

IN ITS WELFARE IS YOUR WELFARE  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

It must be a terrible thing to have a foreign army invade your city and destroy its buildings. It must be terrible to see loved ones killed before your eyes. It must be terrible for the survivors to be forcibly marched into exile, made to live in the very land of the enemy, far from home.

It must be terrible, but we can only speculate, because that is an experience so far from anything that has happened to us. Defeated, destroyed, compelled to live in a foreign land—that was what happened to the people of Israel after the defeat by the Babylonians. It is the event that provides the background for today's scripture in Jeremiah. It must be terrible. But it is not our experience.

How, then, shall we glean meaning from this text, first spoken 2700 years ago to people whose experience was totally different from ours? We know nothing of being compelled to live in a foreign country.

Maybe, then, we can think of it in the opposite way. If we have no experience of being forced into exile in a foreign land, then maybe we can bring the foreign country to us. We don't go to that which is strange and foreign. Instead, that which is strange and foreign comes to us.

Some time ago I had occasion to go into one of the Hispanic food markets that have sprung up around town. I went inside, and suddenly it was as if I were in a foreign country. The products on the shelves were unfamiliar. The labels were in another language. The people behind the counter were speaking unfamiliar words. It was as if I had entered another country, right here in Columbia, Tennessee.

That influx of immigrants from south of the border has happened with amazing speed. It has come so fast, in fact, that lots of people are feeling anxiety about it. "We've got to put a fence at the border! . . . We've got to make English the only language!" We have not had to go to a foreign country; the foreign country has come to us. And for some it's a threatening a scary thing.

But it is not just immigration that sometimes makes us feel like we're living in a foreign country. Sometimes we feel like the world is changing so fast that we can't keep up. There's the Internet, that brings the entire world—the entire world—into our homes. You can read John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on line, but you can also access pornography. You can read a poem a day, but you can also watch people being beheaded in Iraq. It's scary.

So much that is new comes at us at a dizzying pace—new music that is strange and violent, new religions that we've never heard of. There is that which is strange in fashion—baggy jeans worn too low, tattoos, pierced ears and tongues and eyebrows and elsewhere, and don't forget Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction at last year's Super Bowl.

If you are young, none of this may seem like such a big deal, because that's the way life is as you know it. But if you are older, it can be a disorienting experience. You haven't moved, but the world has moved. And it is as if you are living in a foreign land that has sprung up right around you.

It's enough to make you long for a simpler time, a time when the big problem in school was not shooting guns but chewing gum, when gasoline was cheap and doors were unlocked and crime was down. It's enough to get us started in a rousing conversation of "Ain't it awful." (We have to admit, of course, that sometimes the good ol' days were not really as good as we remember in the haze of memory.) We long to go back to those times.

That's what the exiled people of Israel wanted to do. They wanted to go back. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither."<sup>1</sup> Some of them, no doubt, went into hunkering down mode. Keep to themselves. Don't get involved in this foreign land. Just wait it out until they get to go back.

In our new strange and foreign world, we've got people today who go into hunkering down mode. They opt out. The trend is privatization. Keep to ourselves. Don't get involved. The city of Columbia now has its first gated community. Keep the riff-raff out. It's a scary world out there. We'll just stick with our own people.

That's one option when the world gets to going too fast, and when your own place starts to seem like a foreign land. I'll just bow out and keep to myself.

Some years ago Nancy and I were visiting Charleston, South Carolina. It is a marvelous city, as you know. One morning we took a walking tour of the old town. Here were wonderful old homes built before the Civil War. And some of them still had around them the high walls with

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137:3.

broken glass embedded in the top of the wall. And no wonder—there was always the possibility of a slave revolt, of unwanted people getting into your home. Maybe if they just built the walls high enough and put enough sharp glass on top, they would be safe in their private world.

It didn't work then, and it took a war and four years of bloodshed to break down those walls. And our desire for the private, the protected, the secure, is not the final answer now. We delude ourselves if we think that the way to protect ourselves in this scary world is just to build walls around ourselves.

Which brings us, finally, to our text. Old Jeremiah was not one of those forced into exile. He would be later, when a second wave of invasions would spell the end of Judah. But for now Jeremiah was still back in Jerusalem. And he was able to get a letter to the people in exile far off in the hated foreign land. We might expect Jeremiah to say: Hang in there. Don't get involved with the enemy. Stay pure and protected. Wait for the day when you get to go back home.

But Jeremiah doesn't say that. Instead, here is what he writes to people in exile: "Thus says the Lord: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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."

Amazing! Jeremiah doesn't tell these exiles to hunker down and wait to go home. Instead he tells them to make a life for themselves there. They are to pray to the Lord on behalf of that place, the place of the enemy! And they are to do it because in its welfare they will find their own welfare.

In those times when we feel like the world is changing too fast, when it feels like a foreign land has invaded us right here, in those scary and disorienting times, the answer is not to withdraw into our own private world, as tempting as that may be. The answer is not to talk about how terrible it all is and wait for the 1950's to return. The answer is to recognize that this is the world we live in, and to get involved just in this world. For as we seek the welfare of this world, we will find our welfare.

One of the decisions which you parents have to make as your children come along is whether they will be sent to public or private school. There are lots of perfectly good reasons to choose a private school. I intend no judgment against those who choose that option.

But if that is the option you choose, it does mean that you will have to be extra vigilant for the welfare of the greater community. We all know that the place where our children are is the place that will get the greatest share of our attention. You may choose the option of private school for

your child, but you also must pray for and pay attention to the welfare of all children in our community, especially those for whom private school is not an option. Because in their welfare is your welfare.

The scriptures provide a cautionary word about those times when we participate in the private part of this world—private schools, private clubs, gated communities. We cannot provide for our own welfare alone and ignore others. Old Jeremiah lifts our eyes to see a greater vision—a world where all people are together as one. In its welfare is our welfare.

We get ourselves involved in this sometimes messy, strange world, this world that sometimes seems like a foreign place. We get involved, because that's what Jesus did. That is the point. Jesus did not remain aloof from us and our world. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He didn't wall himself off or wait for better times. He got involved in the world as it was. He lived in it, and died in it, crucified on the garbage dump between two thieves.

Friends, this is where we live. It's the only world we've got. It's not an option for followers of Christ to withdraw from it, or limit our involvement only to people like ourselves. We live in this world, we are involved in this world, we pray for this world. For it is as we seek its welfare that we will find our welfare. †