

“The Business of Blooming”
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 (CEB)
Rev. Elizabeth Smith
The Holy Way Presbyterian Church
October 13, 2019

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.

*The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel,
 proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon:
 Build houses and settle down;
 cultivate gardens and eat what they produce.
 Get married and have children;
 then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children.
 Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away.
 Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.
 Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.*

If you've ever sat in a committee meeting with me or joined me for a class or the Women's Retreat or trekked down to the border with me, you probably know that I always carry my yellow water bottle with me. Or at least I try to.

It's become a habit for me in recent years, as I've learned that I'm not one to seek out water throughout my day if it's not already by my side.

And in the desert, that's just not a good idea.

We need to be drinking water! All. the. time.

So I cart around this bottle that I've grown to love everywhere I go.

And like many people my age, my bottle has slowly become decorated with stickers.

I currently have 3 stickers (though I'm eyeing a 4th!) and the first sticker I put on it seems to be the one that gets the most attention.

It's this one here, the one that says, **“Bloom where you are planted.”**

People often ask me about it.

Sometimes just to know where I got it, but more often than not, this short saying seems to have an effect on people.

It seems to send them to a far-off place in their minds, like it's just what they needed to hear that day.

Pithy sayings can sometimes be perfect for speaking to our hearts.

But sometimes the words that come to us are not what we expect or want to hear.
The prophet Jeremiah's letter, of which we've read some excerpts today,
could be an example of that.

The Israelites, the ones who've been exiled from Judah to Babylon, the ones whose lives
have been completely destroyed and uprooted and thrown into chaos, *these* Israelites
need to hear a word of hope from the prophet.

They are probably desperate for it.

They are searching for comfort.

They are hoping for a timeline--or details--*something* that will tell them the end of their
misery is in sight.

They need reassurance.

They desire certainty.

They are hoping for hope.

But that's not really what they get it, is it?

That's not the message Jeremiah shares with them.

Instead, the prophet basically says,

"Bloom where you are planted, y'all.

Bloom and don't look back because it's going to be a while."

Ugh. That's not very encouraging!

But I guess prophets aren't really known for that, are they?

They are known for speaking the truth,

whether or not it's what the people want to hear.

So bloom where you're planted, he essentially tells them.

Easier said than done, right?

Anyone who's ever experienced a traumatic event--be it a natural disaster, a loved one's
death, a fire or flood, a divorce, this list could go on and on--anyone who's ever survived
something like this knows that **moving forward is a process**.

It's not a one and done kind of thing.

You can't just wake up one day and be "over" what you've lived,
what you've experienced.

It's just not that simple.

But Jeremiah's point seems to be that they need to try.

They need to begin the process of moving forward, rather than getting stuck in the
complicated feelings of remembering how things used to be...

...or longing for what could've been.

But hear me say: naming one's reality and feelings and making space for grieving is important--crucial, really. **But it is part of a larger process of *moving forward*.**

We here at The Holy Way have had to start a process like this, whether or not we felt ready for it.

And those of us who've been here since April have already been riding the waves of change.

Now let me clarify--I am not saying that having a pastor leave for a new call is the same as being in exile in a foreign land--because it's not.

But I believe there are some similarities.

Here's what I see.

It is hard to say good-bye to the comfort that comes from a long pastorate, when a pastor stays for 24 years.

Because that length of time allows relationships to get comfortable.

It can bring a feeling of stability.

Routine. Maybe even some predictability.

Life as a faith community can feel comfortably settled.

So when a departure interrupts that, it is normal that the ground beneath us might suddenly feel a bit shaky.

That the path forward feels unknown.

Maybe more confusing.

The exiles in Babylon weren't able to predict how things would really turn out for them. We aren't either.

And yet, God is with us.

God was with the exiles in Babylon, even as they were being challenged to begin afresh in a new place.

Even as Jeremiah was telling them to put down roots in this place that they refused to see as their home.

And that's the thing about God, perhaps the greatest lesson the exiles may have learned during their difficult time.

God is with us.

Always.

God goes with us.

God brings us through.

But beware, transformation is likely to occur. :)

Because God being with us doesn't mean God's hanging out, just idling waiting why we figure things out.

It means that God's actively part of our blooming in this season of change.

In this time of transition God will transform us as a community in ways we might not be able to see yet!

And it's already beginning, this transformation. New seeds are being planted.

The exiles are told by Jeremiah that they should build houses and settle down, have gardens and till the earth, expand their families, and work toward good things for their new community, all while praying to God. That's a pretty tall order. But they begin taking those steps to do so.

But their work, and our work, doesn't stop there. God doesn't just say to settle down and bloom where you've found yourself. To push through with only self-preservation in mind. No. God wants those in exile, and God wants us, to also be a blessing to our community. To promote the welfare of the city. And to pray to God throughout it all.

We are and will continue to do the tough work of planting new seeds.

We'll continue to keep our eyes peeled for the blooms emerging in this process. AND--we will continue to discern how God is calling us to bless those around us. Those just down the road. Those further down the road. Those throughout our community that are in need of physical resources. Those in need of hearing the Good News.

So in this season, we find ourselves having to do things a bit differently than before. We're establishing some new patterns, new ways of sharing God's work. Those serving on Session, Deacons and committees have already begun this process and I know it's both invigorating and scary!

That's often how it feels as we work to root ourselves in new places, to ground that feels like it's changing every day.

And so we cannot let fear guide us in this process.

We can't let it.

I don't exactly remember what drew me to buy and put the "Bloom where you are planted" sticker on my bottle way back when. I suppose my heart that day was drawn to both the comfort and challenge of the reminder.

Growth--*blooms even*--can happen wherever we find ourselves.

We desert dwellers should understand that more than most! We enjoy beautiful blooms throughout the year--or maybe even just one night a year--in an area with a reputation for being harsh.

And yet, we know and trust the possibility that always awaits us.

Here in the desert.

In our individual lives.

And especially here at The Holy Way Presbyterian Church.

May it be so...