597 B.C. It was the end of the world as they knew it. King Nebuchadnezzar and his army had conquered Jerusalem and deported most of the important people to Babylon, including the royal family and the priests. Exiled to a foreign land. More waves of deportations would follow. A decade later the Temple would be destroyed. It was the end of the world as they knew it. And they did not feel fine.

Last week we heard the lament from Psalm 137 “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” How can you sing the Lord’s song when everything that means anything has been destroyed and you have been banished from your home?

In that time, the people looked to the prophets to bring them a message from God. What message would we want to hear in those circumstances? I’m guessing we’d want to hear that God was going to rescue us and bring us quickly home. That we wouldn’t have to spend much time in captivity and that everything would be restored to its former glory. That’s exactly what the people of Judah wanted to hear.

And that is the message that the false prophets were giving them. Don’t worry, in a couple of years you will be back home in Jerusalem, with everything restored. The false prophets told them what they wanted to hear. God did not appreciate their lies.
God spoke the true word to Jeremiah, and Jeremiah reported it as it was told to him, no matter what the consequences were. The people’s fortunes would be restored yes, but they would not be coming back from Babylon for 70 years, so they needed to settle in and get used to their new lives because they were going to be there for awhile. During that time God would be with the Babylonians, and nothing would be restored until God willed it to be so. You can imagine that this was not a popular message.

Jeremiah’s letter to the people in exile can be summed up in a familiar phrase, “Bloom where you’re planted.” Considering how the people had rebelled against God, the message could have been, “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

But God says through Jeremiah, build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children, pray for the city where you’re in exile. Work for the welfare of those who have taken you from your homeland and are holding you captive. By doing so you will ensure your own welfare.

It was a hard message for the people, but it was a true message. It was not the easy way. In the midst of the end of the known world, what was needed was not a return to what was; what was needed was something new. Walter Brueggemann suggests, “Jeremiah’s vitality comes from his passionate conviction about the power of God to work a newness in the zero hour of loss and exile… Jeremiah believes that God is able to do an utterly new thing which violates our reason, our control, and our despair…. For that reason, loss and emptiness are not the last word.”¹

Loss and emptiness were not the last word for the people of Judah. Good came out of the Babylonian exile even though it did last so long. What was the cause of extreme despair became the crucible in which the Jewish people reforged their identity and religion. They returned to the Mosaic law, examined their part in the exile, and put their trust back in God instead of in kings. Much of the Hebrew scripture, including the Torah got its form in that time. The people strengthened their community, even in a foreign land, and they learned that they could worship God in other places, not only in the Temple in Jerusalem. Eventually God restored their fortunes, they returned home, and they rebuilt the Temple.

“In the midst of difficult circumstances, sometimes the call of God is to dig in and find ways to thrive rather than waiting for a change in our current situation.”2 It makes me wonder how God is calling us to dig in and thrive even in the midst of current disastrous events.

In her lectionary reflection this week, Bishop Susan asked this question, “Does it sometimes seem to you as if you are in exile – away from your idea of what the world should be like?” I’m betting more than a few of us can answer that affirmatively. If we do feel that we are in exile from the world as it should be, and as a Christian, I would argue that the world as it should be would more truly reflect the kingdom of God Jesus described, then we might take heed of Jeremiah’s instructions and bloom where we’re planted, seeking the welfare of the place where we find ourselves and the people whom we encounter there.

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We might need to relinquish the view of how things once were so that we can receive the new thing that God is doing in and with and through us. We might need to accept that God’s way of working newness in the “zero hour of loss and despair” may look different from how we pictured it, opening ourselves to the imagination of God which is much more vast than our own.

I don’t know with certainty exactly how we do that. But I think Jeremiah gives us a good place to start. “Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat from them. Marry and have children and grandchildren. 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.” Bloom where you are planted. Pray on behalf of those around you. And as a sidebar, that doesn’t mean to pray that the people around you will change to be the way you want them to be. That means genuinely praying for their welfare, for their flourishing.

Imagine, if we put the power of our collective prayers together, how we might benefit the welfare of our city and all who dwell in it. Imagine how we might contribute just a tiny bit to God’s healing and reconciling work in this world. Imagine how God might transform our efforts into something beyond our wildest dreams. The world as we once knew it might come to an end. And we will still be fine. Because God is with us through it all.