

Why the City? Jeremy 29:1-14
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I'm taking these first two Sundays of 2008 to talk about our vision for the coming year. As you see on our worship folder each week, our mission at Grace Church is "to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." Last week I briefly elaborated on each of these points, and then we looked at a key application of this vision, a specific means for advancing this vision. And that is small groups. We see small groups as an exciting and effective way to take our influence beyond the confines of this building and this neighborhood, and begin to have more of an impact on this city and the surrounding area. I talked about the importance of small groups for outreach, and then I preached from the warning passage of Hebrews 3 to impress upon all of us our need for Christian community and accountability and encouragement and prayer—the things that we hope will happen in small groups. Each and every one of us needs this kind of involvement in order to persevere in the Christian life. We need to be exhorting one another every day so that we won't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13).

This week I want to focus on another key aspect of our vision, which is urban ministry, urban outreach, having an urban presence here in the center of Pittsburgh. Last week I raised the question: Why small groups? This week is: Why the City?

Why the city? Why do we meet here in the city of Pittsburgh? Why don't we shift our focus to one of the surrounding suburbs where it would be much easier to find a nice place to meet, and there are more parking lots, and less traffic, and everything is generally more comfortable? Why don't we do that? If we were operating on human methods, we certainly would. It would be much easier to "grow" a church in a comfortable suburb. But we're not operating on human methods, and we're not seeking human success. Our success is to be faithful to what God has called us to do. And He has called us to the city. This is where He has planted us, and He has called us to be a blessing in this place. That's why, in fact, we are looking to move further *into* the city. We would like to be a downtown church, if God would open the right door for us. We continue to look for a downtown venue to hold our Sunday morning services. We are a city church, and we desire to be even more intentional about this calling.

I want us to look this morning at a passage from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. It's in Jeremiah 29, and it's a passage that many of you will be familiar with. These are verses that you have probably heard quoted many times. Maybe you memorized them at some point. Jeremiah 29:11 is the verse that is probably most familiar to us, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

But I want us to look at this passage as a whole, because there's something here that we've most likely missed in the past. And what we've missed is the urban focus of the passage. These are verses addressed to exiles in the city of Babylon.

Robert Linthicum, in a book on the urban church, tells a story of going to see his daughter and her family in Detroit, and seeing on their wall a beautiful photograph with Jeremiah 29:11 inscribed across it. He says, "The photograph was any camera buff's

dream—pine trees near the foreground framing the picture, a crystal-capped mountain against a cloudless sky. Across the plaque was inscribed the promise from Scripture: ‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” Then Linthicum writes, “It is a magnificent biblical promise that is engraved on the photograph of that plaque—in fact, one of my favorite promises of Scripture. But that promise was not made among pine trees and crystal-clear lakes and snow-capped mountains. Instead, this was a promise made in a city and given, conditionally, to an urban people of God” (*City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church*, 145).

Let’s read these verses in their context, and then I’ll focus mainly on verses 4-7 as they relate to our call to the city.

Read Jer 29:1-14

What we have here in Jeremiah 29 is a letter that Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the exiles who had been taken to Babylon. This was soon after the first deportation of Israelites in the year 597 B.C. Babylon was increasing in its power, and led by Nebuchadnezzar, they came into Jerusalem and captured all the influential people of that society. 2 Kings 24 tells this story of the Babylonians besieging Jerusalem, and “Johoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials” (v. 12). And Nebuchadnezzar “carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as the Lord had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land” (vv. 13-14).

This is the context of Jeremiah’s letter in Jeremiah 29. He is still in Jerusalem, and he writes to these exiles who have been taken to Babylon. Jeremiah 29:1 states that this letter is to the “*surviving* elders of the exiles.” Not everyone survived. Some died on the journey or were executed. It has been a painful and heart-wrenching trial for these Israelites. They have been wrenched from their beloved homeland and transplanted to the city of their enemies.

We can try to imagine how they must have longed for their home and the kind of bitterness and hatred they must have had toward their captors, the Babylonians. This is the situation that the Israelites find themselves in when they receive this letter from Jeremiah. They still have their bags packed, you might say. They are not planning to stay in Babylon. They want to leave as soon as possible and go home. But Jeremiah tells them that the stay is going to be much longer than they expect or desire. It will be 70 years, to be exact. And he communicates God’s message to them, to make themselves at home in that place.

Now that we’ve seen the context of these verses, I want to draw out 3 points from this passage that are very relevant to our context here in Pittsburgh.

I. Exiles in the World.

First of all, we are exiles in this world. Like the citizens of Jerusalem who were exiles in the city of Babylon, we are citizens of God’s city living in man’s city. We belong to the city of God, if we are believers, but we live in the midst of the city of man. The tale of these two cities stretches from Genesis to Revelation, and we find ourselves

today amid the unfolding story. Often it is symbolized in Scripture by the city of Jerusalem and the city of Babylon, which are the two cities we see in our passage this morning. Jerusalem represents the city of God, and Babylon represents the city of man. St. Augustine in the early 400s A. D. wrote a book called *The City of God*, and he describes these two cities. He says that each city is founded on love. The city of God is founded on love for God. The city of man is founded on love of self. These two cities are at war with one another, yet we are called to live in this world, amidst the city of man, without being of it.

This is what Jesus prayed on our behalf in John 17 when He said to the Father, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (vv. 15-16). So we have been sent into the world, but we are not of the world. We are resident aliens. We don’t have citizenship in the city of man, but we have been sent to live in it. We must take up residence here, but must maintain our citizenship in the city of God.

In Peter’s first letter he addresses it to “those who are elect exiles of the dispersion” (1:1). And later he writes, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (2:11). You see, we are no longer citizens of this world, because God made us His own and made us citizens of heaven. But we remain in the world as resident aliens. Like the Israelites who were exiles in a foreign, wicked land, we are spiritual exiles in this place. [In the third point I’ll say more about our purpose as resident aliens.]

II. God Sent Us

The second point I want us to see in our passage is the fact that God sent these Israelites to Babylon. They didn’t end up there by mistake. And it wasn’t Nebuchadnezzar’s power that was the ultimate cause. In verse 3 of our passage we see that Nebuchadnezzar did, indeed, take these Israelites into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. But notice what God says through Jeremiah in the letter to these exiles. Verse 4, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles *whom I have sent* into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” He mentions this again in verse 7, “seek the welfare of the city *where I have sent you* into exile.”

God sent these Israelites from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was His plan and His design. Nebuchadnezzar’s actions were all part of God’s plan to take His people and plant them in the middle of Babylon. It is just as true that God has sent you and me to Pittsburgh. Whatever reasons we may give for why we live in Pittsburgh right now, the ultimate reason is that God has sent us here. God has us here, and He has us here for a reason.

Of course, the Israelites were sent to Babylon as a punishment for their disobedience. I trust that the same is not true of us. But the similarity is in the fact that God sent us here, and He intends for us to be a blessing to this city. Some of you grew up here, and it was your parents or grandparents who moved to this area for whatever reason. Many of us have moved to Pittsburgh more recently, and we have come here for a particular job, or for some kind of schooling. But isn’t it an amazing thing to ponder, that far above all our circumstances and decisions, it was God’s purpose to bring each and every one of us together in this place at this time. I trust that God has a great plan to bless this city through this community of believers. This leads to the final point.

III. To Bless the City

This is what He intends for us to do here. Look at the instructions that God gives to His people who are living in the city of man, the city of Babylon. How did God instruct the Israelites in these verses? In verse 5 He tells them: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.” In other words, unpack your bags. You’re going to be here for awhile, and I want you to really be here. So set up shop; make a home. Verse 6, “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.” God wants these exiles to establish themselves in Babylon. He’s telling them to settle down and raise their families, so that they might multiply in that city.

I commend our church for faithfully multiplying. This is part of what God has called us to do here. We are to have babies and raise those children here in the midst of this city. This is something that honors and glorifies God. My wife sometimes talks about changing diapers to the glory of God, and that’s exactly the right way to look at it. Changing diapers and preparing meals and teaching and disciplining our children, these are not menial chores. These are the privileges and responsibilities of parenthood, and that influence will inevitably extend beyond the home in very significant ways and be a blessing to those around us.

Verse 7 is the key verse. This is the purpose of living here and working here and raising our families here. “But 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.” The word welfare here is a translation of the Hebrew word, “Shalom,” which means peace. But it’s also much more than peace. It’s not just the absence of violence. It’s completeness, and contentment, and tranquility, and wholeness, and health. God is telling the Israelites to seek this for Babylon! Seek the shalom of Babylon. This would have been a shocking statement for the Israelites to hear, knowing what Babylon had done to them. The end of the verse says, “for in its shalom you will find your shalom.” That must mean that their life is to be so intertwined with the life of that city that as they benefit the city it will benefit them as well. As they pursue the shalom of the city, that peace and wellness will benefit everyone involved.

Babylon was a wicked city. And yet God told them to settle down and become part of the life of the city and live and work for the good of the city. I believe this is how God would have us view our calling to this city. We can think of this in contrast to a couple other strategies that we’re often tempted to use, but are different than God’s instructions here. On the one side, God did not tell them to remain totally separate from the city. The run away and hide mentality. God didn’t tell them to do that. He didn’t say, “The Babylonians are evil. Stay as far away from them as possible.” Often Christians are tempted to have this kind of stance toward culture. Build the walls high and keep to ourselves, lest we be influenced by the world around us.

On the other side, God did not tell them to live like the Babylonians. He didn’t give them license to adopt the sinful behaviors or false beliefs of those around them. He didn’t say, “Become like the city.” That is another temptation for many Christians. We must remember that we are exiles here. We must live in the world, but not be of it.

God doesn’t say run away from the city. Nor does He say become like the city. Instead He says, “seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and *pray to*

the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.” So live in the city. Pray for the city. Love the city. Seek the good of the city. That was God’s instruction to the Israelites who were in Babylon, and I think this message is extremely applicable to the Christians in Pittsburgh.

This is how we are to live as citizens of the city of God within this city of man. We don’t run away and cut ourselves off from the culture around us. Neither should we become like the culture. But we must love the city and pray for the city and work for the good of the city. That’s why God has us here, and this is a significant part of our church’s mission. We want to be a church that works to benefit the city of Pittsburgh. We want to pray for this city. We want to help the sick and help the poor. We want to be an example of racial harmony. We want to reach out to those who come here from other countries. We want to engage the culture through the arts and in the workplace and in the marketplace of ideas. In all these ways we can be working for the shalom of Pittsburgh.

And I want to encourage you, Grace Church, and remind you of the ways in which you are already a tremendous blessing to this city. We are blessing the city through things like the MOPS ministry, which ministers to dozens of moms in this area. The resource center counsels women in need and helps them in whatever crisis they may find themselves. Through the deacons benevolence ministry we are able to assist individuals with various needs. Your giving to the benevolence fund has certainly been a blessing to people in our community. Our ministries to children are a very significant way that we are blessing the city, as we seek to raise up another generation who will serve and lead the church and continue to advance God’s kingdom. Those who serve faithfully in the nursery, and teach children’s Sunday school classes and lead the Kids Club on Sunday nights, these ministries are so significant. Through these ministries we are pursuing the shalom of our city.

Also through women’s Bible studies, and various discipleship relationships, and prayer times, and men’s gatherings, we are growing together in the Lord and blessing and influencing others as well.

The small group ministry, as I said last week, is a great way for us to expand our influence in the city. The more places we meet, the more opportunities we will have to bless the city.

As we pray for the city and work for the welfare of the city in all these various ways, we, too, will find peace. It’s a win-win situation. Be a blessing to others, and you will find that you are blessed as well. God will expand your heart and increase your joy and reveal more of Himself to you. Seeking the welfare of the city and praying on its behalf is not a burdensome task. We should not view it as a burden. Rather, it is a delight. It should be something that is on our minds every day.

When we interact with neighbors, how can we be a blessing to them? Think about the houses on each side of you, the homes on your street, on your block, in your neighborhood. What might God want to do through you to bless the people in that sphere of influence around you?

What about at work? How can we be a blessing to the people we come in contact with in the workplace? Christians should be exemplary employees, working diligently and efficiently and peacefully. And we should let our light shine, both in our behavior and in our words. We should live out the Gospel in our deeds and also look for opportunities to speak the truth of the Gospel to those around us.

The ultimate peace that we seek for the city is not just social peace, or economic stability, or racial harmony, or educational opportunities, although we should pursue those things for our city. But the ultimate peace that we seek for the city is peace with God. We have all sinned and put ourselves at enmity with God. We have made ourselves His enemies, and we deserve His just punishment. But God sent His Son to bring reconciliation. Jesus Christ, the One spoken of in Isaiah 9:6 as the Prince of *Shalom*, the Prince of Peace. Paul says in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the peace I hope you have in your life, through faith in Jesus Christ. Peace with God, friendship with God, because Jesus has forgiven our sins and taken our punishment upon Himself. Enjoy this rich peace, both now and forever, and may we as Grace Church proclaim this peace in the city of Pittsburgh, and may we pray for our city and work for its welfare, for in its shalom we will find our shalom.