

## **“Make Yourself at Home”**

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

October 9, 2016

Make yourself at home.

Are there any warmer words we could hear in an unfamiliar place? This kind and thoughtful greeting has a way of lowering anxiety and putting us at ease. Immediately, we relax and settle in for a good visit.

These words did not have the same effect upon Jeremiah’s readers. When Jeremiah told the Israelites living against their will in a strange and distant land to make themselves at home, they balked.

Rather than lowering their blood pressure, this admonition increased it. Instead of reassuring them, it send them into despair. Listen as I share the story that led up to the tension between Jeremiah and his people.

Jeremiah was God’s voice to Judah in its last years before the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of many of its finest citizens. You recall that Jeremiah had the longest career of any Hebrew prophet. For forty years, Jeremiah spoke to the Israelites about God’s expectations of them and God’s dreams for them.

As time passed, it became clear to Jeremiah his people were not living up to God’s expectations as outlined in the covenant God made with Moses. Instead of reflecting the heart and nature of God by being honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, fair, generous, merciful, compassionate, humble and sensitive to the needs of the weakest among them, the Israelites

grew more militaristic, materialistic, selfish, greedy, corrupt and indifferent to the plight of the poor.

They were far more concerned about what they wanted as they went about their daily lives than what God wanted for them as a people of faith. Jeremiah knew their self-serving attitude was eroding the foundation of their society. He feared they would not survive as a nation if they continued to go down this path.

Jeremiah's worst fears materialized in 597 BCE. The Babylonians descended upon Jerusalem and completely overwhelmed the Israelites.

After the siege, Nebuchadnezzar instructed his commanders to take Judah's Royal family, military officers and fighting men and their most skilled artisans and craftsmen to Babylon. Over ten thousand men, women and children were taken into exile against their will. As you would expect, their level of grief and despair was immeasurable.

Soon after these disgruntled families arrived in Babylon, false prophets began giving them false hope. They told the exiles their time in Babylon would be short, probably less than two years. They declared God would rescue them by destroying Babylon.

Jeremiah knew this was not going to happen, and he refused to add his voice to theirs. Jeremiah did not know exactly how long the exiles would reside in Babylon, but he knew it would be much longer than two years, possibly several decades. This led Jeremiah to send the exiles a different message, one that strongly encouraged them to put down roots in a strange land.

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: **Build** houses and settle down; **plant** gardens and eat what they produce. **Marry** and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they, too, may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, **seek** the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. **Pray** to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you, too, will prosper." (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

**What was Jeremiah's message to the captives in Babylon?** He told them to make themselves home.

Through his trusted messengers, Elasah and Gemariah, he told them there would be no early release from captivity. That day would eventually come, but not any time soon and possibly not for two or more generations.

In the meantime, Jeremiah told the former residents of Jerusalem to settle down, unpack their bags and get on with living. He encouraged them to be model citizens and good neighbors by praying for everyone around them and building bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope.

"Build, plant and marry," Jeremiah wrote to them. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

**Why did Jeremiah have this message delivered to the exiles in Babylon?** I believe he did it for the same reason you and I don't deceive our loved ones. Telling them what they want to hear may make them feel good momentarily, but as time passes, if it is not true, it will lead to confusion, frustration, anger and despair.

As bad as being deported was, Jeremiah knew having a negative and cynical attitude about it was worse. This seasoned prophet was wise enough to know a culture of complainers becomes weak, cruel and easy to manipulate. This was why he offered an alternative voice, full of grace and truth, which could help them deal with reality and make the most of even a bad situation.

**Is this a message you need to hear today?** Maybe you are not where you want to be or ever thought you would be, and you are struggling to find anything good about where you are.

You want to return to another time and place when life was better and the future looked brighter. If this is not possible, you want someone to rescue you and get the weight of the world off your shoulders.

Perhaps you are dealing with chronic health issues or financial problems. You are alone after a relationship failed due to neglect or abuse, or your mate of many years died. You have had to dismantle your home where your most precious memories were made and move to an assisted living facility. You lost your job and had to leave home and family to find another one. Someone you depended upon abandoned you and left you with more work and responsibilities than you can manage.

**What do you do after you walk away from the cemetery of broken dreams?** How do you make the most of a bad situation? I believe our text helps us answer this question.

**Begin by accepting reality.** “It is what it is” is a phrase commonly heard these days. Well, what is it?

Face the facts, though they may be brutal at times. Denial and deception are deadly. They lead straight to a prison without bars.

Thousands of Israelites found themselves living in Babylon after the invasion Jeremiah described, and all their wishing and hoping this nightmare would end did not change it. This was why Jeremiah told them there was no way to overcome their despair and get on with their lives until they moved beyond denial and accepted reality.

They refused to listen to Jeremiah at first because it was not what they wanted to hear. Their stubbornness led to more misery, as it always does.

Whose prophetic voice and wise counsel are you ignoring? Is it time to put down your defenses and listen with an open heart and mind?

**Don't get stuck in the past.** While it is important to mourn and give sorrow words, we must never let the grieving process have the final word in our lives and paralyze us.

Remember with heartfelt gratitude what you had that you have lost. Cherish your memories but don't compare your present circumstances to the best moments from the past.

Life isn't always kind or fair. Every day can't be a holiday or a high holy day.

At all times, as a person of faith, look to the future with hope and anticipation. God is always working on your behalf to bring good out of bad and life out of death.

If God can reach into a guarded and sealed tomb to give life back to his crucified and buried Son, God can help you where you are now. The darkness you feel will never hide you from God.

“Behold, I make all things new,” God said through the Apostle Paul. “All things,” Paul wrote. There are no exceptions.

God’s promise to be with the exiles was never about a city, a temple or a patch of land. It was about a loving and inseparable relationship.

Wherever the Hebrew children went, God went with them.

Whatever they faced, God stood by their side.

Whatever life demanded of them, God was there to help them meet the challenge.

God’s presence was never dependent upon their being in a certain place. God would always be with them and bless them so they could be a blessing to others, even in Babylon.

God wants to accompany you on every step of your journey, too. There is no place you will go that is outside of God’s awareness and presence.

Wherever you are, God is there eager to provide the strength, courage, wisdom, insight, understanding, patience and stamina you need. Open your heart and life to God and place your hand in his. God will safely lead you down the path toward hope and healing.

How do you make the best of a bad situation? **Take an inventory of what you have left and the people who still love you** . While you may have lost some things, there is never a time when you have lost everything.

The displaced Jews in our text despaired because they lost everything they valued after they were deported: their temple, their city, their businesses and their homes. It seems all they could focus upon was what they lost, ignoring what they still had.

Jeremiah reminded them that all was not lost. They still had the most important things in life: faith, family, friends, love and hope.

They had everything they needed to dream new dreams and rebuild their lives, as do we. Sometimes we have to lose what we thought mattered most to discover what we can never lose. This could be one of those times in your life.

**Take responsibility for your life.** No knight in shining armor is going to ride in on a white horse and rescue you, just as no one rescued the disillusioned captives in Babylon, in spite of what the false prophets told them.

The decisions you make today, large and small, will determine where you will be tomorrow. Make every decision carefully and thoughtfully.

Look down the road to see where your choices will lead you and those following you. Above all, don't make a bad situation worse by being impulsive, temperamental and irresponsible.

Look at all the verbs in our text: build, live, plant, eat, take, seek and pray. Surely you sense Jeremiah's call to action through these strong imperatives.

It was his way of telling the captives to quit grumbling, complaining, bickering and stalling. Pouting would not change their circumstances. Doing the same positive and constructive things they did in Jerusalem would.

Listen for the verbs people use in their conversations with you. They may contain the advice you need to hear in this season of life.

How do you make the best of a bad situation? **Never underestimate your abilities.**

This is not the first time you have been to the cemetery of broken dreams and had to chart a new way forward. You have had your back to the wall before and had to cope with a 'new normal'. By God's grace, you can do it again.

To a great degree, life is about overcoming. Actually, we are all in various stages of overcoming something, and we always will be.

In this world, the day will never come when all problems are solved, all issues are resolved, and everything goes our way. Detours and challenges come into our lives every day.

This is why God has created us in His image. God has equipped us with an inner strength that enables us to persevere and plod ahead. Tap into it instead of giving into despair.

**Find and join a support group.** There is no reason to travel alone in this world.

Be a good neighbor at all times in all places by opening your life to others and reaching out to those around you who are struggling. This will truly make a difference in your present circumstances.

I measure true wealth in terms of relationships. God's richest blessings have always come to me in the form of people.

At just the right time, God has brought people into my life I needed. Some of them reached out to me with comforting and encouraging words. Others gave sound advice. No doubt, some carried me when I could not walk on my own.

Some of these people needed me as much as I needed them. It was in this time of mutual caring and sharing that my deepest needs were met.

Why would I ever think God will stop doing this? Why would you?

Maybe our church is where you can find and develop the meaningful relationships you need at this time in your life. It is here you can be blessed and become a blessing to others.

Is God leading you this morning to put down roots in our church and community and join us on our faith journey? If so, I invite you to become a part of our warm fellowship.

As a matter of fact, **make yourself home.**