

“Let The Light Shine In!”

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Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

CHILDREN’S TIME

Look what I have today. I have a mirror. OK, make a funny face in the mirror. Cool! Here’s my funny face. What do you think? Now look what else I have. It’s a flashlight. This isn’t a really powerful flashlight, but it can still shine in places where it is dark, right?

When you shine a flashlight into the mirror let’s see what happens. Cool! The light is reflected wherever you angle the mirror!

Let’s see what we can do with this. In the Bible, it says in a number of places that God is the light, so let’s say that the flashlight is God’s love. Let’s also say that you are the mirror. When God loves us, we want to shine God’s love into the world. So, let’s see if we can reflect God’s light and shine it into a dark place in this sanctuary.

Let’s look for a place where it is dark. Maybe underneath the pews, or is there a corner somewhere?

Okay, one of you can be God and hold the flashlight, and another will be a person who God loves. Hold the mirror, and aim the flashlight at the mirror and let’s see if we can make it shine underneath a pew.

Did you know that God has given us a big job? That job is to reflect God’s love, to share God’s love with people who are sad, lonely, or hurt. That is a really important job. Do you think you can do it? Great!

SERMON

The Hebrew people have not had an easy history. They faced trial after trial. They were dying because of a draught, so they fled their land for Egypt only to be enslaved there. The Pharaoh made them to labor seven days a week without breaks making bricks so that the pharaoh could become powerful and rich. But they were slaves.

After they escaped Egypt by the hand of God and leadership of Moses, they suffered in the wilderness for 40 years. They couldn’t find any food or water and needed to rely on God to live. They were also under attack from other peoples who lived in the area.

Once they arrived back in their homeland of Judea, they suffered under countless evil and cruel rulers and kings, and were at war with neighboring kingdoms.

The Hebrews seldom had a reprieve. Today we are going to hear about another season of exile about 400 years before Jesus.

This time, the Babylonians had come in and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. They also carried away a distinct group of them to enslave them in Babylon. They took their government leaders, their priests, their court officials, their skilled laborers, their artists, and many others.

Think about this. The Babylonians took the people who made the economy, their culture, and their faith work in Judea and left them in shambles without their central place of worship, which is what created their identity.

How do you destroy a people? By doing exactly this!

The people longed for their homeland. But even if they were free of Babylon, to what kind of home could they return? They longed for a rebuilt Temple where they could worship their God.

There were some prophets in those days who stirred in them hope for freedom and an imminent overthrow of the Babylonian regime, most notably a man named Hananiah.

Sadly, these were false prophets, who left them more confused and more depressed. They would need to suffer in exile longer.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke into this situation with a message from God.

READ JEREMIAH 29: 1, 4-7

Jeremiah went on to say that it would not be until the current generation had passed away before they could return to Jerusalem, their home.

And still they longed for home.

What was going on inside the hearts and minds of the people in exile? Since they did not want to be there, their lives remained tentative. Their bags were half packed. They held a hesitant commitment to everything in Babylon. They had only one foot on the ground where they lived, but their heart was back home in Jerusalem.

They were living divided lives, only half invested.

God, through the prophet Jeremiah, encouraged them to stop living half-invested lives. This was really not living at all. Regardless of where they were and what they did not have, God wanted them to be fully invested in the lives that they did have.

God wanted them to grow roots in that strange land of Babylon where they were forced to live — to build homes, plant crops, have children and grandchildren.

In other words, God wanted them to redeem the circumstances in which they found themselves and make the best of what they had.

In fact, God told them through Jeremiah that they were to work for the welfare of Babylon, the ones who destroyed their home and held them captive. The welfare of Babylon would be their own welfare. That message must have been hard to hear!

The world we live in is not easy to manage either. In our current politicized country, we long for peace, for things to be set right.

We long for a time when people across political boundaries will cooperate and not be against each other. We long for a place that we can call our home.

When it seems like those in politics refuse to work together and make good choices, we are tempted to simply check out. We are tempted to detach ourselves and escape the whole mess and retreat into a corner, to a safe place among friends who think and want the same kind of life as us.

The mid-term election is a month away and the heat is ramping up, especially after the Supreme Court confirmation process and vote yesterday. Many are fretting, complaining, even outraged at what has become of our political process.

In this election season, we hear people proclaim a picture of how things might be different, if we would only elect them. We are tempted to put our trust and our faith in particular elected officials to change not only the way the government works, but the whole environment in which we live.

We are encouraged to vote for people who will work to create the

kind of world in which we want to live.

Every presidential candidate for at least the past 175 years has had a campaign slogan. In the last election, we heard “Make America Great Again,” which was also used by Ronald Regan in 1980, and parallel to “America First,” a slogan in 1920 used by Warren Harding, tapping into isolationist and anti-immigrant sentiments after World War 1.

Do you know Abraham Lincoln’s slogan from 1860? (He actually had several of them.) He used the slogan “Vote yourself a farm and horses.” This referred to the hope for a law that would grant homesteads to people on the American western frontier.

In 1872 Horace Greeley ran against Ulysses S. Grant with the slogan “Turn the rascals out.”

In 1884 Grover Cleveland’s slogan was again focused on who he was against. It was “Blaine, Blaine, James G. Blaine! The continental liar from the state of Maine!”

In 1928 Herbert Hoover’s slogan was “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.”

One of Dwight Eisenhower’s slogans from 1956 was “Peace and Prosperity.”

In 1968, a Richard Nixon slogan was “This time, vote like your whole world depended on it.”

Remember Ross Perot who ran as an Independent in 1992? One of his slogans was “I’m Ross, and you’re the Boss!”

All of these slogans hold an underlying message the candidate wanted people to believe. Slogans are designed to motivate and rally people under the premise that life will be better under their leadership.

In the process, we are lured into believing that if we only elect the right people, then the perfect laws, the perfect philosophy of leadership, the perfect schools, the perfect way of life, even the perfect church is just around the corner and can be ours when we vote the right way.

This is a lie. These things don’t exist. They never have. This is the same lie that the Hebrew people believed when they lived in exile in Babylon. If only things were different, if we only had ... (you fill in the blank) our lives would be perfect.

We also are living in Babylon.

It is very easy to be lured into believing that external things will make us content and happy — external things like having the right elected officials in power.

Now, I am not saying that the political process is not important. In fact, I think I am saying the opposite. We do have a better world when people are invested in the process of government, know the issues, and vote their conscience. Hear me encouraging all of you to vote next month. It does matter!

This isn't about tolerating the imperfect circumstances we are in, but being present right where we are and investing ourselves in those circumstances to make them better.

We can heed God's message sent through Jeremiah and make the best of the situation we have. That includes our jobs, our marriages, our relationships, our church, and yes, our current political process.

Throwing our hands up, disconnecting, and saying things are too far gone for us to make any difference is what the Hebrews did, and that wasn't truly living.

We have to keep things in perspective. The next Congress representative elected, or Supreme Court Justice appointed will never be our Savior. The next president elected to office will not be our Messiah sent to set all things right in the world.

No, our hope is in our God, the maker of this world where we live.

We definitely experience darkness, just like the Hebrew people, at the hands of irresponsible and even tyrannical rulers. And right here in the darkness, God calls us to a life of light, a life of hope, a life that has us digging roots in this place where we are planted, able to rejoice in God's love, no matter who is in office.

Our allegiance is not primarily to Cesar, or Trump, or Obama, Republicans, Democrats, or the US flag. It is to our God, who offers us all good things as we follow Jesus, the only real leader who deserves our full allegiance.

Let us allow the light that comes from our place in God's family to shine into all the dark places of this world, including the world of politics, to create a better world, no matter who is elected.