

*Settle Down*  
**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Oct. 13, 2013**  
**Lynn Japinga**

**Texts: Jer. 29: 1, 4-11**  
**II Tim 2:8-15**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

[Intro to OT text: In 597 BC the nation of Israel was invaded by Babylon and many of the Israelites were carried off to Babylon where they lived in exile. It was as if the Canadians came and invaded Michigan and carried us all off to Winnipeg. In the chapter before the one we are reading, the prophet Hananiah promised that in two years this would all be over and the exiles would be home. Jeremiah had a very different interpretation of God's intentions.]

Jeremiah's advice in the Old Testament lesson seems innocuous enough. Settle down. Plant gardens. Have babies. But this was NOT what the Israelites/Jews living in Babylon wanted to hear!

Last Sunday the Psalm for the day, Psalm 137, expressed the feelings of the Israelites who were living in Babylon. They were angry, scared, sad, homesick, and most of all they were grieving the loss of their homeland. They did not see any future for themselves in this pagan city, far from their land and their temple. They wanted Babylon to be destroyed so they could come home. They wanted vengeance. The Psalm said, "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have

done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

They sang a lament, which we sang last week and which sounds like this. [CHOIR sings, “By the waters, the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept, and wept, and wept, for Zion. We remember, we remember, we remember Zion.”]

That is such a haunting melody which perfectly expresses the pain and grief and loss the Israelites felt. They thought they had lost their religion too. Judaism was so connected to the land and the Temple. If they didn’t live in the land of Israel anymore, and couldn’t worship in the Temple, how could they be faithful Jews? As the psalm says, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

They wanted God to get them out of there now. And the prophet Hananiah was only too happy to tell them what they wanted to hear. In two years you will be home! But Jeremiah has a very different word from the Lord. “Settle down,” he says. You are going to be here for a while so you might as well make the best of it. Build houses. Plant gardens. Have babies. Enjoy your grandchildren.

Settle down? There was no way they could settle down and live happily in this place. Babylon had destroyed their city! Carried them off into exile, hundreds of miles from home! This was the enemy! They might have to *live* in enemy territory, but nobody

could make them be *happy* about it. They would not sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

And if this wasn't bad enough, Jeremiah said something that was even more offensive. "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." Pray for their enemies? Pray for these pagans? The exiles were more than willing to pray that their enemies be humiliated, and for their babies to be dashed against the wall, but prayer for their welfare? That was asking too much. They were too angry and resentful to pray.

When Pastor Jill talked about lament last week, she said that it was not a sin to be angry. Anger was the natural response of these people who had lost so much. The bigger question, she said, was what do we do with that anger?

Despite the rosy predictions of the false prophet, Jeremiah knew that the Israelites were going to be in Babylon for the long haul. Rebellion was not going to work. Praying for someone else to conquer Babylon was not going to work. If they continued their strong feelings of grief and anger, they would be exhausted. If they chose to be sullen and resentful, they would make themselves miserable. So Jeremiah advises them to settle down and make peace with their situation. This is where you live now. Deal with it. But don't just live there in a grudging way. Pray for the welfare of Babylon. The word welfare is the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means wholeness and well being and peace. Because now the future of Babylon and the future of the exiles was inextricably linked.

If Babylon found well being and shalom, so would the exiles. This was a hard word to hear.

This happened 2600 years ago and it is an interesting story, but how does it connect with us? We haven't been carried off to Winnipeg and we don't live in exile. But I wonder what kinds of hard places we live in. For some of you men, perhaps being drafted was a kind of exile. Military service interrupted your life, your education, your relationships. It took away your freedom and you did not want to be there.

Maybe you work in job that you do not like. Your values and the values of the institute on do not go together and you dread going to work every day.

Maybe you are in college and you don't feel like you fit in and the work seems very difficult.

Maybe you are thinking about moving to assisted living or a nursing home and you don't want to be there. I've been read the novel Water for Elephants and the narrator is a 90 year old man who hates being in a nursing home. He dislikes the food, the confinement, the other residents.

Maybe you envisioned a very different life for yourself than the one you have. You expected to be successful by age 45, but you are not. You expected to be married for 65 years but you are divorced. You expected to have a bunch of kids and you do not.

Being in exile can make us feel angry, sullen and surly. Sometimes with good reason.

What are we going to do with that?

Barbara Dee Timmer used to say regularly, "I'm in the right place." When she lived in the Warm Friend, but also after she broke her leg and was living at Resthaven Care center. I'm in the right place.

We have some friends we have known for years. When we saw them this summer we asked about one of their adult children. They looked at each other and then said, "he's in jail." He became addicted to meth amphetamines and then started selling. "He knows he messed up," they said. He is trying to take advantage of the classes and treatment programs to bring something good out of this exile.

Those are some personal examples, but there are some broader examples of exile as well. In adult education this morning Wesley Granberg-Michaelsen talked about the fact that our culture is very pluralistic. And the power has shifted, so that white, mainline Protestant churches no longer have the influence they once had. And that makes some people very angry. So we can live grudgingly, and spend our lives wishing for the way things used to be. Or we can settle down and welcome diversity as a gift from God.

Some parts of the Christian faith have had a very ambivalent relationship with the larger world they live in. The world is secular, dangerous. Its values, of wealth and success and

winning, seem inconsistent with Christian values. Or they might say that the government is hopeless and we should not participate in it by voting or running for office. There is an old country gospel song that goes like this:

*This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through*

*My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.*

*The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,*

*And I can't feel at home in this world any more.*

But the world is our home. We don't need to let it define us, but we do live here. And Jeremiah's words come to us as well. No matter how crazy and misguided and broken our government looks, and that is pretty broken these days, we are not really free to simply ignore it or keep our distance or throw up our hands in despair. Pray for the welfare of Babylon. Pray for the welfare of Congress. And participate!

I'm not advocating passivity or blind obedience. There are many situations—think of the Resistance movement in France and the Netherlands during World War II—when we do need to fight against the principalities and powers. But for much of our lives we need to settle down and learn to live with ambiguity

The other texts help us with this a bit. God is faithful. God continues to be gracious to us, whether we live in Jerusalem or Babylon, whether the government of the US is Democratic or Republican, whether we live in assisted living or our own home, whether

we work in a job we hate or a job we love. God is faithful and gracious, no matter what our circumstances.

And one way to live in a messy world that isn't necessarily what we would choose is to live with the gratitude demonstrated in the Luke story. A Samaritan was the last person Jesus should have been healing. And definitely the last person who would be expected to return with thanks. And yet here was this amazing sign of grace ... a Samaritan falling on his face in gratitude before Jesus.

How do we learn to settle down into our lives? By being aware of grace. Being grateful, and remembering that God is always, always, faithful. Amen.