift us out of the hell we find ourselves in and restore us to a glamorous and glorious place with no more pain, no more suffering, no more struggle or sorrow!

The reality, however is that this side of eternity, that place does not exist. Ultimately God will share with us that reality but in this life, God's plans for us are not a utopia...they are for a reality right where we are. God's plans are to prosper us not in a "Somewhere Else" but to prosper us in the place where we are.

God expects us to get involved where we are and work where we are and the plan he has for us is not somewhere else but really, right here...right here in this family; in this city, in this state, in this nation...in this church. God doesn't give us the opportunity to just quit because we do not like where we are. God expects us to work for His kingdom right where we are.

His plans are to prosper us here. His plans are to grow us here. His plans are to love us here. God's plans are for our future and that future is with hope but it is right here.

So often we want to lift a verse from the Bible and make it fit what we would like it to say. God's expectation is that we study the whole of the word. We learned that from the prophet Joshua. We are to keep it in our mouth and never let it depart from our lips and meditate on it day and night...all of it. Then we will be prosperous and then we will be successful. Right where we are!

Our expectation is that God will be with us wherever we go!

An interesting activity that many scholars attribute to this exile is that this place...this Babylon is the place where the Bible was first written down. It is the place where the people of Israel had a chance to listen to and remember all the stories given them in oral tradition and write them down.

Their writing is no doubt defined by their experience in exile. I believe a careful reading of the Bible reflects this very situation, and in that reflection, gives us confidence to make the most of the situations we find ourselves in.

Our expectation lines up with God's expectation when we work where we are and do the things that prosper the places where we live and move and have our being. Amen!