

October 12th, 2025

Jeremiah 29:1-7 “What Disciples Do: Plan Ahead, Be Flexible.

Hi. My name is Jesse. And I’m an empty nester. Oh my word, what a big life-change! Let me tell you about some of the benefits and burdens that go along with being an empty-nester. Some of the benefits were no big surprise – smaller bills for example. This includes utilities -- water, electric, groceries, insurance and other oddball expenses. Some we didn’t expect at all. We have a level of privacy now that we haven’t had in 28 years. We can do all sorts of things that we just weren’t able to do before! Like ... well, I know I shouldn’t say this, but I’m going to say it anyway. When there are *no* kids in the house Mary and I can do things together that were unthinkable when there *were* kids in the house. Sometimes ... sometimes we eat dinner in front of the TV. Or even better – we play video games during our lunch break while we’re eating. Not every time, mind you, but every so often. And it feels so naughty.

The burdens were a surprise though. We knew that we’d miss the kids, but we weren’t prepared for *what* we’d miss. Here on East Washington Avenue, the garbage gets picked up early on Monday morning. Connor was always best at making sure the bins got dragged out to the curb on Sunday nights. Mary and I? Not so much. There are mornings when we hear the garbage truck in the neighborhood and we scramble to get the bins out before the truck gets here. On the other hand, it doesn’t matter much if we miss it because without the kids it takes us three weeks to accumulate enough trash to fill the bin!

It's taken a while to get used to cooking for two people, especially if we have something like spaghetti for dinner, or if Mary makes her pumpkin mac and cheese. We end up eating pasta for *days*. Oh, and that child tax credit was helpful too. But here’s one we weren’t expecting. We no longer have a resource to help us understand the latest fads and pop-culture vernacular. We’re clueless when we’re watching TV or in a social situation and some Gen Z or Gen Alpha kid says, “If your nachos

aren't bussin' send them back." What? Bussin? "Yeah. You know. Ridiculously tasty." No, I didn't know, but thanks for filling me in. I would've had to Google that. "You're still using Google? Washed." Washed? "Yeah. You know, out of touch." Okay, no argument there. Then there are the acrostics. Take "Goat" for example. Anybody remember the phrase, "You're either the hero or the goat?" Being called a goat used to be a bad thing. It meant you were the flaky one who always dropped the ball. It also meant being cantankerous. Cranky people were referred to as, "Old goats." You know what it means now? It's an acrostic – "Greatest Of All Time." That's *completely* opposite of what it used to mean! "Dude, you're the GOAT!" That's not an insult anymore. Now it's about the best compliment you can receive.

Speaking of acrostics, here's one that I've been hearing a lot lately. "FAFO" although that one is becoming a little more mainstream these days. It stands for "Fiddle Around and Find Out." At least that's the G-rated version. It's sort of the ultimate "I told you so." You see it a lot in the Bible. Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden. God tells them that they can eat from any tree in the garden except from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And the next thing you know, they're eating the fruit from that tree and that causes them to be banished from Eden. Hey, God told you not to eat from that tree. God said you'd be banished. You fiddled around, and you found out, didn't you?

I mentioned this one a few weeks ago, but when the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness after they fled Egypt God gave them manna to eat every morning. But God also said, "Don't try to store this manna or it will go bad, and you won't get any more." This was a lesson about divine provision. It was all about trusting God. But what did the people do? They tried to store it, and it rotted. They fiddled around and they found out.

One of the biggest FAFO moments that happened in Israel's history is when they decided they needed a king. The prophets warned Israel – "Don't do it. God is our King. You don't need an earthly king. If you

choose a king, you're going to have King problems." And what did the people do? They ignored God. They fiddled around and ended up with King Saul who was everything Israel *did not* need. Thankfully there were two good kings after Saul -- David and to a lesser degree Solomon. But then the nation divided into two factions – Israel and Judah. Israel lasted for 208 years before the Assyrians conquered them. Judah lasted another 136 years before they were conquered by the Babylonians who rounded up all the priests, prophets, artisans, officials and other movers and shakers and exiled them to Babylon to live out their days. And that leads us to the scriptures we have on the table this morning.

Our Psalm starts out, “By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” and ends with something Carolyn probably wishes she didn’t have to read out loud in worship. These people who were exiled to Babylon were experiencing the very worst possible “Fiddle Around and Find Out” they could imagine. If only they had remained faithful to God. If only they hadn’t strayed so far away from God’s path. If only they had set aside their selfish desires and practiced justice as God had commanded them through the prophets. Oh my word, the prophets! Every single one of them *specifically* warned us about this. And we rejected them, threatened and bullied them, ran them out of town, tried to humiliate them, and God just kept sending new ones to warn us. How many opportunities did we miss to make things right? For years we thought everything was going to be fine. There’s nothing wrong here. This rift between the northern and southern kingdoms is just the new normal. Things will work out just fine. They always do. We don’t need to change or do any kind of self-reflection or moral inventory. We don’t have to do any of this, “Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly.” Or, “Let justice roll down like waters.” Or, “Care for the poor, the widow, and the stranger.” I mean that’s not even realistic! Bunch of woke hippie pie-in-the-sky gobbledygook. But they fiddled around, and they found out.

Here's another term that Gen Z and Gen Alpha use, and it's one that we've talked about here in church. It's a German word – *schadenfreude*.

It means, “pleasure derived from the misfortune of others.” You can see some of that in our Psalm when the writer says, “For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” That’s so cruel! How in the world are we supposed to sing the Lord’s song while being held captive in a foreign land? How are we even supposed to survive? How can we just go about our daily lives pretending that we’re okay when we’re not and *probably never will* be? Well, God had a plan and that plan according to Jeremiah went like this -

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in *its* welfare you will find *your* welfare.

Notice there is no *schadenfreude* here. No “I told you so.” It’s very clear though that God is the one who sent the exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Twice in this passage we see, “*I* have sent you into exile.” But that’s not an “I told you so.” It’s more of a “You should know that I always keep my promises.” And honestly, this sounds a lot like, “Plan ahead and be flexible.” The “plan ahead” is, go ahead and make arrangements to carry on as you always have -- build houses, plant gardens, and start families. I love the phrase, “Multiply and do not decrease.” The “be flexible” is that they should seek opportunities to, “work towards the welfare of their captors and their cities.” How is *that* a “be flexible?” Who does that? Who looks after the welfare of the people responsible for taking us away from our homeland? Well first of all, let’s be careful about saying that the Babylonians are the ones responsible for their exile. The prophets warned them about this for generations. That’s on you Israel and Judah! But back to the question, “Who does this? Who looks after the welfare of these Babylonians?”

The answer is, “God’s people do.” From the time that the people received the Law of Moses in the wilderness, they’ve been told to treat the stranger as one of their own. And now Israel *is* the stranger in a strange land. It’s almost like God is saying, “Do this, and you will understand why I commanded you to care for the strangers in *your* land.” I like how God framed this as, “In welfare you shall find welfare.”

I tell this to people all the time – “The grace you show other people in their time of need may be the grace that you receive some day during your time of need.” Folks push back and say, “That sounds like Karma, pastor, and you know that’s a pagan belief!” Funny, over in Luke 6 Jesus said, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” That sounds karma-ish too. Okay, okay we get the point. But it’s all throughout the Bible. “Cast your bread upon the waters, and it will soon come back to you” as the writer of Ecclesiastes says.

Maybe the message of Jeremiah 29 isn’t just about surviving exile — it’s about transforming it. God says, “Build. Plant. Multiply. Seek the welfare of the city.” That’s a challenge to every one of us who feels displaced or discouraged: don’t wait for the perfect situation to live faithfully. Don’t wait to come “home” to be generous, compassionate, and engaged. Wherever you are — that’s where God’s mission is. Be flexible enough to see that. Be bold enough to live it. And when you do, you’ll discover what Jeremiah meant: “In its welfare, you will find *your* welfare.”