

Thriving in Exile

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 13 October 2019

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; II Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.

“Click your heels together three times and say, ‘There’s no place like home,’ and you’ll be there.”

The Wizard of Oz is all about the desire to return home. Dorothy found herself in exile in a strange and colorful place. She made new friends and had great adventures but what she really wanted was to go back to Kansas. She had run away from home. Now she wanted more than anything to go back. The Wizard she thought would be able to help her turned out to be a carnival worker, also from Kansas. He offered to take her back in his balloon, but the balloon launched without her. Finally, Glinda told her the ruby slippers had the power to take her back.

So Dorothy clicked her heels and said, join me, “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”

The people of Judah also wanted more than anything to go home. They were prisoners of war, trapped in exile in Babylon. They did not like being there. We heard their psalm of revenge last week. Psalm 137. “Happy the one who pays you back for what you have done for us.” They hoped the prophet would say, “Hold on, friends. It won’t be long now. Just a little longer.” In fact, another prophet was saying just that. Hananiah had told the exiles, that the Lord had told him, “Within two years I will bring back all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.” (Jeremiah 28:3-4). And to demonstrate his point, when he said the words, “I will break the yoke,” he took the yoke off Jeremiah’s neck. Jeremiah had a flair for the dramatic. He had been wearing a yoke around his neck as a symbol of their captivity. Hananiah took the yoke and broke it.

Jeremiah said to Hananiah in so many words, “Great. I hope it’s true. I hope you’re right, and if you are we’ll soon be free.” But then the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. “Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them!” There would be no easy out. The people were going to be in Babylon a long, long time.

So Jeremiah wrote a letter to the people. We read part of it today. Jeremiah said, in so many words, “Sorry folks. This won’t be over soon.” “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . . 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.”

Do you hear how astonishing that advice is? Thus says the Lord, I know you do not want to be where you are. In fact, this is the last place in the world you ever wanted to be. But there is nothing you can do. So try to make the best of it.

Incidentally, a later verse in this letter may be familiar to some of you. We often read it on graduation cards or at times when we are excited about someone’s future. Jeremiah 29:11 – “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.” We read it as a hopeful, happy promise. But it comes from this time of desperation. It belongs on sympathy cards or cancer

diagnosis cards or I'm sorry you lost your job cards or unexpected divorce cards. It's the word of the Lord to people who have lost their future. All will be well. Different. You may not like it. But all will be well.

Our Tuesday study group is currently discussing the book *Holy Envy*. It is a memoir by Barbara Brown Taylor about her encounters with different world religions through the classes and students she taught. We discussed her chapter on Buddhism this week. The Buddha was a wealthy prince who set out on a quest to understand human suffering and how to have peace in spite of life's pain. After many attempts, he finally became enlightened. He realized much suffering and pain come from attachment and desire. We want what we do not have, or we want to be somewhere else, or we want others to behave differently or we want something that happened not to have happened. We suffer in the wanting. The things we want may or may not happen. We have no control over them. The only thing we can really control is ourselves. So the Buddha taught people to hold life loosely, to let go of the desire to control outcomes or others, in order to find peace.

A lot of people pray something very similar every day. *God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Jeremiah and the Buddha lived around the same time in different parts of the world. Jeremiah's wisdom was similar to the Buddha's in this case. Jeremiah said to the exiles, "You are not going home any time soon. You cannot change that reality. What you can change is your attitude about this place. You can make the place where you don't want to be your home."

I wonder if the man who came back to thank Jesus had already learned this wisdom. It is interesting that he was a Samaritan. Jesus was in the region between Samaria and Galilee, so the man was not that far from home physically. But if it is true that Galileans tended to treat Samaritans as second-class citizens, he was right on the border where those interactions most often occurred. Plus, he had a skin condition that isolated him from others. We would call that intersectionality today. The man was doubly oppressed. Yet he must have learned to practice contentment long before he met Jesus that day. The other nine were so tormented by their disease as soon as they were set free they ran off, ready to put that whole life behind them. This man had peace. This man did not need to race off to build a new life right away. He could pause and reflect and give thanks.

I have the joy of spending most Wednesday mornings with St. Thomas Day School students. Ruth Nichols and I meet them here for chapel. We light a candle and sing Be Still and Know that I am God. Then we pray. In our opening prayer we usually give thanks for things that start with the letter of the week. Either this week or last the letter was P. We thanked God for penguins, puppies, popsicles, and people. And I didn't say it, but I hoped we could also teach them to thank God for problems and pain and perplexity. Or if not thank God for struggles at least learn to be thankful and open in the midst of the struggles. We want all children, young ones and old ones, to stay resilient, eyes wide to the world, happy to be wherever they are.

At the end of Wizard of Oz, Dorothy did click her heels together. Suddenly, whoosh, she was back in monochrome Kansas. She woke up and tried to explain to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry where she was. "I remember that some of it wasn't very nice. But most of it was beautiful. But just the same all I kept saying to everybody was I want to go home. . . . Oh Auntie Em, there's no place like home!" The End.

However, I understand it, the book version is different. It's not just that the slippers are silver rather than ruby. Dorothy returns home to Kansas at the end of book one. But in Frank L. Baum's 13 subsequent books about Oz, Dorothy returns to Oz several times. She also travels to Australia and California. In book 6, she, Auntie Em, and Uncle Henry come to live in Oz permanently. In later books, she travels all over the Land of Oz. She gets settled in her new home, in the place she wanted to leave. She has many exciting adventures there.

The reason is because Dorothy stopped pining for a somewhere over the rainbow. Instead, she learned - "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with."

You may be in some kind of exile right now. Most of us are at one time or another. You may be dealing with a diagnosis or struggling to make ends meet or living with grief or absorbing bad news or worried about someone you love or frustrated with the state of the world or navigating some new place you never expected to be. Even being here is a kind of exile for some. Many of us came to the Episcopal Church because we felt like we no longer belonged some other place.

Hear the Word of the Lord to people in another exile long ago. Live and multiply and be as fruitful as you can be wherever you are. Seek the welfare of the place and people around you. In their welfare you will find your welfare.

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works. Amen.

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