

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**October 10, 2010**  
**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

**“They’ll Know We Are Christians”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Let me share with you a little fable I heard at a Clergy gathering...

God was deciding who to choose as the “Chosen People” and so God went to the Assyrians and said, “I might choose you as the Chosen People, what would you do if I did?”

The Assyrians said, “Well God we are a good choice because we are rich and we have lots of gold, and we would make many icons of YOU. We would put statues of you all over Creation.”

God said, “Hm-m-m-m-m-m-m, tempting. I’ll get back to you.”

Then God went to the Babylonians and said, “I might choose you as the Chosen People, what would you do if I did?”

The Babylonians said, “Well God we have a big army and a powerful military. We would conquer new lands and convert more and more people to worship you.”

God said, “Hm-m-m-m-m-m-m, tempting. I’ll get back to you.”

The God went to the Jewish people and said, “I might choose you as the Chosen People, what would you do if I did?”

The Jewish people said, “Well we aren’t very rich, we don’t have much gold, we don’t have a big army so we don’t have much military might. But we are great storytellers and we would tell your story far and wide.”

God said, “Hm-m-m-m-m-m-m. That’s perfect. I choose you.”

Okay, that is a cute fable. But in fact, many, many years ago, when the Jewish people were exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon, **it was their storytelling** that kept their faith alive.

Do you remember this piece of history?

The time was the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and it was a period of unparalleled crisis for the Jewish people. The king of Judah led a rebellion against their Babylonian overlord, King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar's response was swift and decisive—in 597 BCE Nebuchadnezzar's army conquered Jerusalem. The city's leading citizens—chief officials, military leaders, craftsmen, artisans—were taken into exile, marched to Babylon. Historians believe that 10,000 Jews were deported in what is referred to as “the Exile” or “the Captivity.” The Jewish people remained captive in Babylon for sixty years, until 539 BCE. Then Cyrus, the king of Persia, captured Babylon and in accordance with his policy towards subjugated people, Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

While in captivity, the Jewish people suffered greatly. They were angry and grieving, discouraged and beaten down. We hear their cries of sorrow and defeat in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

*<sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.*

*<sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’*

*<sup>4</sup> How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?*

*<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!*

*<sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.*

During the Exile, the Jewish people turned to prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah for instruction and guidance about how to behave. The Jewish people were grieving and defeated and yet Jeremiah said: do not give up, do not give in. While in exile, do not just survive, but thrive. This was a radical message. The Jewish people were filled with sorrow and yet Jeremiah told them: Do not retreat, withdraw, curl up and die.

You may be exiled, you may be captive in Babylon, but you are still the Jewish people, so build houses, plant gardens, eat, marry, have children and thrive.

Listen again to the passage from Jeremiah that is our reading for today:

*These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>*

Jeremiah wanted the Jewish people to thrive during their captivity, not to diminish, decrease, wither away. He is instructing them not to mourn each day but to live and reproduce and make their lives full and meaningful where they were...in exile.

Jeremiah and the other prophets were critically important to the Jewish people during the Exile for the people were separated from their homes, their land, their city—Jerusalem—and their temple. The prophets gave the Jewish people instructions on how to behave during the captivity, how to function in exile. Besides admonishing them not just to survive but thrive even while captive, the prophets told the Jewish people how to maintain their identity as Jews. The prophets told the Jewish people how to worship, how to keep their faith alive in a foreign land surrounded by non-Jews, how to preserve their traditions and hold on to their uniqueness as Jews, how to maintain their distinctive Jewish qualities and characteristics. The overarching message from the prophets to the Jewish people in captivity was: REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE.

And how did the Jewish people do this? How did they, in captivity, in exile, remember who they were? They held onto their Jewish identity in several ways... one was that they observed the Sabbath together, they created synagogues or what we would call home churches and they worshipped together; they also continued to circumcise male newborns in traditional Jewish ceremonies; another and maybe the most important way that the Jewish people retained their identity in exile was that they told the stories of their faith.... They told each other and their children and each other again the stories of Moses and the Exodus, and the Passover and the golden years of King David. They recited prayers together and then they told their stories again.

Consequently, for 60 years, the Jewish people were able to maintain their identity while in captivity—it is stunning really. When in 539 BCE King Cyrus let them return to Jerusalem, the Jewish people were still Jewish. They had maintained their rituals and told their stories and held on to their core identity as Jews.

Now imagine if 10,000 Christians from this area were taken into captivity and exiled to Ohio. Imagine if we were taken captive to a region where we were surrounded by non-Christians.

Imagine if the prophets among us rose up and said, remember who you are....hold on to your identity....marry and plant gardens, thrive while on foreign soil, live fully and remember who you are.

What would WE do to remember who we are?

What would make us retain our identity as Christians?

How would our captors know that we were Christian and that being Christian meant that we were different and unique?

Earlier today we sang the hymn, “They’ll Know We are Christians By Our Love.” Would that be it?

Would we maintain our identity by being loving—to each other and to our enemies?

Is that how we would know and our captors would know that we were Christian?

If we were exiled to Ohio and surrounded by Hindus or Muslims or Pagans or Jews or Buddhists or agnostics or atheists, how would we maintain our identity and how would people know we were Christians?

While in Exile in Babylon, the Jews maintained their observance of the Sabbath, they circumcised male babies, they formed synagogues or small worship groups, and they told their stories.

What would WE as Christians do in exile that would maintain our identity?

Maybe we could create home churches—maybe we would gather in each other’s houses for worship. Maybe we would remember and sing our favorite hymns.

Maybe we would recite the Lord’s Prayer, like we do here each Sunday.

Maybe we would say the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

Maybe we would baptize each new baby—making three watery crosses on the baby’s head while blessing the little one.

Maybe we would share Communion together, breaking bread and sharing the cup and saying the words of institution.

Maybe we would do all these things—and they would help us hold on to our identity and remember that we were Christians.

Our rituals and ceremonies would matter so deeply.

But the MOST important thing we could do is what the Jews did—they told their stories. Over and over, to the children, to each other, over and over, they told their stories.

To maintain our identity as Christians we would need to tell our stories, the essence of our stories. The Christmas story would be stripped of the gifts and the glitter, the cards and mall music, the baking and the wrapping. The Christmas story would return to its essential points...we would tell of a baby born to an unwed teenage mother Mary and her faithful companion Joseph. And we would say that the poor family was sleeping in a barn and the baby came, and they were pretty broke, and the wandering shepherds who smelled like their sheep and slept under the stars recognized that a special being had been born and they knelt and worshiped the baby. And the baby grew to be a remarkable man who loved peasants, they were his people, and he loved lowly shepherds like those who had been at his birth. We would tell the story of our beloved Jesus—we would recount the stories of his ministry and his life. We would tell stories of Jesus the radical who preached not only loving one's neighbor but praying for one's enemies, Jesus the revolutionary who stood up to the Roman system of domination, and Jesus the rebel who reached to the margins of society and touched, socialized and ate with outcasts considered "unclean." We would tell our children and remind each other that Jesus' friends and followers were poor people, women, tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, children, and Gentiles.

If we were in exile, we would tell our stories.

We would tell the story of Holy Week and Jesus' witness and his courage. We would talk about his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his Last Supper and his tears in the Garden of Gethsemane. We would tell of his betrayal with a kiss, and his mock trial and his cross. We would talk about the meaning of the cross. And we would tell the story of how after his death Jesus appeared to his followers and they experienced him with them, and how we experience him with us today.

If we were in exile, we would tell our stories. And our stories would be stripped down to their essence. And we would know them by heart. And we would repeat them with love and tell them often, while we baptized our babies and shared our Communion and sang our songs.

Our captors would know we were Christians by our love....  
our love for Jesus, for each other and even for them.  
And they would know we were Christians by our stories.  
And WE would know we were Christians by our stories.

Our stories about the wondrous man named Jesus who we worship and follow.

Our stories about a still speaking God who moves through our lives and blesses us  
with grace-filled moments and strength in times of trial.

Our stories about a God-filled, song-filled, love-filled community that sustains us  
and propels us to live as Jesus lived.

If we were exiled in a foreign land, we would tell our stories....stories that give our  
lives meaning and our community its identity.

If we were exiled in a foreign land, our prophets would instruct us to build houses,  
plant gardens, take wives, have sons and daughters, multiply, and tell our stories.  
Our prophets would encourage us to recount, relive, and retell our stories.

My brothers and sisters, in the end, it is our stories that identify us as Christians.  
So let us cherish those stories, live those stories and tell those stories...  
because when we tell our stories, we remember who we are.

Amen.