

**From the Pulpit of  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

A New Beginning

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Jeremiah 29:10-14  
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Very early in my ministry I read a book by Walter Brueggemann, a wonderful Old Testament scholar, called “The Prophetic Imagination.” I remember being so excited by the book I couldn’t wait to share it with the rest of the staff. It is on my personal list of most influential books. I have read many of Brueggemann’s books over the years. This week I took off the shelf a book called “Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile,” and I read this:

“Ministry, as derived from Jeremiah, is as much concerned with the *invitation of imagination* as with *the practice of ethics*. This does not mean ethics is unimportant to Jeremiah or to us. It means rather that we must find a fresh way into the matter. I am increasingly convinced by Paul Ricoeur that people are changed, not by ethical urging but by transformed imagination.”<sup>1</sup>

Jeremiah – as well as the other prophets with him – did not simply say “you need to do this.” He encouraged the people to use their imaginations to see things in a new way, to think about not only what was but what might be in and through God’s love and power, to allow God to shape their imaginations and vision.

The people of Israel were in exile, and it was absolutely devastating to them. Everything they thought made them what they were, and everything they thought provided for their security – the temple of the Lord – and everything they had in their homeland, was going to be taken away from them and they would find themselves in a strange land. Psalm 137 expresses this kind of feeling in the words, “But how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

We think of the Babylonian captivity of the people – actually, it wasn’t all the people, but a significant number of them – as something that happened to the people but it really didn’t make that much of a difference in the long scheme of history. Well, we would think that if we ever thought of the Babylonian captivity, and I don’t think most of us think about it, and some of you may not even know about it. But for the people of Israel at that time, it felt like the end of the world. What is going to happen to us? How will we ever survive such a thing? The only thing they could see was the immediate present, and they couldn’t see anything beyond what looked like the destruction of all that they knew.

Enter the prophets and their hopeful imaginations. Enter the prophets with their way of seeing the power of God when all the people could see was bad news. Enter the prophets with a new vision of what God could yet do with the people.

The promise was that they would be going home. And going home did not just mean back to the way things were, but there would be a new beginning, a new chapter in their story, that God would do something new with them. That is also a promise we see in the prophet Isaiah, where

God says, “Behold, I make all things new.” And it is the promise we have almost at the very end of the Scriptures, in Revelation 21 – “See, I am making all things new.”

If the people were trusting in themselves, they would have little hope. They would stay in exile. But God, through Jeremiah, said “I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Hope in exile. Hope for the future which looked so desolate and so uncertain. Hope for being re-created.

In a lot of ways, First Presbyterian Church has been in a kind of exile for the last 2 and ½ years. There was a lot of turmoil with the pastors resigning, and basically a week after that happened COVID shut everything down. Remember what I just said about the people of Israel: Everything you thought made you what you were felt like it had been taken away from you, and you found yourselves in a strange land. The people you thought would be helpful for you were not helpful, and in some ways their efforts made you feel like you were deeper in exile.

And then these words: I will fulfill my promise to you. “I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm.” We can also talk about the words of Jesus to the disciples at the end of the gospel of Matthew, when they didn’t really know what was going to happen after Jesus’ resurrection, and how they were to do what Jesus called them to do: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” I am with you, even in the midst of what feels like exile. I am with you, even when you felt like you were in this all alone. I am with you, even when you are wondering about all that has taken place and how to move forward from all of that. I know the plans I have for you. I am with you.

Hope in exile. Hope for the future which may have looked so desolate and so uncertain. Hope for being re-created.

So now First Presbyterian Church is ready to receive a new pastor, to have a new start. You are not the same as you used to be – exile will do that to a church. But you are still God’s people, still the body of Christ, and the door is about to open to that which is new and can be so very exciting.

What will you do with this opportunity? Will you be open to that hope-filled future? Are you willing to be changed by a transformed imagination, which means that the church is not going to be like it once was, but that the church can be something far more than it is right now? Are you open to new possibilities for ministry, new ways to be involved in the community? Almost 15 years ago I was installed as the moderator of Tampa Bay Presbytery, and during that service there were several questions, similar to the ordination/installation questions for clergy and church officers, that I was asked. One of the questions was “Do you welcome the responsibility of this service because you are determined to follow the Lord Jesus, to love neighbors, and to work for the reconciling of the world?” And I remember before I said, “I do,” that I heard the powerful words of that statement in a new way – “follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world.” Wow.

As you have come through this time of healing – and there is more healing still to be done – but as you have come through this time of exile, as you are being continually changed by a transformed imagination, are you willing to be that instrument of Christ’s peace in this community and in this world, which is the call that is before you? Are you willing to step forward in faith into the wonderful future that is before you, but which you cannot begin to know unless you take those steps to follow where God’s Spirit leads, to follow where Jesus leads, to follow the God who calls you from the not yet?

The people of Israel were told that their exile would soon be over, that they would be going home, even though home was not the same as it was when they left it. One of the things that can happen when people are in exile, however, is that they can become used to that exile, almost complacent in that exile, so the thought of a homecoming might be challenging, even a bit frightening, because we don't always do well with that which is new. We prefer what we know, simply because it is known. To move into the future can be overwhelming, a bit intimidating, because it is the unknown.

But God is calling you and leading you into a bright future. Your response, though, cannot be a passive response. The people of Israel who went back home had a lot of rebuilding to do. First Presbyterian Church has some rebuilding to do. No, thankfully you don't have to rebuild the temple, the physical structures. But there are relationships that need to be rebuilt. There are ministries that need to be rebuilt or started anew. And, yes, there are financial needs associated with the new beginning. That is why the stewardship message this year is "Stepping forward in faith."

We have a small plaque in our home which we bought in Selma, Alabama, when we were on an educational tour about the Civil Rights Movement. It is a quote by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It says, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Stepping forward in faith means you do not necessarily know what the future holds, but you know the one who calls you to get out of the boat and follow him. So you get out of the boat, you listen to and for Jesus, you allow the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you, and you give of yourself – your time, your financial gifts, your heart – to follow the One who showed us a new way to live, a new way to love, a new way to give.

Dear friends of First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota: Hear again the words from Jeremiah. "I know the plans I have for you." God is leading you out of exile and into an exciting new beginning. Even though you don't see the whole staircase, take the first step, then the next step, then the next step, in giving and loving and serving, because you are being led into a glorious and hope-filled new beginning.

To God be the glory and the praise, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Fortress Press 1986, p. 25