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Restoring Peace In Our Communities

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First Episcopal District Bible Study

The Year of **R E S T O R A T I O N**

Key Verse:

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

Romans 14:19

Study Passage:

Jeremiah 29:1-11

THE RECKONING

We live in a time when many of us struggle to find peace. We struggle for peace of mind, as nearly 20% of adults in the US experience depression, anxiety or other mental illnesses; twenty million people aged 12 and over are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol; and in December 2018, the US had its highest suicide rate in 50 years, the highest of all so-called “developed” nations.¹

Peace in our homes is also elusive when approximately 35% of women and 28.5% of men will experience rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime; almost five children die every day from child abuse—the majority from a parent; and one in ten Americans over 60 experience elder abuse mostly from adult children or spouses.²

Despite the fact that crime rates in the US have fallen since the 1990s, many of us struggle to find peace on our streets and in public places. Mass shootings

are increasing in frequency and resulting in higher death tolls; and hate crimes committed against people of color, religious minorities, and people in the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-

Transgender-Queer (LGBTQ) community rose 17% in recent years.³

These high rates of distress, conflict and violence are all happening during a

time when Americans are increasingly isolated from one another, reporting fewer close friends, meaningful connections to people, and higher rates of loneliness.⁴ The only thing that unites Americans today is the belief that the nation is deeply divided.⁵

Our communities are fractured. Yet our cultural priorities on individual rights, our political focus on narrowed self-interest, and our religious emphasis on personal salvation provide us with little resources to build the social cohesion necessary to sustain lasting peace.





RECLAMATION

God will restore our peace when we see ourselves, not as mere individuals, but as part of a wider community whose peace is connected to and dependent upon others.

RECOVERY

The Book of Jeremiah chronicles the prophecies of Jeremiah, who lived approximately between 650 and 550 BCE. Jeremiah was the son of a priest and was active during the last years Judah's existence as an independent nation. Judah was the southern Kingdom of Israel, which remained after the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and Jeremiah warned the kings and the people that destruction would befall Judah as well if they did not repent and turn from idolatry. The people refused to listen and Jeremiah was persecuted greatly because of his message. Ultimately, the Babylonian Empire grew in power, conquered the Assyrians, invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and forced the king and most of the ruling class and aristocracy into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah was not taken into exile by the Babylonians, but was taken to Egypt by the remaining non-exiled Judean leaders who continued to falsely accuse him and reject his prophecies.⁶

Our study passage is the letter that Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon. After forty years of prophesying death and destruction, Jeremiah pens a missive with a surprising message. To a group of once powerful people who had been conquered, whose religious institution was decimated, who were stolen from their homeland and taken to live in a hostile foreign land, God says, "Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile...for in its peace, you will find your peace" (ch29.v7). Contrary to other prophets who were proclaiming falsely that the exile would be temporary and the exiled should keep a posture of hostility and rebellion (ch.27), Jeremiah prophesied that the exiles would be in Babylon for 70 years, a lifetime, and they should settle in, build lives, and work for the peace of the whole community, understanding that the peace of the Jewish exiles was inextricably linked to the peace of the Babylonians.

The word for peace in Hebrew is *shalom*, and it denotes a sense of wholeness, soundness, health, welfare, prosperity. The opposite of *shalom* is not simply conflict or war, but brokenness, division, injury, impairment, destitution. Jeremiah preached a message in which peace was more than the cessation of armed hostilities, but the restoration of community, which required a redefinition of community and a reconsideration of who was "us" and who was "them."

Sources for the Study

"The Reckoning"

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6. Biddle, Mark E. (2001) "Jeremiah" in Michael Coogan (Ed.) *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Oxford University Press: New York, pp 1073-1166

"Renewal"

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8. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it>
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Jeremiah 29:1-11 (NIV)

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. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin[a] 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.) ³ 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:

⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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. 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.” ⁸ 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. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

RECONSTRUCTION

1. What attitudes, behaviors, and practices might have been part of the exiles' initial strategy for seeking *shalom* and coping with life in Babylon?
2. How might those initial strategies be different from what God was telling them to do in verses 5-6?
3. In v.6, God tells the exiles and their children to marry, but does not specify that these spouses must be Jewish. God also tells them to have many children and increase their numbers. How does this command shift how God wants the exiles to think of themselves in Babylon?
4. In v.7, the New International Version translates the word, *shalom*, by adding the word “prosperity” to “peace” in v.7a and using “prosper” in v.7b. This suggests a “win-win” type of attitude was possible such that “if it (Babylon) prospers, you too (the exiles) will prosper.” Other translations read, “Seek the welfare of the city... for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.” What implications do these translations have for the different ways the exiles could have understood their community in relation to the Babylonian community?
5. In addition to settling down as they are commanded to do (vv. 5-6), and praying for Babylon (v.7), what other things might the exiles do to seek the *shalom* of Babylon?
6. What shifts in attitude would have been necessary for the Jewish exiles to seek the *shalom* of Babylon the way God was calling them to do?
7. V.11 is favored by many who interpret it personally. How does its meaning change if we read it as a Divine expression of desire for the collective *shalom* of a community in and out of exile?

RENEWAL

When the exiles were in Babylon, and may have been tempted to withdraw and turn inward to cope with their trauma, God told them that they would find their *shalom*—their healing, well-being, and wholeness—in the *shalom* of Babylon. God will restore our peace as well, both individually and collectively, when we seek healing through connection to community.

In his book, *Chasing the Scream*, Johann Hari identifies a growing consensus in the social scientific community that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but connection. What was once thought to be primarily an individual problem of poor impulse control, disordered pleasure seeking, or chemical dependence, is now widely understood to be a social problem. People who abuse substances and engage in other addictive behaviors, do so to avoid the pain of trauma that also damaged their ability to form trusting relationships. The solution to addiction, then, is increased connection to people who can communicate to the user that they are loved and valued and will support them as they confront the pain of their trauma. Instead of shaming and shunning, isolation through jails, and increased criminalization, the best response is to offer care, compassion, and connection.⁷ Since 2001, Portugal decriminalized all drugs, stopped spending money arresting and jailing people who were addicted, and spent money instead on reconnecting them to their feelings and the wider society with investments in health, psychiatry, employment, housing and coordination of services. As a result, Portugal saw dramatic drops in injected drug use, HIV and hepatitis infection rates, overdose deaths, drug-related crime and incarceration rates.⁸

This is true not only of people with addictions. God created all people to connect and love; and despite our impulse to isolate ourselves and others when we have been hurt, God is calling us to engage deeper in community to experience peace, healing, and restoration. The Charter for Compassion outlines a series of steps we can take:⁹

- **To Seek Peace in our Families**—Instead of viewing domestic violence and child abuse as private problems, view them as community problems. People who commit domestic crimes often commit public crimes; and ongoing community violence increases rates of family violence. Encourage community leaders to act in support of victims and survivors. Sponsor efforts and program by men and boys that teach respect, consent, and advocate for women's rights. Participate in public actions that raise awareness of domestic abuse in all its forms in your church and across the community.
- **To Seek Peace on our Streets**—Get to know your neighbors. Have conversations with local youth and residents to learn where the high crime areas are and plan increased community presence. Build relationships with the local police and sponsor opportunities for police and residents to connect, dismantle the “us” vs. “them” dynamic, and work together to improve public safety.
- **To Seek Peace in our Society**—Increase knowledge of and connections to people with different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Commit to addressing conflict using peaceful conflict resolution techniques instead of avoiding conflict altogether. Promote restorative justice programs in schools and the criminal justice system. Through processes called “circles,” these programs establish connection by facilitating healing for all those who have been harmed, requiring restitution by responsible parties, and effectively supporting the offender's re-entry into the community.

REVIVAL

1. Our key verse encourages us to do everything we can to pursue peace in community by focusing not only on our own needs, rights and self-interest, but on those of others. Is God calling you to connect with a group of people who are different from you so that you can seek peace together?
2. What would it take for you to seek deeper connection with groups of people who have hurt you or appear to have opposing self-interests?
3. What would have to change for you to earnestly seek your peace, healing and restoration in connection with others?