

“Planting in Exile”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-10

May 24, 2020

Well, even though this isn't exactly how I envisioned Lake Fellow Sunday would be, I am excited to be with you all this morning. And I want to start off by saying, thank you. Thank you, Second Presbyterian Church for all the ways you have helped to nurture and grow this young preacher. For the care and support, the grace and really the love that you have shown me. This church knows how to take care of its Lake Fellows and for that I feel truly blessed.

In reflecting back on the last two years, one thing I have been surprised about is how well we've gotten to know one another. You've been kind enough to let me celebrate with you at baptisms, ordinations, and even a socially-distanced wedding just yesterday! But you've also let me witness to some of your more tender moments, with loved ones at hospital beds, prayers in the middle of the night and memorial services for those we have lost. Beyond the milestone moments, we've shared meals and meetings, handshakes and hugs. I have felt so embraced and known by this community – what a way to belong!

One thing that is unique to Residency Programs within the realm of all ministry jobs, is that they have a definitive end date. Most ministers don't begin working knowing when they will be done at a certain church. I didn't know when I'd leave here for sure, but I knew it would be before August of 2020, when you will welcome two new Lake Fellows and the cycle will begin again. There is a season to this program, albeit a long season of two years, but this season is one that I am sure many of you have witnessed time and again as you have welcomed, embraced, and blessed over 45 other Lake Fellows before Jasiel and I.

And that's the thing about life. We find ourselves vacillating in between these different seasons of time. For everything, there is a season. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to laugh and a time to cry. We all know the Ecclesiastes Scripture (or if you're like me, you sing the song by The Byrds and decide its close enough). These are just the seasons of personal life – but what is unique

about the world we are living in right now is that we are all experiencing a season together. And while I'm not exactly sure what it will be called or how it would be described if we were to update the Scripture to modern times, I am confident that this is a season we will not soon forget. And one I worry we are not soon to be released from. Unlike the Lake Fellow program, there is no firm end date in sight for our COVID fears.

In our reading from Jeremiah this morning, we hear the words of the prophet speaking to people who are in quite a season of their life as well. Although this season is very different from the Lake Fellow program or the time we find ourselves in as a world right now. The Israelites are in the season of exile – having been forcibly removed from their homes and sent to live in a strange and foreign land. Taken from Jerusalem and placed into an oppressive life in Babylon. Their city was destroyed and their temple, burned.¹

The prophet Jeremiah writes a letter to them in the midst of this season, delivering to them the words of God. He speaks words of hope that one day, life will be normal again. One day they will be able to go home again. But that time is not only not today, but it is far off, perhaps even generations into the future. These hardly feel like words of hope in the midst of collective tragedy and trauma.

Now I want to make one thing very clear – we are not in a time of exile. Exile would indicate a level of disenfranchisement that most of us are not experiencing, exile is a time of oppression and extreme loss of autonomy and identity. This is not exile. And neither is the Lake Fellow Residency Program, just to clarify. But all three are seasons of transition, seasons where we are called to live in the present amidst an unknown future. Seasons that represent liminal spaces.

The term liminality was first coined in the early 20th century from an anthropology perspective. It seemed that there was a need to define the space between two rites of passage. The Latin word *limen* means threshold, as if we are standing at the doorway waiting to be let into a new world.

Or as Theologian Richard Rohr describes liminality, it a season where we are “drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the ‘threshold’ where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.”ⁱⁱ

We’ve all experienced liminal times in our lives. The moments between:

Graduating from school and starting a career.

Having your heart broken and learning to love again.

Retiring from work and finding a new purpose in life.

Deciding to have children
and holding them in our arms.

Buying a house and making it a home.

These are the liminal spaces we may have encountered before. They can be disorienting times, full of moments of doubt, wonderings if we can return back to the place we have been before. Questioning when the next chapter begins and holding on to hope, that we will see it when it arrives.

In our gospel reading from Luke, we get a brief glance at the liminal space the disciples were living in. Jesus, their teacher and savior, had been crucified before their very eyes. He was dead, and life was never going to look the same again. But then, suddenly they began to hear stories. Stories of an empty tomb and a walking companion on an Emmaus road. Stories of sightings and suppers. They are living in a liminal space knowing that their entire world has just been changed and yet they do not know what stands before them. Indeed they wondered, “can we hope?” Do we dare to believe that this is not the end of the story? And then, Jesus himself appears to them, showing his hands and his feet to their questioning minds.

As he leaves and begins ascending to Heaven, he blesses them, commissioning them to be a presence in the city, to stay put and continue the ministry, to act as witnesses to all they had seen and experienced in their time journeying with Jesus. The disciples did not know what would happen next, they didn’t know exactly where Jesus was headed or when he would return again. But they lived into these moments, they lived into the hope that one day he would return again. They continued their ministry, just as Jesus had commanded, being fervent in their worship and steadfast in their joy.

To me, this echoes one of the most important lessons I have taken from the Lake Fellow Residency Program:

be firmly planted where you are. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. And that is a lesson I learned from all of you. It was not an intentional decision, but rather an unavoidable invitation that I am so blessed to have received from this congregation. In this in-between season of my life, one that easily could have been spent with one foot back home or one foot in my next call, you encouraged me and welcomed me so fully, I had no choice but to want to stand with both feet firmly on this ground. You helped me to embrace this liminal time as a place of transformation and unending hope for both the future of this congregation and future of the church.

It is easy to think about what we will do when we emerge from these liminal spaces. When we find ourselves stepping out of the shadow of death or eclipsing the mountain top. We look ahead to the date where our desired life will be fully lived into. But in the space betwixt and between, what does hope even look like?

In Babylon, Jeremiah spoke to Israelites who were in search of a hope. And while our situation is very different, I believe in a living Word of God, one that speaks to us in each season of our lives as well. Surely, if those who had been exiled could live into the hope that God has set before them, we can too. We can learn how to search for abundant life amidst the chaos of our own situations.

Instead of living in fear, anger or complacency, those who are in exile were given a set of life-enhancing instructions: “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. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.”ⁱⁱⁱ The message of God through the prophet is clear: have hope in the future you cannot see, leaning on the promise of God that there will be a time when you can return home.

Having hope in a future we cannot see is a core tenant of our faith. We believe in a God who goes before us and is already present in what is to come. A God that is not defined by seasons, but rather exists simultaneously in the past, present, and future. We live in the now and not yet. But when our personal lives feel as though they are unravelling, when our plans for the future begin to slip through our fingers, how do we have hope? How do we even know what we are to hope for?

Build, plant, grow, seek. These action verbs from Jeremiah are clear. In a liminal season, while we sit on the threshold of what will be unveiled on the other side, we are not to remain idle in our waiting. Or despair at our situation. Instead we are to root down where we are and live into an unknown future that we know God has already claimed. We are to plant seeds, trusting that there will be rain and sunshine to care for them. We are to build houses and grow our families, believing that God will provide for us all. We are to be present to the needs of those around us, building up our communities and extending God's love to the world.

While a fearful inclination during these times might look like turning in on ourselves, a hopeful inclination would be to turn ourselves out to the world. To recognize that because God has gone before us, we can have faith that God holds our future. That hope amidst suffering and pain is not only possible, its imperative. And that hope can look a lot like planting a garden, sewing seeds without knowing whether the soil is any good, or if the weather will hold, but planting them anyways, trusting that some will take root and provide a harvest, even if that harvest isn't for us.

That's what you have done for me, Second Presbyterian Church, and all the Lake Fellows who have come through this program. You've invested in us, planted seeds of learning and growth, even though our seasons with you were short. Knowing that some seeds won't germinate while we are with you. Knowing that some of the skills you've nurtured in us won't pay off for you. Knowing that some seeds will need to be replanted again and again, only to be harvested much later in our ministry lives. But you did that because you have hope. Not only hope for what God was working in each of us, but more importantly what God was working in this church and the in the world. You already know how to plant hopeful seeds for the future.

Being in a liminal season can be a holy season. It is often described as a place of transformation, much like the wilderness that we studied over Lent. A place where we can learn to trust that God is already present in the

future we cannot see. While liminal times can bring great uncertainty, they can also bring great learning.

And what we hope for during this time is this: that we will be transformed. That we will come out the other side of this liminal space differently, with new inclinations towards loving our neighbor. That we can work towards repairing societal injustices that continue to be unveiled by our collective season of pain. That we will remember the everyday heroes that emerged, the longing we shared just to be with one another, and the many different ways that we have been church together. Most of all, I pray that we remember the God who sustained us through it all, the One who is already before us, and is also beside us. May we hope in that sure knowledge. Amen.

ⁱ Enter the Bible: Babylonian Exile: <http://www.enterthebible.org/periods.aspx?rid=907>

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr Daily Meditation Email July 7, 2016: <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Liminal-Space.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=jd48qU30R0U>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah 29:5-7 NRSV