

**BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED..... Jeremiah 29: 1-7**

Please pray with me. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful. And kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you will renew the face of the earth. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

HOME - There surely is something nostalgic about the place we call home.

I wonder, what does home mean to you?

For many, it's the place of belonging, of comfort, of love, of knowing and being known, of sharing life together.

In "The Wizard of Oz," Dorothy said, "There's no place like home," as she clicked her heels and hoped for the return to the comforts of her own bed and her beloved Auntie Em and Uncle Henry.

Bible Study author, Gladys Hunt's definition of home is "a safe place", a place where one is free from attack, a place where one experiences secure relationships and affirmation. The people in it do not need to be perfect; instead they need to be honest, recognizing a common humanity that makes all of us vulnerable."

In an article – WHAT HOME MEANS TO THE HOMELESS – most people encountered in the tick-infested swampland, in tents and shacks cobbled together from scraps, said it was the people in their lives that made the trash-strewn patch of mud feel like home. Why, because these carrying people provided peace, safety, and a means for recovery - HOPE!

Many homeless spoke about the animals in their lives as the loyal and nonjudgmental companions that helped them weather the toughest times, offering unconditional love and security.

For me, home was 2943 Marriottsville, Road. It was the address I memorized in kindergarten, the one printed on my driver's permit, as well as the one used to send my college acceptance letter. For me, home was 2943 Marriottsville Road, where I collected years of memories.

Over the years, as I have grown in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, home has taken on a different meaning. Now, home is where THE HEART OF GOD is. In other words, wherever God is, I'm home!

For the Israelites, Jerusalem (The Promised Land) was home. But the Babylonians had forced them into exile. They had to leave Jerusalem and live in Babylon for many, many, years – this time of exile robbed them not just of their home, but their identity, their welfare, and being close to God. – (Because they believed God lived in Jerusalem).

Here they were in a strange land, surrounded by strange people who had other ideas about religion, ate different foods and did many things differently.

This is the context into which the letter from Jeremiah arrived...a word from God.

The Israelites would have been excited – at last there would be good news! God would provide a way for them to return home! Their dreams were about to come true!

But no, the prophet Jeremiah delivered a startling message to the Israelites stuck in Babylon – settle in, build homes, plant gardens, grow your families, marry the strange people -stay there in that strange foreign land and let it become your home. Not just for a little while---but for several generations. Essentially, they were to think about the future instead of looking to the past and praying for an opportunity to leave as quickly as possible.

Their dreams had unraveled. Yet...their dreams unraveled into a vision with possibility: If Babylon prospers, Jeremiah wrote, you too will prosper! Praise God for it!

God was saying that it was OK to settle in this strange place, it was ok to own land, plant gardens, build close relationships with the Babylonians. And even work for the welfare of their host country. It was OK to make this place their home for the time being.

The good news was that even though the Israelites were far from home, God was with them and helped them to make a new and good home while they were in exile.

Another way of describing what Jeremiah was saying could be:

It's time to live, to flourish where you are and to see those around you flourish to.

In verse 7 the words peace and prosperity come from the Hebrew word shalom – meaning peace, wholeness, or completeness. God was calling those people who found themselves in exile –to pray, to seek peace and prosperity – to view their identity in YHWH (YAHWAY) as an opportunity to engage their neighbors, rather than withdrawing into isolation. By doing this, they too will prosper, they too will experience God's shalom. This is good news – even in exile, the church itself can flourish and have a positive impact on the surrounding culture.

**SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US TODAY.**

Perhaps like the Israelites, we've all been **SITTING IN A LOT OF TENSIONS.**

It may not be exile, however the most tightly knit aspects of life have been snagged, unraveled, and disintegrating before our very eyes - Worship, work, school, play, celebrations, relationships, shopping just to name a few.

We want to dream for the future, but everything feels so unknown.

At times like this we convince ourselves that God is far away, otherwise God wouldn't have allowed us to be in the situation that we find ourselves in

today. This is the time that we must acknowledge our feelings but move forward letting our faith lead the way.

We can choose to be thankful for the gift of life no matter how difficult our path is because we are assured that God is with us in the middle of it and that he continues to bring blessings to our lives, even in our most painful moments.

We may be afraid of all the disappointment of this broken world. But God isn't afraid. He's aware. So very aware of his ultimate plans and purposes. And are we not thankful that in this broken world, we have an unchanging God to guide us through.

Here's the good news, even when we try to take control and make assumptions and misunderstand God on every level, He still has a perfect plan – When we pause, recognize our self-reliance instead of seeking help & leaning on God, we are renewed in energy and in faith - giving us the freedom to bloom where we are planted, just imagine beautiful blossoms that burst forth, and abundant fruit is borne.

One of the many joys that I have experienced during this “shelter in place” time was to witness blue jays hatch and grow up in their nest right outside my family room window. Mom would swoop in several times a day with fresh worms, and at night she would cuddle with the chicks and protect them with outstretched wings.

I watched the feathers begin to grow, and then one morning I witnessed a chick hopping daringly from its nest onto the branch of a shrub. Later that day the chick began to hop from branch to branch. Then, the next day they discovered they could fly. I said a prayer for the blue jay and couldn't help but wonder what tree cavity would become its next home.

God's mysterious gift of instinct moves in baby birds, leading them to stretch their wings and fly exactly at the right time. I pray to be given a similar inner direction when God wants me to try new things.

Watching the miracle of new life right before my eyes, caused me to pause and take an inventory of every area of my life.... to celebrate what is, grieve what was, and look for what could be! As my friend flew away, I asked God to give me the courage to step out in faith and spread my wings, when God says it's time.

In this current season of unraveling and weaving something new, where do we spend our time and energy projecting God's beauty in the world. Is our energy being wasted on things that aren't life giving? Do we waste our energy feeding our fears and doubts? How are we choosing to put love first – to love both our neighbors that are easy to love and our neighbors that are difficult to love? How much more could God do to give us a future with hope, if we took this time to live into our new reality and to change the systems that are broken so that all can have life?

Speaking through Jeremiah, God gives the exiles and us a reason to hope. In verse 11, Jeremiah pens one of the most memorable and favorite verses of the Old Testament –“ 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.”

The future of hope might be a situation where we feel like we are more centered in God's will and where we might be able to use our gifts and talents in new ways. Little by little, we may find that God clothes us in more gifts, and often when we take that risk, we find that we are better at doing something than we thought we might be.

We may find ourselves in a closer relationship with God that we've never dared to dream!

How can we as a church continue to work with God to build, plant, multiply, pray?

How fitting that the home page of the Saint James website has two big bold words displayed in red – WELCOME HOME. It further states the following

- “We believe in the importance of living the example of Jesus, by responding to his call to take care of the other people in our world.”

God has placed us in our communities and culture on purpose. God has placed us where we are to seek the welfare of this city. We understand that our welfare is completely intertwined with the welfare of this larger community surrounding us. Jeremiah reminds us that it is in the welfare (peace) of everyone around us that we will find our own welfare.

For me, this is Baltimore. What’s the state of my city? Low average income; A poverty rate that is double the national average; and one of the most segregated cities in the country. What profound opportunities for prayer - the most valuable gift we can give.

Wherever we are, we feel deeply connected to God, which we express in our daily worship. Out of that flows our desire for connection with each other, our community, and the world. We have a heart for shalom, for peace and prosperity in all our relationships – and we want our community and our world to flourish.

We take the time to drive or walk through our neighborhoods and ask God to show us where he is already at work. We may very well begin to see things we’ve never seen before, hear things we’ve never heard before and quite possibly find ourselves with the opportunity to listen, to extend a warm invitation, not to those that can repay us, but to those who can’t – the poor, the sick, the lame, and blind. Just by taking interest in the lives of others, we can continue to spread the good news of Christ.

Thanks be to God for the many modern-day gifts we have that can help us to advance the ministry of the Kingdom even when we are socially separated. Saint James has graciously embraced technology, which provides the platform to gather as a community in a virtual setting. Several Saint James members are currently on a virtual mission trip in Mexico with Give Yea Them to Eat.

As part of this journey, members will learn about rural reality, community development, and faith development in this very impoverished area.

Recently I was extended an invitation to participate in bible study for residents of My Father's House, a recovery home for women in Mt. Airy. This virtual experience allowed residents to connect with others outside the recovery house and learn about Jesus.

And speaking of bible study, Saint James Thursday morning bible study class resumes September 10th. Won't you join us for this time of prayer, fellowship and study.

We do not know what effect the presence of the Jewish exiles had on the people of Babylon. We do know that God was with them and just by being who they were – people of God – they had a witness to that society. In a similar manner God is with us and is using us to be his light in the darkness, God's hands and feet in time of need, and God's messengers of hope and comfort in times of fear, sorrow, and grief. There is no virus, restriction or mandate that can stop the growth and healing love of God; it's up to us how we will utilize this unique opportunity in history to continue to be a light.

Grace and Peace! Amen