

A SENT PEOPLE*by Elaine Poproski***PSALM 137; JEREMIAH 29:4 – 7**

In 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem until the city was conquered, and then destroyed the temple as well as much of the city itself. Many of Israel's people were deported to Babylon (which today is southern Iraq).

Can you imagine what that would have been like? Imagine for a moment that some world power invaded Canada, came into Toronto and decimated our city, and then sent millions of us to live wherever they were from? Imagine we were all sent to live throughout Russia. Most of us wouldn't speak the language. For most of us, the culture – the laws and values and etiquette of our new home would be unknown. We'd be separated from friends, maybe from family. We'd lose our jobs. We might be looked down upon by our new neighbours. Our education and work experience may or may not be acknowledged. The freedoms we're used to – that we don't even notice anymore – might be gone. Can you imagine what that would be like?

I think that's what it might have been like for the people conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and exiled to Babylon. Theirs is the context of Psalm 137 – a psalm of lament – which reads this way:

- ¹By the rivers of Babylon –
 there we sat down, and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
- ²On the willows there we hung our harps.
- ³For there our captors asked us for songs,
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
- ⁴How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
- ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
- ⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you,
 if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
- ⁷Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
 the day of Jerusalem's fall,
 how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
 Down to its foundations!”
- ⁸O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
- ⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Do you hear the despair? Do you hear the anger? Do you hear how lost they feel?

Jerusalem wasn't just their home, it was their holy city. It was the home of God. And theirs was the God above all gods. Except now their God above all gods had been conquered. His holy temple was no longer holy. There was no place for their God anymore.

Can you imagine finding out that God isn't all-powerful? Can you imagine being face-to-face with the proof that God doesn't exist? Or at least that God is not King of kings and Lord of lords?

We might argue that the destruction of Jerusalem didn't mean any of those things about God. After all, we know God isn't really limited to a city or a place. But if we put ourselves in the minds of those conquered by Babylon, in a world full of gods, all of whom were claimed as patrons of their various people, to be defeated as a people was to have one's god defeated. Everything the exiles believed about the superiority and supremacy of their God was in question. How could their God be superior and at the same time allow his holy city to be destroyed – his holy temple to be ripped apart? It was inconceivable.

But God was not dead. God had not forgotten his people. He continued to raise up prophets to speak on his behalf. And it was through those prophets that the people began to understand – to reframe – their experience of defeat and exile. They began to understand that their trouble was the consequence of their own rejection of God. He hadn't abandoned them. They had abandoned him. Babylon didn't defeat them so much as God used Babylon to teach them.

Jeremiah was one of those prophets. And it's his words in Jeremiah 29 that we believe to be a direct response to the people's lament and despair. We read this, in Jeremiah 29:4 – 7:

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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.

In other words: Get up; you've had your cry; now it's time to get on with the business of living. This is your new home. Make it your home. Do your work. Build new houses. Marry and have children and go to school and get jobs. Learn the language. Figure out the customs. Keep going.

Can you imagine how hard these seemingly simple instructions must have been? We see it happen over and over again in refugees who come to Canada from all over the world. We see people learn English and get jobs. Even when their education, training, and work experience isn't recognized or valued in our country, they persevere. They find work and do it, regardless of what they used to do before they were forced to flee their own country. We see people who've been traumatized in ways we can barely comprehend, stand up and do what has to be done.

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be a refugee? I find it hard to imagine that I have what it takes to make it work. I can see myself sitting by the rivers of Babylon in despair, but I don't know if I can see myself getting up and getting on with the business of living. What about you? Could you do it? The reality is, most of us probably we could. When there's no other option, when it's get moving or die, untapped strength rises up – it's the resiliency of human nature. We get up and get on with it because there's no real alternative.

But could we do the last thing Jeremiah says? It's in verse 7. He doesn't just tell them to get up and get on with the business of living. He says this, as well:

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.

There's a logic to Jeremiah's words. When cities prosper, so do their people. (Though that's something of an over generalization, I think. After all, we see first hand every day that not everyone prospers. Every time we see someone without shelter or without sufficient food, every time we see someone unable to access quality health care, we're reminded that prosperous cities don't automatically translate into prosperous people. And yet, that being said, I think it's probably fair to say that if a city doesn't prosper – if a city has limited or no resources – none of its people will prosper either.)

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.

It's not enough to get up and get on with the business of living. It's not enough to build houses. You must make this city of exile your home. You must join your conquerors in making the city great. Seek its welfare. Look for ways you can contribute to the lives of those who live there. Get out of your bubble of fellow exiles and make friends with the Babylonian people – find out what they need, what they love, what you can do to make their lives better. Vote for politicians that will serve the city well, not just serve you and yours. Volunteer for organizations that help people who aren't like you. Seek the welfare of the city in which you live – even though it's not a city of your choosing. And pray for it. Pray for its welfare. Pray that its people would know joy and love and prosperity. Pray that their children would live and thrive. Pray for its security and its safety.

In other words – in Jesus' words from hundreds of years later – love your enemies.

That must have been so hard. These were angry people. Look at how Psalm 137 ends: Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! That's some heavy-duty anger there. It's some heavy-duty hate. And with good reason – at least the anger. I mean, how many of these exiles had watched their children die? How many people had they seen killed by their Babylonian conquerors? What horrors had they endured on the march from their home on the Mediterranean to this new city. It was at least as far from Jerusalem to Babylon as it is from Toronto to Calgary. How many graves marked that trek east? Was there enough food? Did their shoes survive? Was there shade when they needed it? Or warmth when it was cold? How were they kept from escaping?

It makes sense to me that they were angry. It even seems ok to me that they were angry. We might find their expression of that anger a bit hard to stomach; I mean, I can't imagine any of us celebrating the violent death of children, even if those children belong to our worst enemies. But the anger behind it – that I understand. All of us have been angry at some time or another. Maybe not as angry as those behind Psalm 137, but angry, nonetheless. And it's o.k. to be angry. Sometimes it's right to be angry. But we can't stay in that place. Even when our anger is justified, staying there, in that place where we hate, in that place where grudges thrive and we never forget the wrongs done to us... If we stay there we will not survive. At least, we will not survive as people who are called to love and compassion, to gentleness and kindness and patience and self-control. There will be no room for God's Spirit in us.

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.
Seek the welfare of the people who are that city and pray to the Lord for those people.

Here we have people who witnessed the destruction of their most holy place. And their theology was such that Jerusalem's destruction – especially the destruction of the temple – was tantamount to God's destruction or, at least, to his defeat. But here was Jeremiah saying pray to God for the people who conquered you.

You don't pray to a defeated God. There's no point in praying to a dead God. I think what was amazing wasn't that Babylon had destroyed their God. What was amazing was that God still cared to listen to his people even after they'd abandoned him. What was amazing was that God was with them in their captivity. What was amazing was that God would care for their captors. What was amazing was that God wasn't just active in Israel; he was also active in Babylon.

Jerusalem's destruction didn't happen all at once. Almost 20 years prior, Babylon had defeated Egypt – one of Israel's most powerful allies – and had been forcing Israel to pay tribute ever since. This is when the capture and deportation of Israel's up-and-coming leaders actually began. But then Egypt fought back against Babylon, and Israel took the opportunity to revolt, leading to the siege and eventual destruction of Jerusalem. And all through these happenings, people in Israel who claimed to speak for God were advising Israel's leaders that there was nothing to worry about because their God was supreme and so everything they were experiencing was just temporary. Israel would be great again.

Jeremiah had a different message. Jeremiah spoke out against Israel's leaders – calling them on their failure to honour and depend on God and to instead choose to honour and depend on Egypt; he challenged their failure to care for their poor and their hungry. He wasn't very popular.

But then the people were in exile. They were lost. All the promises of all the so-called prophets didn't hold up. Finally, they could hear Jeremiah. But I wonder how long it took them to really understand what he was telling them. Up until now everyone kept telling them that God would return them to glory – whatever that meant. They could not be defeated, at least not permanently, because God was in control and God would never let something like that happen. But now, here they were, by the rivers of Babylon, a defeated, despairing people with no home and no God. I wonder how long they sat there, waiting to be delivered, before they were finally able to stand up and get on with the business of living where they were now.

I think there are a lot of parallels between Israel's story of exile and our own experience in Canada. It's not that we've been conquered and exiled. But perhaps we experience some of the same loss and despair as they did. Whatever we might say about the evils of colonization and the destruction the British and French colonizers brought to this land and its people, there was a sense among those colonizers at the time that they were on mission for God. Forget for a moment the complexities of a version of Christianity so intricately interwoven with the powers and politics of the day, and consider that many of those who settled here in this country likely genuinely thought of themselves as blessed by God – preferred, even, by God. They saw this land as a gift from God for them. It seems to me that that is the same kind of message Israel's false prophets were preaching for years and years before Babylon defeated them.

For centuries, as the colonizers who populated Canada thrived in their new land, it seemed to them that God truly was on their side. Nothing could possibly hurt them – nothing could destroy them. This is the same rhetoric some Canadian missionaries, and those who sent them, used to justify the on-going colonization of other places and other people. In our own country, for years and years, power and Christianity were interdependent. Politicians had to be part of a church to stand any hope of being elected. Laws were enacted to enforce what we believed to be the Christian way – things like no shopping allowed on Sundays. Indigenous children were removed, often violently, from their homes and their families by the thousands in order to rid them of their non-Christian heritage and indoctrinate them into Christianity. We were Israel before the fall to Babylon. We both felt our superiority powerfully, convinced that God was on our side and that nothing could defeat us.

Canada is no longer (if it ever really was) a Christian nation. Some Canadians are in the same place Israel was when they sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept. Some among us are undone by our reality. Some of us are convinced that if we could just go back, if we could just reclaim what was, everything would be o.k. But I think most who sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep, do so because they've finally begun to realize there's no going back. We are in a new land. We are surrounded by people who speak a different language, who value different things, who hold to different customs. And this isn't a temporary situation.

It's into this reality that Jeremiah speaks, not just to those ancient exiles in Babylon, but to us.

Get up. Get on with living in the place where you are. Stop waiting to return. God is not dead. God has not been defeated. God has not abandoned us. Rather, it was us who abandoned God. This place where we find ourselves – this place that has caused us to weep with despair – is exactly where God wants us. We aren't here despite God's best efforts. We are here because of God. It is to us that Jeremiah speaks:

Seek the welfare of the city where I sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

What does that mean?

It means God is active and involved in this city we call home. We might have interpreted the loss of Christianity's privilege and pre-eminence as a thing to lament, but perhaps it is a thing to celebrate. Perhaps what we thought of as Christianity was as far removed from the ways of Christ as Israel was from the ways of God before their exile. Perhaps it is in this place, in this time, that we can finally truly be Jesus' followers like his earliest disciples were.

Those earliest disciples were completely dependent on the Holy Spirit. They relied on the Spirit to equip and empower them to be Jesus' disciples everywhere they went. They relied on the Spirit to continue the work of making them more and more like Jesus throughout their lives. They relied on the Spirit's own character to shine through them and to thus lead others to the kind of lifesaving, life-empowering knowledge of Jesus that they had. They had very little else upon which to rely. They had no political power. They often weren't respected. Many among them had little to no wealth. But they had the Spirit. And because they had the Spirit, people everywhere experienced the extraordinary, life-changing love of God.

Stripped of our power and our privilege as Christians in Canada, perhaps we will finally, fully depend on God's Holy Spirit like the earliest disciples did. Perhaps, as we get up and stop with the lament over what we've lost, and start living like Jeremiah would have us live, we will see people experience the same kind of extraordinary, life-changing love of God as those earliest disciples did.

It used to be that we thought we were the hope the world needed. It used to be that we thought we were exactly what everyone needed to be like because we had it all figured out. But we aren't the hope of the world. Jesus is the hope the world needs. And perhaps, now that we no longer stand at the centre of things, upheld by the power and privilege that the colonizers fought for, we finally will be able to point to Jesus instead of ourselves, not just in the words we speak, but in the lives we live.