

**Year C—Proper 23**

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalm 111

Luke 17: 11-19

**Seek the Welfare of the City**

The Rev. Nathan Bourne

I'm not a New Englander.  
I'm reminded of that about this time every year,  
When the weather begins to turn,  
And winter threatens to take hold for the next six months.  
Every Sunday of football season,  
When I see people in Tom Brady jerseys  
On their way to or from watching the game,  
I remember that I'm not from here.  
Whenever I stick a foot into the ocean,  
And the shock of cold radiates up my leg,  
I'm acutely aware  
That this is not the place I was born.  
There are some things I will never get used to—  
How fast people talk,  
Calling water fountains “bubblers”  
Snow that doesn't completely melt for five months,  
Water that's never comfortable enough to swim in,  
Spring not starting until June,



Black flies,  
The constant threat of Lyme disease  
Hanging over everything like a pall,  
The obsession with Boston sports teams,  
And The veneration of Dunkin' Donuts—  
Excuse me, Dunkin'.

And then there are the things I miss about the South—  
Crocuses coming up in February,  
A good glass of syrupy sweet tea,  
Pimento cheese,  
Warm smiles and conversations  
With bank tellers, grocery store cashiers,  
And anyone I might interact with,  
Passing hellos from people I've never met before,  
A good bowl of cheese grits,  
Being able to grow kale and other greens year-round,  
Water that's comfortable to swim in,  
And the list goes on.

Over the last five years,  
I've had to adjust to life in a couple new places—  
A part of the country where I never thought I'd end up.  
I've taken comfort in the similarities,  
And have had to navigate the differences  
In order to live as a transplant.



In our first reading,  
Jeremiah is trying to help the Israelites in exile figure out  
How they're supposed to live  
In the land of their Babylonian captors.  
For hundreds of years they lived  
In the land that had been promised to Abraham,  
And then to Moses.  
Their whole identity as a people was connected to that promised land.  
Now they've been forced into exile,  
To live in Babylon,  
Under the rule of a foreign emperor.  
They were marched through the desert over 900 miles,  
And brought to an unfamiliar city.  
They were taken away from everything they knew—  
The places they cared for,  
The communities they were a part of.  
They had no idea how long their captivity would last.

It's to those Israelites in exile that Jeremiah writes.  
He warns them that their captivity will not be brief.  
It's likely that the present generation will not live to see Jerusalem again.  
His words don't offer much comfort,  
But in them there is clarity.  
"Build houses and live in them;  
plant gardens and eat what they produce.  
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."



It's as if he's telling them to prepare for the long haul,  
To make Babylon their home.  
He wants them to grow where they are planted.  
The soils of Babylon will never be the soils of Israel,  
But that's no reason for them to give up.  
In Jeremiah's words,  
There's an underlying confidence  
That this too shall pass,  
That God will not abandon God's people,  
And that with God they can flourish anywhere,  
And in time—  
Not a time of their making,  
But of God's—  
Their children's children will return home,  
To the land that was promised to them.

I will likely never know the experience of true exile.  
Few of us ever will.  
But I think we can relate to that experience on some level.  
There are times in all of our lives  
When we find ourselves on the outside,  
When we're in a place or situation  
That feels unfamiliar,  
Strange,  
Even dangerous.  
That feeling of exile—  
Of being removed from home with no clear way of return,  
Is a reality of life.  
For many of us,



That place from which we are exiled  
May be the safety of our childhood home,  
Or a relationship that fell apart.  
It may be a community we were once part of,  
But where we no longer feel welcome.  
We all have places in our past,  
To where we can never return.

Jeremiah realizes that the Israelites in exile  
Want only to think about their homeland.  
He's worried that they will get stuck in their grief,  
That they will spend their days  
Mourning what was,  
And fail to see the lives ahead of them.  
His letter offers them encouragement  
To live in the present moment.  
Yes, they have lost their homeland,  
But there is another land under their feet  
Where they can live their lives  
In faithfulness to one another and to God.

In times of transition,  
And especially when that transition brings  
A strong sense that something is lost,  
I have a tendency to look inward.  
I want to focus on what is missing.  
I want to think about the first days of the southern spring,  
The warmth of water,  
The familiar trails and woods of the place where I grew up.



The places of my memory  
Feel safer than the unknown of what is new and uncertain.  
Jeremiah's letter encourages  
The Israelites in exile  
Not to fall into that trap.  
He tells them to plant themselves where they are,  
To make the most of their situation,  
And flourish the best they can.

In his letter there is a certainty that God is still at work.  
They may not know the way ahead—  
How long their exile will last or if they will ever return,  
But Jeremiah assures them that they have work to do in Babylon,  
And God will be with them.

Jeremiah closes with these words:

“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.”

They're the most radical of the whole reading.  
Not only are the Israelites to endure their captivity  
And plant themselves in Babylon,  
But they should go as far as to seek the welfare of the city,  
The land of their captivity.

Rather than just look inwards and focus on themselves  
And their hope to someday return home,  
Jeremiah tells the Israelites to look around them,  
To see the land where they are,  
The opportunities to build houses and plant gardens,



And to see themselves as part of a larger community.

“Seek the welfare of the city,  
For in its welfare you will find your welfare.”  
It’s a reminder that wherever we are,  
There is work to do.  
Wherever we are,  
God is present there,  
And there are opportunities to further God’s mission—  
To reach out in love to those who are in need,  
To live in peace and harmony with the people around us.

I wonder what invitation this reading might have for us today.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*,  
The indigenous ecologist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer  
Talks about what it takes to become naturalized to a place,  
Coming to know it intimately and living in harmony with it.  
“Being naturalized to place,”  
She writes,  
“means to live as if this is the land that feeds you,  
as if these are the streams from which you drink,  
that build your body and fill your spirit.  
To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground.  
Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities.  
To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters,  
to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it.  
Because they do.”



In her words I hear echoes of Jeremiah—  
Build houses and live in them,  
Plant gardens and eat what they produce.  
Both Jeremiah and Robin Wall Kimmerer  
Point to the same thing.  
At the end of the day,  
We are all exiles.  
We are all sojourners moving through  
This place.  
The land on which St. John's sits  
Was here long before there was a church,  
And it will be here long after.  
For centuries it was cared for by the Abenaki people  
Who were driven off of it,  
Killed by greed, disease,  
And a hunger for land.  
We are only guests here.  
This land isn't ours.  
It's not for us.  
How we use it  
And how we care for it,  
Should always be to serve more than just the community  
gathered here on Sunday morning.  
“Seek the welfare of the city,  
For in its welfare you will find your welfare.”  
To become naturalized to this place,  
Means coming to know it more deeply.  
Places and communities are always changing.  
There are always opportunities to seek the welfare of the city in new ways.



Our responsibility as stewards and caretakers of this land,  
Is to live in a way that is mindful of the city around us.  
The only way for St. John's to thrive where it's planted,  
Is to reach out in love to all of our neighbors,  
To remember that the welfare of the city is our welfare.  
The health of St. John's,  
Depends on our ability to look beyond our walls,  
To hear and respond to the needs of the city  
And world around us.  
It depends on our ability to know the place where we are,  
And to love it.

Despite all my misgivings about New England,  
I've come to love this place  
And its rocky coastlines,  
The sight of bridges raised,  
And the cranes of the shipyard.  
I love seeing the herons feeding in the early hours  
Of a crisp fall morning,  
The juxtaposition of dark firs  
And paperwhite birches.  
I've learned to embrace winter,  
To enjoy the gift of snow,  
To appreciate its silences,  
And all the opportunities it presents.  
I've discovered that there is no greater joy,  
Than biting into a fresh apple cider donut.  
One of the greatest gifts of my ministry and life here,  
Is to get to sit at Common Table,



And hear the stories of people  
Who occupy every corner of this community—  
To realize some of the complexity of this place,  
And different people's experiences of it.  
I don't know that I'll ever become a New Englander,  
But I've learned to appreciate it,  
To love this place and the people in it.

I've had my own journey of growing where I've been planted,  
As I'm sure we all have.  
Jeremiah's words are an invitation to continue that work,  
As individuals,  
And as a community.  
The story of the Israelites in exile,  
Is a story of God working through people where they are,  
Despite all the odds.  
It's a story of God standing alongside God's people  
Through unspeakable hardships.  
It's a story of God's love for the people  
Of Israel,  
And, through them, the whole world.  
How is God inviting us to work for the welfare of the city?  
How are we meant to plant ourselves here, in this place?  
How can we go beyond these walls,  
To remind ourselves that our flourishing,  
Can never be separated  
From the community around us.