

"Making a Difference"

Jeremiah 29:11

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Jeremiah is the biggest book in the Bible, with over 33,000 words in the original Hebrew. With apologies to my seminary professors who appreciated the depth and nuance and complexity of this book, I think the essence of the whole of the book of Jeremiah could be summarized in two words.

The first word is **EXILE**.

The Babylonians invaded Judah in the 6th century before Christ, before the common era, leading to turmoil and upheaval. The city of Jerusalem was overrun, with death and destruction all around.

Many people were forced to leave their homeland and go in exile to Babylon, grieving and wondering why this tragic event happened and wondering how long it would last.

In Jeremiah 29 we learn that Jeremiah wrote to the people in exile. In the letter (and through the book) he cautions against false prophets who promise quick and easy solutions, instead letting people know the hard truth, that their exile might last a long time.

God speaks through Jeremiah, encouraging the people to buy houses and plant gardens, to make the best of the challenging situation.

While honestly facing the harsh reality of EXILE, Jeremiah also offers **HOPE**, and that's our second word to summarize the book.

Listen for God's word:

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes....

Life in 2020 feels like a kind of exile. With the coronavirus, with political chaos, with racial tension, with economic hardship.... We are weary and fearful and longing for a return to some sort of peace and normalcy.

In the midst of our exile, I feel like God is calling to us, just as God called through Jeremiah to people in exile: to not only avoid simplistic and naïve answers, but to face the challenge together and do the best we can, to be people of hope.

That's our calling as Christians, as followers of Jesus, to be people of HOPE. Jesus came with good news of God's kingdom, God's realm, God's new reality that is breaking into the world, slowly but surely overcoming the powers and principalities of the world.

And he calls us all to be part of that process, saying to his first disciples, the fishermen, "Come follow me and I will make you fish for people."

It's like Jesus is calling all of us, each of us, saying something like: "Your life matters, wherever you are, whoever you are. And you can make a difference, you can make this world a better place. Come follow me, and let's make it happen!"

At Covenant Presbyterian Church, I get the sense we're hearing that call of Jesus, recognizing that we can make a difference, that we can be people of hope in a time of exile.

Look at what is happening at our church:

- We are providing children and families with crafts and activities to do at home, to keep learning about God's love and how to live as God's people
- We are giving Youth opportunities to gather with masks and distancing—for fellowship and Bible study and hotdogs and pizza, and for mission work around the community, to help feed hungry people.



- We are cautiously making our building available for things like Red Cross blood drives (and we have another one in a few weeks)
- We are doing “Drive Thru Donuts” on the first Sunday of the month, and along with those yummy pastries, we’re reconnecting and encouraging each other.
- We continue to support mission partners like Domestic Abuse Intervention Services, the Road Home, racial justice initiatives, and world mission people with our mission dollars, thanks to your generosity.
- We have welcomed new members via Zoom, and we have Bible studies and fellowship groups using new technology, doing the best we can. I hear about 90-year-olds learning to text. We have worship available by phone as well as video and podcasts.

Yes, the building remains closed, which is sad but necessary. However, the church is very much open, as God’s people are being nurtured in God’s word and being equipped to do God’s work.

And it’s more than church activities. Every day I hear about Covenant people making a difference:

- caring for neighbors with meals and chores,
- sending notes and making phone calls,
- working hard in politics to make this world a better place,
- loving our neighbors in a time of exile.

I’m very thankful for our church and how we’re together making a difference.

Today is Commitment Sunday. One big part of the day involves asking people to make a financial pledge for our ministry in the coming year.

If you're able to do so, thank you, as some folks are facing economic challenges and won't be able to pledge as much as they would like.

There are other ways to commit yourself or recommit yourself to our common ministry of making a difference and being people of hope.

- You can pray for our church and our leaders
- You can open yourself anew to listening for God and striving to serve God
- You can send notes of encouragement and thanks to members who are doing great things
- You can find new ways to be involved via Zoom or however—to connect and grow and serve

Together, we make a difference for one another, but our purpose isn't simply about taking care of us. Our purpose is to strengthen and support each other with God's love, so that we can make a difference in the world, with the things we say and do every day.

In other words, we learn about God's love together, seeing how it makes a difference for us, and then we live God's love every day, asking God to work through us to make a difference in the world.

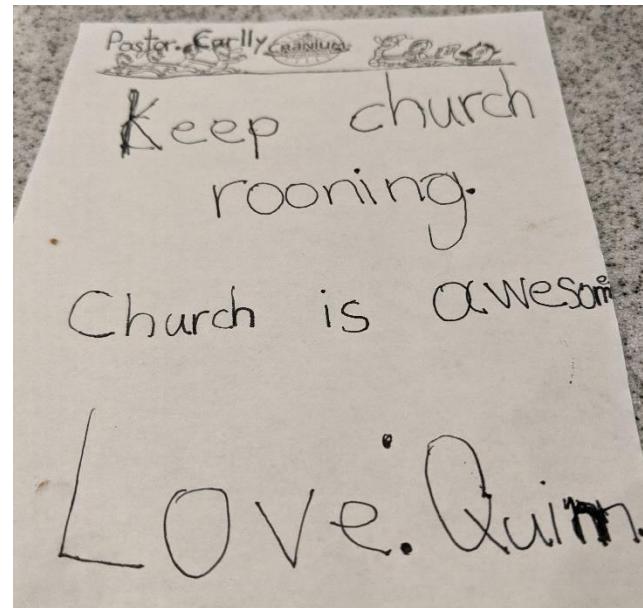
Our time of exile is hard, no doubt. But like Jeremiah, we have reason to hope.

I see signs of hope every day.

- We can be hopeful as we have conversations about a new environmentally friendly parking lot and driveway, which is going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. But we know that our church has made a difference for over 65 years, and we're hopeful we will continue to do so for decades to come.
- We can be hopeful as we continue to care for one another on the journey of life and witnessing to the power of love. A few weeks ago, I got to share communion with Covenant members Dale and Molly Myrlund on their 70th wedding anniversary.



- We can be hopeful as we hear from kids how much they love our church. Just this week Donna and Jeff and I each got personal notes from a young member of our church, telling us how awesome our church is. My note said we have to keep church running.
- We can be hopeful knowing that God in Jesus Christ is with us, as we witness in communion and baptism. Just last Sunday we baptized a little girl who was born in mid-March right in the beginning of our COVID era.



We are living in a challenging time, a sort of exile.

But together as a church, nourished by God's word, following Jesus' teaching and example, we are making a difference for each other and for the world around.

This gives me hope.

Amen.