

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 “You Get What Everyone Else Gets”

You ever hear that old saying. “That person’s so heavenly minded, they’re no earthly good?” I heard that a *lot* during my time in the Appalachians. The saying is used to describe folks whose religious convictions and ... well ... preoccupations left them virtually incapable of fully engaging in life, work and relationships. “So heavenly minded, they’re no earthly good.” It wasn’t a compliment. But part of me had some serious problems with that saying, because I thought it was sort of insulting to people who took their faith seriously. It’s like that phrase was meant to rein the person back as if to say, “I’m okay with you being religious, but not *that* religious.” And so I’d think, “What’s wrong with being heavenly minded so long as you aren’t doing anyone any harm!?” The problem was, sometimes people *are* harmed when others refuse to engage.

See, it’s a challenge to work out just what it means to be a good Disciple of Jesus. Part of being a disciple involves looking forward to the day when all things are made new and the reign of God is fulfilled. And yet you’ve also got to live and engage in the ordinary every-day realities of life in a world which, for the most part, really doesn’t care much about such hopes. So we have to ask, “Does my hope for how the world *ought to look* cut me off from living in the world that *is*? Should I stand back from this world and treat it with contempt because I’m waiting for a new and better world? Do my hopes for tomorrow mean that just carrying on means that I’m compromising? Or worse, that I’m *unfaithful*?”

Well, I’ve got some good news if *you’re* struggling with this. You aren’t the first of God’s people to face this issue. The passage Joe read from the prophet Jeremiah addresses this too. Jeremiah’s message was to the people of Jerusalem whom King Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile in Babylon. The question that Jeremiah is addressing is this same question. First of all, the people who the King exiled had no desire to be in Babylon whatsoever. They were there against their will and they were longing and praying and believing for a day when the exile would be

over and they could go home to Jerusalem and start their lives over again. “Today everything is all wrong, but one day it’s going to be all right again, and then ... then we will truly be able to live!” So there was this firm belief that one day God would restore their fortunes and bring them home. The question on the table during the time Jeremiah was writing to them was, “Okay, but how are we supposed to live in the mean time?”

One option was to be “so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good.” They could focus all their attention and hopes on the anticipation of tomorrow. They could look down their noses at everything to do with their present circumstances and refuse to engage with it. “These Babylonians are all jerks, their culture sucks, their food is awful, and their entertainment is weird.” They could say “You know what? None of this has anything to do with us so we’re just going to devote all our time and energy to planning and preparing for that day when we get to go home.”

How often do we see extreme versions of this sort of thinking today? For some reason Netflix has been airing a *lot* of documentaries about doomsday cults. People get sucked into this idea that the end of the world is near and Jesus or whoever they believe is going to save them is about to return in glory any day now. “For *sure* ... in *our* *lifetimes*,” many of them believe. So what do they do? They quit their jobs, they sell their homes, they give all their money and earthly possessions to the cult-leaders and cut off all ties with ordinary life *including family* as they wait to be snatched up to heaven.

So again, that’s one way to do it. Another way that isn’t so extreme is, to just “live in the future.” People who do this don’t seem as extreme as the ones who cut themselves off completely. Because we *all* do this to some extent. “When I get my new job, then life will be worth living.” “After I’m married, I’ll be able to get on with my plans.” “Once the kids leave home, we’ll be free to do everything we ever wanted to do! Bwa-ha-ha ... we’ll go places we want to go and do all the things that really

matter to us.” “When the people around me finally get their act together and stop messing things up, then things will finally work out right for me.” Or the version I most often fall into, “If I can just get through this season of busy-ness, then I’ll be able to get everything together and live the way I know will let me thrive!” I had a lot of time to think about that one on Sabbatical, and hopefully I have come back with a different attitude than before I left. Actually, when you think of it, living in the future is pretty common for some who consider themselves followers of Jesus.

But whichever camp you fall into ... the “cut myself off completely” camp or the “focus on the future” camp, what both these ideas have in common is the belief that nothing worthwhile can happen in the present and that all the things that would really make a difference in life are not things we can do ourselves. We think, “I have no influence on anything. Everything is external ... it’s in the hands of someone else. They’re just things I have to wait for, and when they finally happen, then everything will be changed for me and I’ll be able to live life as it’s supposed to be lived.” This is, of course, a comforting thought, because if it *is* true, then the way my life is at the moment isn’t really my fault! There’s nothing I can do about it. I just have to wait for that one external event that’s going to change everything.

As you can tell from our scripture this morning, Jeremiah calls, “bull-pucky” on this when he’s addressing these exiles in Babylon. “The message from the Lord for you,” says Jeremiah, “is this: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and raise children, and when your children grow up, encourage them to do the same. Seek the welfare of the city where you are in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in *its* welfare you will find *your* welfare.” Or, in other words, “Don’t put off living while you wait for better circumstances. Get on with your life in the here and now. Make the best of it, and live it to the fullest.”

Now ... is this giving up on the hope of a good future? Not at all. Jeremiah is not saying that this exile is going to go on forever or that God will never bring them home to Jerusalem. And if Jeremiah were preaching to the early Christian Church or even to us today, I'm sure he wouldn't suggest that we just forget about the promises of Jesus' return and to heck with any hope for the day of God's Reign of justice and peace coming to earth. There's *room* for hope! There's no doubt that your life may very well be greatly transformed by a new job or a new relationship or a graduation or whatever else it is that you are hoping for. But what Jeremiah's message *isn't* saying is that your life should be put on hold until that big day arrives. Life *can* be lived, and *should* be lived, in the context of our present circumstances.

So ... here's another version of "living in the future" that's not very healthy either. It looks a lot like denial. Probably because it *is* denial. It's delusional in fact. It's when we live as if we are unaware of the circumstances around us. Dark clouds, thunder, hail, wind, floods, and disaster abound, but we're like, "Oh, it's not raining." Again, we're not dealing with the reality that's in front of us. We're only seeing what we'd like to see. It would be like me leaving my bicycle in a bike rack in downtown Chico without a lock because I believe I shouldn't have to live in fear of my bike being stolen. Well ... that would be nice. It would be nice to live with no fear of your bike being stolen. But it's *Chico!* The day you can leave your bike unlocked *is not here yet*. We have to live our lives aware of the circumstances that actually exist ... not just the circumstances as we *believe* they should exist.

We as followers of Christ are called to live in prayerful expectation for the day of the Lord. We pray every week, "Thy Kin-dom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We say, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." We look forward to the day when all things will be made new and the world we live in will be governed by justice, mercy, love and peace. But that kind of prayerful expectation doesn't mean we stop engaging with life. It doesn't excuse us from facing up to and taking account of the risks and dangers of our present situation.

The good news that Jeremiah is calling *us* to hear is that God is with us *now*. Life is a gift from God to be lived to the full *now*. As God has made known in and through Jesus ... no matter what the circumstances are now ... even if you are being betrayed and crucified ... God is with us and is active to redeem what's going on around us. God is active to redeem the world in order to bring life out of death and hope out of despair. Life is a gift, and what you make of it in the present circumstances will play no small part in how good it will be when the circumstances change and the promises are fulfilled. Life is a gift. Embrace it. Give thanks for it. Share it. And live it to the glory of God.