“Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange New Land”

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

October 9, 2016

Focus scripture: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 and Psalm 137: 1, 4

This week we pick up the story, again, of the people of Israel who were captured, and taken in exile to the city of Babylon, in the sixth century BCE. The Babylonian empire was spreading far and wide, and had over powered Jerusalem. As many 10,000 Israelites were exiled in Babylon. The psalm we read together last week (#137), was written out of the exiles’ experience. It speaks of their despair at being displaced far from home, and their grief at being separated from Mount Zion, in Jerusalem. This was the sacred place where they encountered God.

The exiles cried: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” And the exiles asked:

“… How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

The passage we read today, from the book of Jeremiah, takes a different tone. It is a letter, sent by Jeremiah, who is still in Jerusalem, to the exiles in Babylon. It is as if this passage is chosen to give an answer to the question posed by the psalm.

The psalm and the letter from Jeremiah represent two recurrent strands of understanding God, in the Hebrew Bible.

The first strand may be the most familiar: the Israelites, as God’s chosen people, are set apart. In order to maintain their monotheistic beliefs, and religious practices, they are to maintain their strong Jewish identity. They are to keep separate and keep kosher, they are to keep the Sabbath and keep the commandments. As people of God, they are different, they are not to intermingle with those of other groups who practice pagan religions. They are certainly not expected to pray for the welfare of their enemies!

But another strand of understanding is creeping in here in Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah challenges another prophet, named Hananiah, who promises that the exiles will be quickly returned to Jerusalem. Jeremiah, says that the people are going to be in Babylon for the long haul. Long enough to marry their children to Babylonians, and have grandchildren. Seventy years!

Jeremiah’s message from God is that they are to settle in, build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the produce. They are to contribute to the community.

And, here’s the shocker …they are to pray for the welfare of the ones who took them captive. Yes, pray for their own captors, their enemies! This how they are to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.

I wonder how this went down, with these homesick people. When the Israelites were at home in Judah, they didn’t need to worry about threats to their identity. The observance of their religion was built into their daily lives. Babylon was different. Perhaps they worried that their children would be tempted by the colorful offerings of the pagan temples and the lifestyle offered by the superpower Babylon. This is a common concern among displaced people.

But, Jeremiah’s letter tells the Israelites something they never understood before. God is not only present in Jerusalem, on mount Zion, in the temple. God is with them wherever they go.

The fact is that even when people are not physically displaced, often the home territory changes under their feet. And this is deeply unsettling. I believe that is what has happened here in Wollaston and also in the surrounding culture, over the past generation.

How is it that we are in different the territory, here, these days?

Does this landscape look different from the landscape of your childhood?

Are our neighbors different?

Do they have different religious practices, or none at all?

Are the stores where you used to shop now closed down?

Are the old meeting and gathering places now deserted?

Those of us in the older generations may very well feel displaced

in our own homes and our own neighborhoods. When we come into church, and look around at how different things look now, it may be struggle to sing the Lord’s song.

Of course, you don’t have to be of the older generation to experience displacement. The 4 D’s: death, divorce, displacement or disaster, can be experienced at any age. I learned recently that when a church gets a new visitor, it’s more than likely for one of these four reasons.

That is, a person will most often seek out a new church when they’ve experience a major life change:

* they’ve lost a loved one;
* they’ve gone through separation or divorce
* they’ve move home to a new neighborhood;
* they’ve recently experienced some other major upheaval.

Each of these things is a kind of displacement, or even exile. People experiencing one of the 4 D’s find themselves in new and unexpected territory. This often means that they are looking for connection or a place to put their feet firmly on the ground.

It is important that we are on the lookout for these people in our community, and that we invite them to find connection with us, and with the Holy One, in our community of faith.

One time I felt displaced was the time when I was doing my “border crossing” during seminary. The idea of a border crossing is that students go to a places where people live in very different situation from themselves. The student lives the alongside the community they visit for a time, eating their food, getting up close and personal.

I did my Border Crossing by working and studying, two days per week at the Hebrew Seniorlife Center in Roslindale. Spending a couple of days a week at a nursing home in greater Boston may not seem to be so much of a border crossing. And it was practically speaking, very easy for me to do. But once I began, I realized the nature of the borders I would be crossing, and they were many.

I would be in new territory studying with mainly Jewish students, which gave me a real appreciation for what it feels like to be the religious “outsider”. Then there were the residents I was ministering to. Many were Jewish, some were immigrants, or had been born to immigrants. Most were suffering from dementia, and all were advanced in age. But no matter where they had come from, they each had their own feeling of displacement having come to the residential center.

This was new territory for them, after being used to leading their own independent lives, in neighborhoods where they had lived for many years. Coming into residential care felt like displacement, it felt like exile.

My task was to connect with these elders, and in some cases to help them settle in. I was to minister to their spiritual health. This included their sense of identity, belonging, reconciliation, forgiveness, and trust. These are hard things to maintain, in strange place, particularly for people who are even feeling displaced in their own bodies, by dementia and other diseases.

One occasion when I hadn’t been working there long, my supervisor told me there was a new woman on the unit, who was close to the end of her life. She was quite isolated. Could I add her to my list of visits?

I wanted to be sure to get to her, so later that afternoon I made my way to this woman’s room at the end of the hallway. Her brain was addled from the disease she was suffering and the treatments she had received. She struggled to communicate with the nursing staff and the other patients. It seemed that they had decided to leave her alone.

In her stark room there were a few pictures of good-looking well-dressed family members. But it seemed they, also, at least on that day, had decided to leave her alone. And so she looked up to me from the hospital bed, and threw her arms up in despair,

“I never expected to end up like this!” she cried.

After we had sat for a while, the darkness of the evening was drawing in. I offered to say a blessing for her. I felt sadly inadequate. As a Jewish patient she deserved a well-spoken Hebrew blessing, but that was beyond me.

I pulled out my booklet of Jewish blessings, and read in English.

Our eyes met and hers welled with tears. Even as the words were less than traditional, the feeling that passed between us was filled with a holy presence. “Thank you,” she said, “thank you for being here, thank you for coming.” I touched her hand good bye. In our mutual displacement we had connected at a profound level. On the drive home, I prayed “thank you, Go, for this strange new place, where your presence was palpable. Thank you for allowing me to sing your song in a strange place”

Centuries later, Jesus lived in Judea, in the same land the exiles had been taken from. But, this time the land was occupied by another foreign empire: Rome. Pagan temples were constructed in the land. The Romans insisted on loyalty to Caesar, over the one God of the Israelites.

Jesus’ message to the people was much the same as Jeremiah’s letter all those centuries before: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Even as the land was being transformed into something quite foreign, Jesus saw the opportunity to spread the love of God to the occupying forces. He ministered to a Roman Centurion, who asked for healing for his servant. His vision was for the Kingdom of God to all the earth: a wonderful, inclusive table fellowship for all of humanity.

For this is the way God came to us. God came into the world as Jesus of Nazareth, displaced and exiled in his own land.

And through the life of Jesus, God sought out the exiled and the captors alike, bringing them together in their sense of mutual displacement.

I pray that we may we always feel displaced, until we have reached out to all the exiled people on the earth, and sought their welfare. For, this is how we will sing the Lord’s song in a strange new land.

Amen