

THE PEOPLE OF PRAYER

JEREMIAH 29:10-14ⁱ

Rev. Matthew Williams

Friends, I am excited to be with you here again on this beautiful Sunday morning as we continue working through our sermon series, "The Easter People." This sermon series is based on the Scripture from Acts 2:42, where it lists the things that the disciples did as they formed the foundation of a new church. That verse read:

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and to the fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer."

These were, perhaps, some of the most important functions that the early church performed as she grew in the days following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We discussed several of the items on this list so far. We talked about how the believers devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. We are reminded that the believers at this time, did not have a New Testament to base their faith on. They were getting the information about Jesus directly from the apostles. The New Testament, as we have it today, was being written by these different individuals. This was not a sermon that we talked about explicitly, however. We had just completed a sermon series on the life of Jesus Christ during the season of Lent, and so it did not feel necessary to dig back into this type of topic again.

The First sermon in this series was then about that Greek word *koinonia*. It was about community and the deep, close, mutual relationships that we need to have to be a functioning church. We discussed how Calvary Church certainly fits this model *koinonia*. Then last week, we discussed the importance of the table in faith and worship. We realized this when we ran through a survey of Scripture where meals played an important role in the ministry of Jesus Christ. I referred to these meals as, "transformative tables." These dinner tables were places where people could encounter Jesus on their own level and come to know who Jesus was. They were places where lives were changed. They were places where Jesus made a difference. We asked ourselves, "do we still have transformative tables in our church today?" We talked briefly about how we need to create more transformative tables in our lives.

Today friends were going to be talking about the last item in this Acts 2:42 list: prayer. We are the people of prayer. Now, I understand that we have talked about prayer on

several different occasions here at Calvary Church; however, today felt like another appropriate time to discuss the true importance of our acts of prayer as members of the community of faith. There are several different passages that I could have selected to discuss the importance of prayer. We could have looked at different models of prayer as demonstrated in the Gospel of Matthew. We could have examined what happens when we follow through with prayer in our lives, which is important; however, it was not what I wish to discuss today. Instead, I felt God drawing me back into the Old Testament into the book of Jeremiah. Before we dive too deep into this particular Scripture, I feel we must discuss some background information on what the book of Jeremiah is about.

Jeremiah was a major prophet in the Old Testament. He was born in a time of great change in Judah. If you know anything about Old Testament history, which can be quite confusing, you know there are different periods where good kings and bad kings are ruling over the land. The good kings are the kings that followed the will of God, and they are the kings that brought prosperity to the land because God is with them. However, the bad kings are the kings that pushed God aside. There the kings that wanted nothing to do with God, and they searched for other gods to take the place of Yahweh, our God. In the times when the bad kings were ruling, the lands of Israel and Judah suffered greatly, and in the times when the good kings were ruling, these lands prospered because God was with them. Jeremiah lived through several different kingships. He experienced good kings and bad kings. As a prophet, Jeremiah heard the voice of God speaking out warnings to the land of Judah when the bad kings were in power. God warned Jeremiah that exile would be coming. God warned Jeremiah that destruction and death would be on the horizon if Judah would not change its ways. God warned Jeremiah that Judah would be doomed to face the same fate as Israel had: annihilation.

As we venture into the 29th chapter of this prophetic book, we learn that the land of Judah did not heed the warnings that God was giving through Jeremiah. The Babylonian Empire came in and decimated the land. They carried the people of Jerusalem and Judah out in chains. They were exiled to foreign lands. However, some remained behind as a remnant in the land. The structures of Jerusalem were flattened. The temple in which God lived was destroyed. Could you imagine what it would be like to witness such a thing? Many of us have been blessed to not ever have to experience such kind of destruction and devastation firsthand. We live in a country where prosperity abounds; however, perhaps one could make an argument that the pandemic crisis we are currently in, in some ways, reminds us of what it might have been like for these people facing exile. I am not saying, however, that what we are going through is exactly like

what an exile was. That would be to trivialize the experience of countless people who lost homes, who lost loved ones, who lost everything.

As we face this pandemic, however, we are seeing devastation unlike we have seen before in our lives. I was listening to the news this week, and they were saying that the economy is the worst it has been in the entire history of the United States. I am not entirely sure if that is true or not, because it sounds like it could be hyperbolized; however, I think we can all agree the economy is certainly not in good shape. Many people are facing joblessness. They are facing bills of different sorts piling up. Many are facing a shortage of food. Some are being forced to make difficult and heartbreaking decisions. There are others still that are in fear for their life. Some people are suffering from physical abuse as a result of being shut-in, and the victims do not have a good way to escape the abusive situation that they are in. This time of social distance and isolation is having its effects on those who suffer from depression and anxiety. As the weeks drag on friends, I'm sure that the sense of hopelessness that many of us may feel only begin to increase. As a worshipping body, we may feel that we have been exiled from our churches into a life of solitude and seclusion

These are dark times. But darkness can never extinguish the light of God. God spoke out through Jeremiah here in this passage to the people of Judah who were being exiled. He spoke out from the darkness to bring hope. I want to reiterate these words of Scripture one more time.

“This is what the LORD says: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,” says the LORD. “I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.” (Jeremiah 29:10–14, NLT)

God was saying to his people to be strong and courageous. God was saying do not be afraid. This time of darkness is only temporary. There will come an end, and when that end comes, God will come. God will do all the good things God had promised, and God will bring you home again. For the people in exile in Babylon, they had to wait 70 years. I do not think it is going to take quite that long for us to see God bring us home again, friends. We are reminded that there is a time for everything. God went on in the Scripture. God said, "For I know the plans I have for you, they are plans for good and not for disaster to give you future and a hope." Even in this disaster, God was bringing hope.

God was not going to let the people God loved to be squashed. Rather, God was reforming, reshaping, purifying the hearts of these people. He was drawing them closer to him. This hope was contingent on the next verse. God said, "In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly you will find me. I will be found by you."

God was saying that this hope is dependent on a relationship with him. If you search for God, if you are praying and listening for God, you will find God. If you search with your whole heart, devoting your life to prayer wholeheartedly, God is there. If we think back to that verse in the book of Acts, we learned that one of the most important things to this early Christian community was devoting themselves to the act of prayer. We know that the Holy Spirit was right there with them. They were doing miraculous feats through the Holy Spirit. They were speaking in different languages. They were healing different people. They were emboldened by the Spirit of God to do things that people would find otherwise impossible. God was with them. To know the will of God, however, they had to communicate with God. Prayer is the gateway to our relationship with Jesus. For the people in exile in Babylon, God said to pray. For the early church to grow even during persecution, the church had to pray. As we sit in our homes today listening to the sermon or reading the sermon if you are one of the people who receive our mail-outs, we need to be in prayer. The fact is the darkness is here. The darkness wants to stay. As the Easter people, however, we know that the darkness has no power over the light. Friends, during this COVID 19 crisis, I would encourage you to pray at 7 pm for 7 minutes 7 days a week to connect with God. Also, be reminded that God is with us in times of darkness. Remember the words of the psalmist:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever."
(Psalm 23:1–6, NLT)

Amen.

ⁱ All Scripture, unless otherwise noted will be derived from the New Living Translation. Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Je 29:10-14). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.