

## WHEN LOVE COMES TO TOWN – Week 1

Jeremiah 29

*This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) <sup>3</sup> He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD. <sup>10</sup> This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For 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. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity.<sup>[b]</sup> I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

### Monday, November 15

We are in this brief series on our church vision called: When Love Comes to Town. This week, we're looking at this letter from the prophet Jeremiah to a group of exiles living in Babylon. Here's a little of the backstory of Jeremiah and his life. God called Jeremiah as a youth to declare his word to Judah a good twenty years before the Babylonian army showed up in Judah. Babylon and Egypt were the superpowers of his day, and Judah was wedged between them. All along, Jeremiah told the people what was coming. They themselves would fall under the Lord's judgment because of their idolatry and unfaithfulness. It seems shocking to think that the Lord might use a pagan country, a country like Babylon to teach his own people the virtues of faithfulness. But that is what the Lord did.

Here's our text telling us the background:

Jeremiah 29:1-3

*This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) <sup>3</sup> He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.*

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon at the time. His desire was to build the greatest nation on earth. Rather than exterminate his enemies, he brought the people, their culture and even their gods, home to Babylon. He used the power of cultural assimilation to change the surrounding peoples and nations. His city became one of the greatest cities of the world. So, his power was more than military might. The Babylonian technology and social freedoms and fashion and financial systems were the most sought after on earth. When Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple with it, most of the exiles ended up in Babylon. Of course, there was an immense problem with this. Babylon was also the worldliest city. Because everything and everyone was brought there, everything could be found there, yes everything. And, there

everything goes. In scripture, Babylon becomes the city used as the metaphor for the earthly city that stands against God. As you can imagine, in the sinful city there are many ways you can live. You could go native and go along with what everyone else is doing. Or, you could withdraw and create your own community to keep the city and its influences out. The Jewish people did the later, retaining their tribalism and barricading themselves against the city. They were assisted by false prophets that told them to hold tight. They would be able to go home in no time. The nightmare would be over and they would be free. This was the reason for Jeremiah's letter. He heard reports of the false prophets giving the people empty hope. The word of the Lord came to him, and he sent it along to them almost eight hundred miles away.

Now, his letter begs the question for us. How do we view the earthly city? Are we to buy into the worldview and the lifestyle of the city in which we live? Or, are we to keep ourselves separate? Do we enter into the culture or build our own subculture? Do you complain about the city in which we live or rejoice in the opportunities of the city? The title of our series gives away our perspective, *When Love Comes to Town*. Jesus used two metaphors in his sermon on the mount to explain the calling of his disciples. First, he said they are the salt of the earth. They will bring the flavor of his kingdom even though there are few of them in the world, showing forth the gospel of God's grace. Salt also was an important preservative. Their presence in the city will preserve life as God intends it to be. They will care for the poor and serve those in need. But Jesus also called his people to be the light of the world. He said that his people would become an alternate city, showing forth to the world what his kingdom is all about. I like the way one author has spoken about the dangers. He said we could become spiritual chameleons blending in with our surroundings so well that we no longer show the distinctive nature of the kingdom of Jesus. Or, we could become musk ox. The musk ox has a special way of self-protection. They form a circle with their horns facing out, blocking all dangers and keeping all others out. Yes, we could take up a defensive and protective posture that has no interaction with the city. The goal of God in Christ is to change the architecture of our hearts as we learn the way of love of Jesus. Instead of living as chameleons or musk ox, we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We do this not because we are right and everyone is wrong, but because we have learned the way of love and service from Jesus our king. It is his love in our lives that becomes the impetus, the motivation for all we are and all we do.

Let's pray:

Faithful and gracious Father, we admit that it can be difficult to live in an immense city like Miami. There are days when we wonder if we fit in at all, and other days when we know this is home. Help us to see our city and the people around us through your eyes. Teach us the way of love through Jesus. We pray. Amen.

## **Tuesday, November 16**

Have you ever felt like you were in exile? You were not where you wanted to be? Most of us have had the feeling of being out of place at one time in our lives. We can feel like a stranger because we don't feel that we fit in. To move the Jewish people to Babylon involved culture shock. As we learned yesterday, their response was withdrawal from the city and waiting for their day of return to their land and their way of life. But they didn't realize that day would lie decades into the future. They were going to have to come to terms with Babylon.

Here is what Jeremiah tells them:

Jeremiah 29:4-5

*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.*

Wow! This must have been quite the surprise to the Jewish people in Babylon. No doubt, they were living in tents and counting the ways until they could leave. But Jeremiah tells them to make a life in the city. To build a house meant thinking of yourself as a permanent resident. This meant committing to staying and building community, having a sense of ownership and commitment to a place. It meant becoming a stakeholder among pagan people and calling it

home. I remember years ago when our presbytery commissioned a missionary to go to Turkey, an overwhelming Muslim country, the missionary said that he rented a dwelling in which to live and then bought short-term furniture. Folding table and folding chairs, wicker chairs and items you would use for a short-term stay. He was convinced that within a few weeks, he'd be deported and he didn't want to invest a great deal of money in things he would no doubt have to leave behind. He expected his stay would be brief, and he would be forced to leave. Then I remember seeing this missionary seven years later. He was still serving in Turkey, and a day came when he realized he would not be leaving right away. He realized he needed to get permanent furniture and to think differently about where he was living and what he was doing. You see, he realized he had a mindset that dictated his life.

We can do that same thing. If we know we are moving, why go deep in friendships with our neighbors? Why find a place of service and ministry in the community? Why sink deep roots into relationships and commit to walk with people? You see, the command the Lord gave his people meant more than building houses rather than living in tents. It was about how they were to see themselves in Babylon. Would they come to see themselves as part of the community? Would they care for the city? Or, would they remain outsiders in their hearts? God is calling his people to engage, to commit, and to become stakeholders. There was a remarkable mindset that came with becoming followers of Jesus. First, we always feel like sojourners and pilgrims knowing that our true home is with the Lord himself. We know our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await our savior from there. At the same time, we are to love our neighbors and invest in the city where we live. We are to sink deep roots into community and make a home but always remember our future hope. We are told that Abraham was looking forward to a city whose foundations are found in God. This is what we do as well. Here's why it can be so difficult. The first city was built by Cain, the man that killed his brother. Running from God, he sought to build a place for himself. He didn't build a garden. He built a city. Why did he do this? He could gather people alongside his family, and they could in a sense build a world for themselves. They could provide for each other and protect each other. Cain felt vulnerable and sensed his need apart from God. In the life of a city, he could have what he needed. It is often for these same reasons that people flee to the great cities of the world today. The first city was to make a life apart from God. Cities today can convey the same promise. Gathered together, we can provide and protect. But notice that the Lord commands his people to become part of the city of Babylon. Why would God do this? God plans the transformation of the city. God loves cities because so many people live there. That is the plan of the God, the transformation of the city in preparation for the city of God. Ok. That's heady stuff, theology. In practical terms, God calls us to the city to bring his light and love to the people that live here. Though we set our minds on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, our feet are firmly planted on the ground. We have a calling to love our neighbors and to build a life here where God has called us to live. Yes, we'll end today with the most shocking statement in this letter, *This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile...* Yes, Nebuchadnezzar might have brought the exiles to Babylon, but the Lord brought you here. He carried you into exile in the earthly city. The Lord has a purpose in this. But have we committed to settle down? To build a life here?

Let's pray together:

Lord God, we can feel like our lives are a mistake or that we are not where we are supposed to be. Remind us of your sovereignty, that you are working all things according to your purpose in Christ. Remind us that you have us here in this city for a reason and that you are working. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

### **Wednesday, November 17**

For our Granada 2022 vision study, we are asking what happens when love comes to town. The Apostle Paul was visiting one of the most important cities in his world, the city of Athens in Greece. Yes, of course, Paul had visited other great cities, but he had never seen anything like this. Athens is home to the cradle of western civilization, the home of the great Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Still, it was shocking to find the city filled with idols. Idolatry was anathema in Israel, and the Jewish people did all they could to remove idols far

from them. This was a point of pride and purity for them. Athens (and Babylon for that matter) was the opposite. The gods and goddesses from across the empire were represented there. A whole pantheon of gods was on display. No doubt, Paul walked through the city stunned and sick over it all. But in the process he came across a strange statue erected to an unknown god. As Paul spoke to people in the marketplace of Athens, he was invited to make an address at “speakers rock”, right at the foot of the acropolis. Here he had the chance to tell them about the God they did not know.

He explained:

*“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*  
-Acts 17:24-27

Paul talks not about one god among many, but the one true and living God. This God does not need humans to erect monuments in his honor. He is not a local deity like the false gods they worship. He is the one that created every human being. He established the nations. He decided where they should live on earth, and even set the boundaries of their nations and the times in which they would live. He created the cultures of the world. Now, they had never heard of any God like this. But why did God create the nations and cultures of the world? He did this so that people might go in search of him and perhaps find him.

Now, this was heady stuff. There is one true and living and all-powerful God that has planned life in our world with purpose that people might find him and know him. No message like this had ever been heard on Mars Hill. These people occupied themselves in endless debates day after day about the newest teaching on the market, and here was the truth being shared with them. As we think about Jeremiah and his message, over 600 years earlier, the Lord told his people that it was he that carried them off to Babylon. This was according to his plan. Yes, it happened in history through the design of Nebuchadnezzar, but it was planned and purposed by the Lord. I wonder if we believe this about our lives. Beyond the circumstances that brought you to Miami, whether through birth, or through a job, or through family connections, do you believe your presence here is part of the plan of our sovereign God? If you do, this will alter the way you see things. It will also cause you to look for and live into the purposes of God for you. You will begin to see that God has a plan for you while you are in Miami. Sometimes I hear people complain about Miami, the crowded roadways, the disrespect, the oversexualization, and the cost of living here. I encourage them to first see that they are here on mission from God. That means they are called to love their neighbors, to find ways to share God’s grace, and also to serve others. I also encourage them to stay as long as they can and to make the most of the time the Lord provides to them here. This was what Jeremiah was telling God’s people. Yes, you are far away from home. This may not be where you wish to be, but God has you there for a purpose. Being faithful to God will mean finding your purpose and giving yourself fully to the Lord there. I think of this when I think of Jesus. The incarnation, or the taking on of flesh for God to become a human being, was at great cost. But Jesus had a purpose from the Father. This is why he came to the earthly city. He wanted to reveal the love of God and God’s plan to bring redemption to the entire world. Do you feel like you are on mission while you are here in the city? How can you live that out each day in what you do?

*This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon... -Jeremiah 29:4*

Let’s pray:

Faithful and loving God, remind me this day that you called me where I am. Help me to see your purposes in the mundane moments of my day. Help me to see that every moment and each person matters to you. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

## Thursday, November 18

I remember being rocked near Christmastime of 2013 when the news from Benghazi reached us about a teacher from Texas living there. Yes, you got that right. Ronnie Smith, his wife Anita, and his son were living in Libya and working at the International School in Benghazi. After the US ambassador was killed two years before, the Americans left. All except Ronnie and Anita.

One student said:

*He was the most amazing person, more like a best friend or a family member. After everything that happened in Libya, we were losing hope and he was the only one who was supporting us...*

What were they doing in Benghazi of all places? Yes, Ronnie was a Christian. And, yes, he had been warned about the security situation in Benghazi. Then Ronnie and Anita talked and prayed about the dangers. Sadly, on December 5<sup>th</sup>, Ronnie was out for his morning run when he was gunned down. Less than two weeks later, Anita wrote an open letter to the Libyan people. No, it wasn't filled with anger over what happened. It spoke only of love and forgiveness.

In part she said:

*To his attackers: I love you and I forgive you. How could I not? For Jesus taught us to "Love our enemies" — not to kill them or seek revenge. Jesus sacrificed His life out of love for the very people who killed him... His death and resurrection opened the door for us to walk on the straight path to God in peace and forgiveness.*

Astoundingly, Ronnie's love was shared all over the Muslim world. TV stations in Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait carried the story. Anita explained in Arabic about her love for the people and even the attackers. In a world driven by hate and a thirst for revenge, nobody had seen anything like this in Libya. They had seen tanks and guns and soldiers. But, not love. As I read this story, how could I not think about Jesus, and how he was born into danger and lived his life under threat and died to save his enemies?

Now, this week we have been looking at the letter Jeremiah sent the Jewish exiles that had been carried to Babylon. His letter tells them they need to rethink their situation. They were expecting to go home any day, but the Lord told them they would need to settle down.

Then there is this surprising command:

Jeremiah 29:7

*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.*

Yes, the Jewish people, whose lives had been torn apart by war, are to seek the peace of their enemies. Again, there is nothing like this in the world. Hatred seems to have a very long shelf-life. It can be sustained and grow across generations. But here was the command of God to bring peace. To help the city prosper. Now, we might wonder how to translate this into terms we can understand today. We are not in Benghazi, but in Miami. What does seeking the peace of our city mean? Well, that word peace is a loaded word that carries a lot of freight. It means fullness, wholeness, soundness, and completeness. In practical terms, it means protecting our neighbors from harm. Coming alongside them to relieve distress. It means fostering a child that has no home, tutoring a child that has fallen behind in school. Working to make sure people have adequate housing and medical care. Yes, it is basically the provision of support and care that will lead our city to greater health. It is leading people to peace with God and with each other. It means helping people find jobs that will build their sense of dignity and also provide for their families. It is inviting people into a living community of faith where we learn to walk together and love one another despite vast differences between us. It is seeing ourselves as God's ambassadors bringing the life of his kingdom into every corner of our city.

Now, of course, this is a tall order and none of us can fill it. But each of us can have a little part in it. We can begin right where we live by giving time to a neighbor, by practicing hospitality and finding ways to give ourselves to serving others. That's what Ronnie and Anita Smith were doing

in Benghazi. They didn't have any illusions about changing the world. They only thought of using the gifts God gave them to spread his peace, the true shalom of the kingdom of God. Why do we take this as our mission? Because this is the mission that Jesus himself took. He entered into our world on a mission to serve others and not to be served. And, yes, what Jesus did changed our world, and he continues to change our world one person at a time, as evidenced in your life. Like in Libya, the world has seen division and violence, hatred and oppression. Let the world see the love of Jesus at work in you and in me.

Let's pray:

Lord, God, we are taught to put ourselves first, yet we see Jesus, and he has made himself the servant of all. Continue to teach us the way of Jesus so that we might come to walk as Jesus walked. To the praise of your glorious grace. Amen.

### **Friday, November 19**

Not too long ago, the news carried the story of the amazing adventure of Richard Van Pham. Pham had planned a short sailing excursion from Long Beach, California. A storm came up, breaking the mast of his 26ft sailboat. His small outboard motor wouldn't run. Richard was adrift. I'm not talking about a few days. He was missing for almost four months. Imagine eating fish and turtles, catching rainwater in a bucket. Drifting 2,500 miles. Every day he scanned the horizon for any sign of people who might be able to help him. Then one day a plane spotted him. Soon, a 453-foot guided-missile frigate rescued him. 300 miles off Costa Rica. The ship's commander said:

*It's a three-hour cruise gone bad. It's like a cross between Gilligan's Island and Robinson Crusoe.*

Interestingly enough, Richard didn't ask to be rescued. He thought he could still rescue himself. He asked them to repair his mast, and his outboard motor, and let him go home! Thankfully, they didn't listen to him. They got him to safety and off his decrepit boat. Have you ever been lost, really lost? What if you were lost and thought you were ok, not lost at all?!

Now, as we read the story of the Jewish people in Babylon, they were lost. Really lost. But along the way they had gathered a group of false prophets to tell them that everything was ok.

Here's what our text says for today:

Jeremiah 29:8-10

*Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord. <sup>10</sup> This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.*

There is a lot here to unpack. First, there are many ways you can come to see your life. There always seems to be someone ready to tell you what you want to hear. The Jewish people wanted to hear that their time of exile would be brief. That they should keep their bags packed because they would soon be going home. These lies from false prophets created a false narrative that led to a faulty way of living. It is amazing how the story you see yourself in becomes the roadmap for the decisions that you make. What you think your life is for. Why you think you are here. These things will generate your worldview and your lifestyle. Now, we also have plenty of false prophets today. They will tell you that your life is all for you, for your wealth, your success, your happiness. They will tell you that is why God exists. He exists to ensure you have those things. God is at your disposal to give you what you want and when you want it. But that is a false narrative written to satisfy us rather than the truth about God and his world. Yes, the way of Jesus leads to peace and joy, but our world is about God and his glory, not us and self-actualization. This is the lesson that the Jewish people had to learn in Babylon.

The truth is we can be like Mr. Pham on his boat. We are lost, and we can think we are just fine. Here's the next chapter from his story. When he got back to southern California some people gave him money, and one man gave him a new boat equipped with a radio, flares, compass and even gps. The whole deal, so he would not get lost. One year after the first rescue, Pham was picked up about 30 miles off the coast in a second rescue by the Coast Guard. The commander said:

*He was lost and disoriented. He told us he left Long Beach three days ago and was in the process of trying to make his way back.*

His boat was not heading toward land, but further out to sea. The man who gave him the boat heard about it:

*I'm sad to hear he's confused and disoriented. If he used the navigational equipment I gave him, he wouldn't have been lost.*

Navigation equipment. God has given us this as well, to keep us from getting lost, so that we can live on mission and for his glory. He has given us his word and Jesus to show us, in person, what it means to live the mission of the God that created us and our world. The good news in the story of the Jewish people was that, despite their failure to connect to their mission, God would be faithful to his promise to bring them home. It wouldn't be right away, but seventy years in the future. These years became as their first desert years with the Lord, time to learn the ways of the Lord and to come to walk with him afresh. Their story is a source of hope for us. As far as we wander, or as lost as we may become, God remains faithful and will do as he has promised us in Christ. Jesus is God's "yes" to every promise he has made to us. We can rest in him.

Let's pray:

God our provider, you point us toward your truth and invite us to walk in it. We easily become distracted. We wander and stray. Thank you for never giving up on your people. Thank you for leading us back to the mission you have for us in your world. Help us to live from the truth of who you are and all you have promised. In your name we pray. Amen.

### **Saturday, November 20**

Perhaps, you have heard the funny story of the person that was playing Bible roulette. No, not Russian roulette with a gun, but with a Bible. The way you play it is to open your Bible to a random page and drop your finger on a random verse. Then you read it and take this as God's message to you. One poor misguided person went to his Bible playing Bible roulette. He first randomly turned to Matthew 27:5, "And he (that is, Judas) cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself." This was a troubling verse to choose at random. So, the man became anxious and quickly turned to another random page and placed his finger on the first verse, Luke 10:37 "...Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise." Ok. What are you going to do with that? Of course, we need to read scripture in context, otherwise you can twist scripture to say almost anything.

Here is our text for today:

Jeremiah 29:11-14

*<sup>11</sup> For 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. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."*

Now, that first verse has been chosen by so many people as their favorite verse in the Bible. It is this stunning promise of good will from God toward us. God wants to give us a hope and a future. But before we rush to claim that verse for our own, would we want to be in the place that the people who received that word found themselves? Yes, they were a people that had lost

everything. Their world was first turned upside down and destroyed. Judah went through a twenty-year saga of occupation by the Babylonians that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem. They had been taken back to Babylon in exile. It was an eight hundred mile walk that took months. The best example from US history is the trail of tears. Five tribes of native Americans, the Seminole, Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands to places in the Midwest as ordered by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. About 60,000 people were displaced. Many of them died on the journey, and those that lived found themselves in a place that would never feel like home. This is what happened to the people of Judah. And, in the midst of this moment, God tells his people that he has a future for them. There is purpose, and he wants them to prosper. This sounds as strange as Bible roulette. How are you going to believe this is the word of God? They had seen everything but peace and prosperity. From their perspective, they had no future. That is why this passage is so beautiful and powerful. It is not only because of God's promise, that he does fulfill by the way, but because of the pain they experienced and the loss they knew. It would be like promising that the Marlins would win the world series, but yes, the world series has already passed. It just would not be possible. For how would it be possible for the Lord to extricate his people from the grip of the most powerful country on earth and to resettle them back in their homeland. How is that going to happen? It must have seemed like a pipedream.

Often, this is how the gospel sounds to people today. "You tell me that God came to earth?! I'm not even sure I believe in God. That he died for me and rose from the grave. He defeated death and is coming again to bring the fullness of his kingdom?! Really, you've got to be kidding me." But this is the good news. God plans to give us a future, and that is the source of our hope today. It is not wishful thinking. We know this because God's plan is already afoot. It is underway in Jesus. We see this in his resurrection and God's promise to make all things new. Yes, it is true, we often feel like a people in exile, a displaced and mislocated people. Yes, the return of Jesus and the fullness of his kingdom is not likely to come today, though that is our desire, and we are always to anticipate his coming. Yes, seventy years later God made good on his promise. The unthinkable happened as the exiles were allowed to return, and the temple and the walls of Jerusalem were ultimately rebuilt. So, yes, we can know the plans God has for us, plans to prosper us, to give us a hope and a future. This isn't the announcement that all is hunky dory right now, so don't worry about, but it is the promise that a new world is coming in Christ.

Here is what Jesus told his disciples:

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God[a]; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. -John 14:1-3*

Let's pray together:

Lord God, it has been so long. Your people have waited so very long. Help us not to waver in our faith or to live in fear. Enable us by your Spirit to trust in your promises for us. Empower us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, waiting for his appearing, and at the same time living the mission you have for us in him. For we pray in his name. Amen.