

Twenty Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Luke 17:11-19
Pastor Samuel B. Adams
Living in Exile
14 October 2007

I just spent the last week in Wainwright, a 30 minute flight out of Barrow in a small plane. The airport there is simply an empty field with landing lights. No terminal. No security lines. I didn't even have to take my shoes off, which is just as well. Because we were outside and there was snow on the ground! And, once that plane dropped me off and left again, I was there. for a while. If I'd had a car to use, there were no roads out. There was not a working phone in the manse where I stayed. The church was locked, and I had no key. To call and talk with Jan, I had to arrange a time and a place to use a phone. I did get access to e-mail once, the day I arrived.

I knew no one in the community. The people I met were from a different culture. We did share a language. And we did share a faith tradition. So we had a place to begin. They were friendly and welcoming – and grateful that I had come. But, I was on my own most of the time. I confess that I felt lonely, and cut off. And isolated from all that was familiar and comfortable.

When I got back, I realized that God had given me a tiny taste of what it means to be in exile. How timely, I thought! Today's reading from Jeremiah is a letter he wrote to his countrymen in exile. They had been rounded up like cattle and herded to a land far from home. They were captives in Babylon, modern day Iraq. They were angry. And they were grieving. For home. For their nation. For their way of life.

But now they were where they were, and they were going to be there a long time. About 70 years. At least three generations. They had to learn how to build an ordinary life – one that moved steadily from one day to the next – while they waited for God to deliver them, send them home. As I thought about the challenge they faced, I remembered a student of the prophets, who, in his own way, has become a prophet from our time.

Walter Brueggeman, is a highly regarded Old Testament scholar and lecturer who taught at Columbia Seminary, a Presbyterian school in Georgia. He believes that we, in our time, have much in common with the believers in Babylon. He believes that we live in exile, too. Though our culture often uses our Christian words, our culture has grown increasingly secular. Our economics are more important than our faith. Personal success often trumps commitment to a larger community. The Bible's language – and way of life – seem more and more foreign, Even to us. That is exile*** that shapes our lives every day.

When I was in Wainwright I realized that the daily, ordinary life of those people is much closer to the daily life of our ancestors in faith. Our huge houses, our truckloads of stuff, our consumer driven economy have become a principal source of meaning for us. Daily we are besieged with advertisements that tell us all the things we need, many of which truly contribute little to our ability to live as God's faithful people. In Wainwright I remembered, again, that I do

not need a car. I do not need a phone. I do not need high speed internet. I need God.

How do we live in a culture that does not share our world view? How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? The psalmist was right. It is so hard. There are too many other songs that are vying for our attention, and our commitment. Our schools and our leaders tell us so many stories, that are not our faith story. Yet they have great power to shape our lives, forge our identity, define our world. Truly democracy and individual freedom are great gifts. But, great as they are, they are not at the heart of our identity as God's people.

If we choose to live as God's people, we are not part of the dominant culture. We are in exile. The source documents of our faith, the stories of others who lived faithfully, are where we go to find clues about how to live faithfully. Jeremiah knew that. That was why he wrote. In an alien culture, the exiles had to do live faithfully, one ordinary day at a time. And they could not do it alone. They needed the unique support that came from those who shared their vision. They had to gather and share their heritage, their story, with one another. To keep their identity alive.

And that's exactly what we do when we gather like this, for worship. When we come together for Living Waters, or gather with friends to read and study the Bible, to pray, to learn disciplined ways of nurturing our faith by our own disciplines of study, prayer, and prayerful journal writing. The being together part is at the heart of it. For Christians the word **WE** is every bit as important as the more familiar **I**. We were not meant to live alone, or to believe alone.

There is a term we use through much of the church year. And think little about. Today is the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Ordinary time is the time in between the climactic moments, the great festivals, that mark the milestones of our faith journey. Ordinary time is where we live our lives, and let life move at its own pace. Ordinary time is where disciples are made.

Like Jeremiah's countrymen – far from their beloved homeland – we must learn new ways to be faithful in ordinary, every day, discipleship time. Like generations before us, we have heard all our lives that God has chosen a special people. Jeremiah's generation thought a catastrophe like the fall of Jerusalem would never happen. But it did. Now, they had to preserve the identity forged in Judah, their homeland. Never mind that it was in ashes. They must be faithful to God.

Faithfulness was more than hearing the words that had been so carefully preserved in their scriptures. It was more than their treasured ceremonies, the religious practices developed over the generations. Yes, these were important. But they were only the surface. The frosting on the cake. But they were not the true substance of what they had lived – and were so fearful that they could lose. Their identity, who they were, was at stake. Their relationship to God defined them. And our relationship to God defines us to, if we will let it.

The people of Judah were a special family, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, the family whom God had chosen, had made – by solemn covenant – to be God's own chosen family. They lived every day in the knowledge of this special relationship. When they were faithful, their

prayers, their reading from Torah, were the life breath, the heart beat of this living relationship. When they were lax, these simply became dull habits that nagged at them, and judged them.

Now, with the stench of Jerusalem's ashes fresh in their nostrils, they found that their faith mattered. More than they knew. To lose that was to lose the great treasure at the heart of their daily life, the very orderliness that structured their days and their nights, their labors and their Sabbaths. And their prayers. For them, that was the meaning of ordinary time. Not boring, inconsequential time. But time ordered – put in order – by their relationship with God.

When he wrote them a pastoral letter from Jerusalem, Jeremiah knew just how they would be struggling, trapped in a culture whose way of life was not grounded in their treasured faith. His suggested ways to live a practical, everyday, ordinary, and still faithful life, and to preserve themselves and their spiritual heritage. He told them to put down roots; to settle, marry, raise families, give their sons and daughters in marriage, have grandchildren and great grandchildren.

God had shown him that enough of them would be faithful to the God of their ancestors. This crucial remnant would keep their feasts and fasts, and gather as they could to read their sacred writings. They would remember and share their powerful traditions with their new family members, and new extended families in their new land. He called them to pray for the welfare of the cities where they had been taken as captives. For their captors. Their new neighbors. This was how they were to order their time now. This was the discipline for ordinary time in exile.

The fruits of Jeremiah's discipline for his people in exile would be evident many years later, when the exile was ending. God had preserved the identity of this people. After 70 or so years in exile, there were new generations of people of faith. Living comfortably as citizens of Babylon, the exiles found new ways to be faithful in those years. They had ancestors who had come from Judah, but they had grown up in Babylon. These were the ones who would return to the ancient Jewish homeland to rebuild Jerusalem, and the temple. Ezra and Nehemiah, must have been great grandchildren of the first exiles. But their's is a story for another day.

Sisters and brother, exile is everywhere. It is here. In fact, it is us, living in all the places where our neighbors do not share our faith, our hope, our commitment to that God whose people we are. Sometimes it makes us clannish and shy. But our survival discipline is much like the one Jeremiah gave to the exiles from Judah. To live each ordinary day, sharing our experience, strength and hope. And praying for our neighbors. For our time, we are the remnant that God has left, like yeast, to make a difference in our time. ***

(In the world) That is the good news. God is good. The scriptures speak are at their most powerful in helping us live in the most grinding ordinariness of life. We have the tools. We know what to do. And God's Spirit is waiting to empower us – and help us empower each other – to a daily discipline of faithfulness. Amen.