

**An Urgent Message
Jeremiah 29:4-14
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
Woodbury UMC
August 14, 2022**

On Friday, I read that the CDC has eased its Covid guidelines to the point that one article said it was dropping them. This was in the health news section of my app, right next to an article on Monkeypox. We are just starting to relax from one years long public health crisis, and a new one is here. Even more, it is spreading the most in gay and bisexual men, leading some to turn a blind eye, because if THEY are suffering but WE are not, then why get all worked up over it.

What an amazing failure of empathy! What good can possibly come of this?

When I read and study scripture, there are a few sections that I seem to come back to more than others. One of those that may also be familiar to you is included in today's scripture reading, much beloved by so many of us, cross stitched onto pillows, crafted and available on Etsy, framed and hung up on the wall.

Do not listen to your dreams. They are a lie.

That's right there in verse 8 and 9. You know, this could have been a decent sermon about the dangers of taking verses out of context.

But that's not the message I have for today. You were probably thinking of Jeremiah 29:11: *I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.*

I believe this. I really do. But this message of hope and faith is often difficult to believe, given the evidence of our eyes and ears to everything that is happening in the world. Whether it is a viral outbreak on the heels of a worldwide viral outbreak, weekly mass shootings, the new normal of regular extreme weather and all that comes with it, and so many other things, hope and faith can seem to be in short supply.

This scripture is baffling, really. Consider the history of the people, their relationship to God tying them to the land, being constantly told to avoid foreigners to stay pure. Now they are in exile, and they are being told to pray for the good of those that destroyed the temple, to contribute to the well being of their enemy. When their kings had married foreigners in the past, they were well aware how this had led to worshipping other gods and forsaking their God, and calamity. Yet now they are told to marry from among the people of their great enemy, and even to have children! To help their children to marry and have children!

God says to do this for 70 years, and after that he will gather them all for an amazing return to their homeland – but in the meantime, to pray for the welfare of those

who had driven them into exile in the first place. And as I mentioned earlier, NOT to listen to those who speak of God's word coming to them in dreams, pre-emptively saying "They do not speak for me." A generation earlier, this would have been unforgivable! consorting with their bitterest enemies – and now, they are to assimilate in pretty much every way, other than in remaining God's people.

That is not actively resisting. That is moving into a state of resignation.

The people had left their beloved country and been scattered abroad. This could just as easily be a sermon about refugees. This could just as easily be a sermon about how things look to the refugee forced from their lands by a hostile foreign enemy, only to end up living in a community that is just as hostile to them, actively harming them. That feels like a very relevant message — but that is a different sermon. Even so, it is probably one that should not wait too long to be told.

Where else have we heard someone speak of praying for one's enemies? Even more than that, where have we heard someone else speak of praying for your enemies while living in a land occupied by an overwhelmingly powerful nation?

We don't know if Jesus was thinking of this text when giving the Sermon on the Mount. Advice to those exiled in enemy lands is probably also good advice for those

living under occupation and threat of annihilation. And yet, in consideration of this scripture, I think it may be a lot easier for us to pray for our enemies than we realize.

Did any of you see the remarkable video Arnold Schwarzenegger released in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine? It was amazing! He tells the story of being a boy and seeing the world's strongest man, a Russian and someone he would later meet. This man was his hero, and as he grew, he learned to love the Russian people. Of course, with the invasion of Ukraine, Russia is the enemy—and yet he spoke eloquently of how he loves the Russian people, how Russians have been his heroes his entire life, and not to consider the actions of the Russian leadership as speaking for the entire Russian people. He talks about the siege of Leningrad in World War II. How his own father fought in that battle, but for the wrong side — against Russia, as part of the Nazi army, and he spoke of the pain his father suffered the rest of his life at living with the knowledge of what he had done. He explains that Ukraine is not riddled with Nazis as the Kremlin has told Russian citizens — Ukraine's president is Jewish!

What are the chances that national leaders hate each other, while those citizens may have no reason for animosity, or may even love each other? In our time, some political leaders strongly encourage their followers to see anyone that disagrees with anything they say as all the same, all stupid, all not to be trusted, all not to be treated as human beings. That has caused unbelievable pain and suffering and death, because

some with power see life as a zero-sum proposition. Yet in our reading, the prophet is saying Yes, this nation has devastated your nation, but now you should intermarry and pray for their welfare?

It is difficult to fairly compare modern politics to the ancient world, but I think I am seeing a call for a strong differentiation between those who lead a nation and those who are its citizens. Perhaps we have enemies, but maybe they are not who we have been told are our enemies, and perhaps there are far fewer of them than one might realize. Should we actually pray for the welfare of those others? And God replies, I know the plans I have for you, and they are for peace and hope. Even living in exile, when you come seeking me, you will find me, even in that situation.

Who is our enemy? Particularly in modern politics, at least speaking for myself, **my** enemy is less a who and more a what. I think it is fair to say that as Christians, we aren't really against people, but we probably are against ideologies that we perceive as dangerous or harmful, cruel or unjust. A good person can have an ideology that causes harm and ought to be opposed. A bad person can get a lot of people to disregard the humanity of anyone in the out group, so that only people just like them are to be considered people, using this to justify all manner of terrible things.

Consider this. When I see a cult of personality causing terrible harm, remember that the people IN the cult had something happen to them, in order for them to feel that this was a good plan, or that they are the only ones that know what is true and what is right. Point being, the people in a cult are just as much victims of the cult as are those the cult wants to harm. And God loves them, too. We are to pray for their welfare, too.

There are still many things I look at and wonder “Why, God??” – either in my own life, or the lives of people that I love, or in the lives of complete strangers, and I wonder how anything good can come of them. I imagine over the course of my life, this isn’t really going to change much. However, if our reaction is to pray for others, and resist poisonous ideologies as well as resisting the powerful urge to give into hate, maybe we can better accept that God’s got a plan.

Maybe one of the important parts of that plan for good God has for us is to teach us how to hate less and less, to see others as enemies less and less. If you really want to dream big, maybe this is God’s way to help us, so that where we had seen hated enemies, now we see other human beings, and we can pray for them, too.

God has a plan. Amen.