

Listening to our lesson from Jeremiah may have raised a question in your minds: Who are King Jeconiah, Elasaah son of Shaphan, Gemariah son of Hilkiah, King Zedekiah of Judah, and more importantly, why did Pastor Dave make poor _____ read their names?

A classic phrase provides the answer: “A text without a context is pretext for a proof text.”¹ Which is a clever way of saying that when we don’t know what was going on when a Scripture was written, we can twist it to suit our purposes, but when we do know what was going on when a Scripture was written, we can discern what God’s purpose means for us today. We can hear the good news that continues to shape our church: *Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV) For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

So before we get to building that “*future with hope*,” some words about the context: The names mean next to nothing to us, but they were headline news in Jeremiah’s time. King Jeconiah is also known as King Jehoiachin, who ruled during the final days of Israel in the Holy Land. King Zedekiah was the final king in Jerusalem. Israel and Judah were rival states; these were rival kings, who were in power because of their willingness to submit to Babylon (King Nebuchadnezzar) and who would bring destruction and the end of their kingdoms because of their failed rebellion against Babylon. Hilkiah, a priest, had spoken out against such rebellious actions and Zedekiah had him executed. In addition, some self-styled prophets were urging Israel and Judah to rebel; of course God would restore them, they said, theirs was a Promised Land; it belonged to them; it was where they belonged; they could not imagine any other way.

So the context of our passage is a power struggle every bit as political as the one that has shut down our government; the outcome of this passage was a paradigm shift that equipped the people of God to not merely survive but to thrive in a way that they could not imagine; a way that built the future with hope.

❶ Build the Future

¹ <http://theoblogoumena.blogspot.com/2007/09/text-without-context-is-pretext.html>

The people of God couldn't imagine being the people of God anywhere other than in the Promised Land. They belonged there. They knew who they were and Whose they were there. But they weren't there anymore; they were in exile; they were in Babylon.

Some people groups simply disappear in such circumstances; they lose their identity and blend in; they lose their faith and cease to exist. Others aggressively assert their identity and lash out to defend the faith. We know this second path all too well; Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Saffron Terror in India, the Irish Republican Army and “the troubles” in Ireland, Eric Rudolph and the abortion clinic bombings down south.

The common theme in all of this violence is an effort to transform the land of exile into a holy land. In the name of faith, we become intolerant; difference is dangerous and must be eradicated by force of law or force of arms or both! We are boldly going back to the future; back to the land we knew; back to the way we knew; once we get there, all will be well; but there are so many threats, so many deviations to correct, so many obstacles to overcome to build the future.

Jeremiah suggests a third way; a way by which we can preserve our identity and be distinctively faithful rather than becoming dangerous defenders of the faith: *Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSV) 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.*

This verse is a paradigm shift that Jesus will later reinforce with his challenging command: *Luke 6:27–29 (NRSV)* ²⁷ *“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.*

The future will not be built by defending the faith; the future will be built by practicing the faith, by walking in God's way of love and peace. Our future, Pennside Presbyterian Church's future, will not be built by defending the faith; by identifying some enemy against whom we can unite in the name of

God; our future will be built by practicing the faith, by walking in God’s way of love and faith.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave eloquent witness to this way when he said the following at the Yad Vashem Museum (the Holocaust Museum) in Jerusalem: "Our Lord would say that in the end the positive thing that can come is the spirit of forgiving, not forgetting, but the spirit of saying: God, this happened to us. We pray for those who made it happen, help us to forgive them and help us so that we in our turn will not make others suffer."²

The future will not be built by defending the faith; the future will be built by practicing the faith, by walking in God’s way of love and peace. Build the future!

② A Future with Hope

Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV) For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

How do we build that future with hope? We can quote the Desmond Tutu’s, Martin Luther King’s, and hero after hero, but we’re not heroes; we’re ordinary folks living the faith in ordinary ways each and every ordinary day.

We overrate heroes, and if we could ask Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Theresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, they would protest that they aren’t heroes; they are ordinary folks who lived the faith in ordinary ways each and every ordinary day. They practiced the faith; they weren’t perfect; they built the future one day at a time, one prayer at a time.

“Practice makes perfect,” we say, and spiritual practices make a difference; practices like prayer. When we pray to God for the peace of the place we live, our prayers open our eyes to how God is at work in the place where we live. Thus, Reading isn’t some Godforsaken city, Pennsylvania isn’t some Godforsaken state, and the United States isn’t some Godforsaken country

² <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Desmond-Tutu/109318329086784#>

even if the government is shutdown. No, God is present here. God is at work here. God is building God’s future with hope here.

The foundation of God’s future is prayer; the best thing we can do right now for our church, for our city, our state, our nation is pray, but when we pray, fair warning, God listens. God hears. And God acts. That act may be to send you and me to serve. So it is that Pennside serves in the Mount Penn Business Association; we participate in the Antietam Valley Community Partnership; we are involved in the conversations between the Antietam and Exeter Township School Districts. We host Templo Biblico to reach out to the rising Hispanic population in our region. We sponsor Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to raise up the next generation! If it matters to our community, it matters to us, because we’ve been praying and God is listening!

The future will not be built by defending the faith; the future will be built by practicing the faith, by walking in God’s way of love and peace. Say your prayers. Pray for our leaders. Pray for our neighbors. Pray for what matters to them. Pray, but be ready! God is listening. God will answer, and God’s answer may be to send us to serve and build the future with hope! Amen.