

Life in Babylon

Message #1 in the series "Daniel – More than a Lion's Den"

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I invite you to open your Bibles up to the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah Chapter 29. As we lead into this brand-new message series, I want to share with you a very important word of Introduction Jeremiah Chapter 29 starting in verse one.



"This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." [Jeremiah 29:1-14 NIV].

Will you pray with me?

Oh, Lord, God, open your word to us and open us to your word. Teach us, Lord, what You would have us learn as You can form our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. All of this, Lord, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sociologist John Tyson recently wrote that there are three major shifts that have been happening in our culture. Cultural shifts significant both for the Church of Jesus Christ and for the global community. First, he says that there is a shift for Christians moving from the majority to the minority. What does that look like? In basic statistics, according to what he has discovered as a sociologist, currently, roughly 65 percent

of Americans state today that they believe in Jesus. That's a pretty nice number, given what it could be. 65 percent and 49 percent of that 65 are classified as millennials. Millennials are those who were born in 1981 through 1996, and what John Tyson is indicating is that 49 percent of millennials born in those age ranges still believe in Jesus. That, too, is not a surprise, and that's a good relative figure. The figure that disturbs me and disturbs John Tyson in his rendition of these statistics is about the next generation, the generation born between 1997 and 2012. This particular generation, only 10 percent say that they believe in Jesus. 10 percent. So quickly, what we are learning, sociologically speaking, is that there is a cultural shift where Christianity is on the move from the majority to the minority. There is another culture shift, according to John Tyson, and that is from honor to shame. At one point, it was honorable to be connected to a church and to be a person of great Christian faith, politics, politicians, judges, you know, all of the individuals that we would normally raise up in our communities as being of good influence. To know that these were persons of faith who attended their faith communities was a very honorable thing.

In our culture today, we are quickly moving to the point where being a Christian as almost being shamed. In fact, more and more Christians who stand up for what they believe are being canceled in our culture, and there is another shift in our culture, from tolerance to hostility. For many, many generations, it was clear that our freedom and tolerance of faith was a heartbeat and a hallmark of who we were and are in this country. But there is a shift that has been happening slowly but progressively a shift from tolerance to hostility. Christianity has become a threat in many respects, according to John Tyson, to the flourishing of secular liberalism within what has been labeled as a post Christian world. So, the interesting thing for us to take away from what John Tyson is bringing to the table and why it's important for us, especially in the midst of our day when we are facing the potential for being on the brink of World War 3 and all of what has been happening over the past two years of a pandemic and prior to that leading into the pandemic and still very prevalent now. In the midst of this culture of animosity, there is a truth that goes underneath it all and reminds us that not much in the human condition has changed in millennia. What is that truth? Culture shifts when people act differently than the way they used to. Culture shifts when people act differently than the way they used to. Why is that such a surprise to us, right?

Culture, by definition, is what we, the people make it. So, we cannot stand on the sidelines of what's happening in our world, within our communities, even within our churches, and blame anyone because in fact, the conditions are the way they are because we the people have made it that way, or we have at least tolerated it. John Wesley was famous to quote, and we don't know if he specifically said this, but he is named as the one who said this, is that what one generation tolerates the next generation embraces. Culture shifts when people act differently than the way they used to. Hold on to that for a brief moment. Today is all about giving introduction to the Lenten series that we are focusing in on in the Book of Daniel. But I do want to pause and put it into a larger context for us. As I have prayed through what's been going on in our culture and what is, I think, the next step for us here at St. Paul's Church and within our local community of Elizabethtown, I have felt on my heart and in my spirit that it is important for us to declare this year, 2022 as the year to rebuild. Certainly, the pandemic over the past two years has challenged all of us. It clearly has challenged our global community, and there is our great division among churches and communities on issues of masks and vaccinations and all of that. That is from my perspective, but symptomatic of something that is bigger and something that is more prevalent. And I think it's time for us, rather than staying stuck in those conversations that lead us nowhere, is to make a decision to move forward, to move forward in faith, believing with all of our hearts that God is not surprised by the human condition that he sees played out on here, planet Earth. And God is waiting for the church that he inaugurated to rise up and be the ambassadors of hope that he has designed us to be.

So, we here at St. Paul's are going to take up that challenge, to take up that baton and to spend our time rebuilding. What does that mean? It means that if in fact culture shifts when people act differently than the way that we used to, we are going to start acting differently and "be the change," to quote Gandhi, "to be

the change that we want to see." What does that mean for us in practical terms in this coming shift that we are going to build? I think we need to relearn a few things. First, I think we need to relearn empathy. Now I know I just talked about empathy two weeks ago. Please, if you missed that discussion, look it up online in the sermon archives. Just two weeks ago, we compared sympathy and empathy. Empathy is something that we need to move towards. It gives us the ability to walk in the shoes of others, and it gives us the capacity to listen, to truly listen. Something that we have forgotten how to do. Doesn't mean that we have to agree with everyone. Goodness knows, we're not going to agree on everything, nor do we want to. But we do need to love, and love comes first through honoring one another in the act of listening.

Also, we need to relearn the value of gathering together in group life, both large and small. I know that we have reached a point, culturally speaking, where it is easier for us not to come to church for worship. For many of us, perhaps we're still anxious about re-gathering and please know that I honor that anxiety. Do what you need to do. But also, we are aware, hear me and love me when I say this, that there are those among us in churches all over this country, who have gotten to the point of apathy. The rhythm of coming to church has been broken, and it's quite easy to just sit in our jammies in front of the TV with our cup of coffee and worship passively, sometimes actively, but to worship from a distance, and we're doing that mostly because we have become indifferent. We're expecting something and we don't know what we expect.

Apathy and indifference is a danger. It's a danger to our faith journey. So, we need to relearn the value. We also need to relearn the value of gathering in small groups. So, we are committed here to reboot our huddles and our grow groups and reengage the process of moving smaller, so that we may grow with one another. We also need to relearn relational intimacy. And by this folks, I do not mean sex. We have spent two years in social distancing, and that has become our norm. I think we need to honor and respect what social distancing was designed for and we need to turn now towards each other and move towards the connectability that defines the community of faith. I think we also need to relearn forgiveness. We have become a community, not just here in Elizabethtown, but globally, where we're so easily offended and we're so quick to offend. And we have to remember the number one principle second, only to love that Jesus teaches us by the cross. We need to approach one another and model forgiveness and also receive forgiveness.

We also need to relearn how to stand calmly in the midst of what is known as dialectical tension. That's where two competing values both good perhaps from our own perspectives, are trying to occupy the same space at the same time. Any time that happens, there's bound to be differences of opinions or differences or even clashes of values. And we as the body of Jesus Christ, we need to learn again, now with the full armor of God to stand calmly in the midst of that tension. Closely linked this we need to learn relearn how to move from post-traumatic stress to modeling hope. We're going to talk more about that in upcoming weeks and months. I think I know that each and every one of us may have triggers based on what we've been through, but we believe in a God of the impossible and that God has called us to be ambassadors of hope. We need to relearn how to do that, and we need to relearn how to define our lives by what we believe. And that is the one that I want to start with. That is what the book of Daniel is all about. And that is our plan when we talk about Daniel being more than a lion's den.

Certainly, from the young age, for many of us, we learned the stories of Daniel and we reveled in those stories of courage and faith. The Book of Daniel is filled with so much more than just a lion's den. We're going to dive into that starting next Sunday and look clearly at the lessons that I think are very much appropriate for today's world. But let me give you just a few parameters for that study to introduce us. First, in this series, I'm going to do my best to look at both scripture and our cultural context, a process, known as exegesis. It's for those of you who do not know that word in simple terms, it's doing what I taught us last summer in the observation, interpretation, and application process. That's what exegesis is in

simple terms. I'm going to do observation, interpretation, and application both to the biblical text as well as to our culture. And I'm going to seek to connect the dots because I believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is embedded in this Old Testament book of Daniel, and its good news that we need to hear today.

I also want to let you know that I'm going to say some things in this series that you will agree with and I'm going to say some things that you will not agree with. You need to know that I do not want to inadvertently offend anyone, which must mean that I will advertently offend some. So, any offense that I perpetrate in the words that I share are only offensive to the receiver. Not from the giver. It is not my goal to offend. It is my goal to move us off our comfort zone. And to challenge us to grow in faith, so if you disagree with me, that's fine. Go into the scriptures and engage what God is doing so that together we grow because that is my agenda.

Finally, I am not going to be taking political sides. Why is that an important statement? The Book of Daniel is filled with opportunities for us to assume that that is written from a political perspective. How do I know that? People are doing that all the time. They're engaging in politics and they're pointing to scriptures. You need to know that I am not building the series on a political agenda. I do not take political sides from this vantage point. So, if you hear anything that I say is political that says something about you, not me. OK? Did I do one of those inadvertent offensive things just now? What I am going to be doing as I am going to be teaching us the way of the exile. Because I believe that we are facing in our culture today another season of exile, but it's not what you think. I want to whet your appetite very, very quickly because we don't have time today, and I knew that by setting the stage.

Jeremiah warned the people that an exile was coming, and he warned them repeatedly and the heartbeat of God that was pulsing in his words, he was pleading with the people of Judah and Jerusalem to turn from their ways because there would be a consequence. And prophetically, he announced that there would be a judgment and that they would be exiled. And what did they do? They ignored him. They treated him badly. They exiled him for a season because they did not want to hear this challenge to their status quo. I'm not spending any amount of time in this passage, I just want to draw your attention to a few words. So let me read it again with you,

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the Prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving, notice the word surviving elders of the exiles. That word is very important because whether we realize it or not, the exile was a painful, violent process. People lost their lives. Imagine what the Ukrainians are going through as people are fleeing, fleeing their homes, fleeing their lands, fleeing everything that they knew. And now increase that tenfold.

"To the surviving elders of the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the people who never can had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon."

We're going to be talking a little bit more about Babylon in this series. A series that will help shape out the metaphor that Babylon represents. For those of you who want to dabble a little in advance, Babylon is rooted in the Book of Genesis Chapter 11 and the Tower of Babel. The Tower of Babel is where we get the first picture of how humanity wants to corporately rebel against God. That plays itself out in what Babylon represents, thus, says the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile as Pastor Matt shared, this is an act of God. At no point, does King Nebuchadnezzar have the upper hand. Keep that in mind as we enter into this series. Whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, build houses and live in them plant gardens and eat their produce. In other words, settle in. You're going to be here for a while. 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. That word is very important and do not decrease but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and prayed to the

Lord on its behalf for in its welfare. You will find your welfare. We're actually going to come back to that verse in another series that's coming after this one. The art of neighboring. We're going to be delving into what does it mean for us to do exactly that within the Elizabethtown area. And then he continues to write for us, says the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel. Do not let your profits in your designers who are among you deceive you and do not listen to the dreams that they dream for. It is a lie that they are professing to you in my name. I did not send them, declares the Lord.

And so, a lot of voices out there that promise big things. And what Jeremiah is clearly saying is everybody's telling you that everything is going to come up smelling rosy. They're lying. This is going to be hard, and there's a point to it all. And you're going to need to learn the point, he says to them. And then he says, for thus, says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, he's announcing in advance,



you're going to be in this for 70 years. I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans for welfare and not free evil to give you a future and a hope that verse we hear all the time, especially at graduations. It's a great verse, but it has a context, and the context is within judgment within exile. God is going to be true to his promises and that God is going to be shot when the people feel the pain of their judgment. They are going to cry out to him, and God says, when you're ready and you seek me, when you truly seek me, you're going to find

me and you're going to discover that I haven't. I haven't been absent at all. I've been with you. So, this like Peter, who reminds us that he's writing to us who are in exile, who reminds us that we live in a season of Babylon. These individual. So, what do you need to relearn? What do I? What do you?

Let's pray together.

God, we give You thanks for the words of hope for your gospel message comes to us as a word, as a message of hope in the midst of the brokenness of the human condition. You did not wait for us to be perfect. You came in the midst of our imperfection. So, remind us, Lord, that we have a job to do, and we are your ambassadors of hope and new life of grace and forgiveness, empower us, Holy Spirit to take that role seriously. As we pray in Jesus' name and all God's people said Amen.