

“Preaching Commitment” by Deborah Sokolove



Recommitment Sunday

October 16, 2022

Throughout this recommitment season, the Hebrew Scripture readings have been filled with lament, with prophets relaying God’s disappointment with a people who have turned away from love, from just and merciful dealings with one another, and instead become filled with hatred, violence, and taking advantage of everyone who is lower than themselves on

society's ladder. In this time of ugly rhetoric, corruption, and exploitation of every disadvantaged group I can think of, all this has been sounding way too familiar. Jeremiah and the other prophets might as well have been writing yesterday, rather than nearly three thousand years ago.

In Jeremiah 29, however, the prophet turns away from lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the difficulties of the people who remained. Instead of haranguing the false prophets who persuaded the nation to trust in lies about God's word, as in the previous chapter, Jeremiah decides to write a letter those who had been taken into captivity in Babylon.

It is unclear how many Israelites were in Babylon at the time that Jeremiah wrote this passage, because the narrative is very difficult to follow. Several chapters later, Jeremiah 52:28 says that 3023 people were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in the seventh year of his reign, and 4600 by the end of his twenty-third year. Elsewhere in the bible, there are mentions of as many as ten to twenty thousand people taken into exile, forced to walk the roughly 650 miles to Babylon and live in a country where they did not speak the language or know the customs.

While there are many parallels that could be drawn between this story and the ongoing refugee and immigration issues here and in many other parts of the world; the situation of Ukrainians who have been forcefully relocated to Russia since the invasion began last spring; or the pernicious effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and pervasive racism here in the US—I'm going to leave those projects to someone else. Instead of dwelling on the evils perpetrated by the Babylonians, or how terrible the long trail of tears from Jerusalem to Babylon must have been, what this passage brought up for me was what Seekers might hear for our own sense of commitment in what

Jeremiah claims is the Word of God to the captives who were trying to figure out how to live in a foreign land.

We do not know exactly what the rules were for the captives or how they were treated by the locals, but they seem to have had a certain degree of freedom as long as they stayed in and around the capitol city. Not surprisingly, the Israelite king and his family, as well as some other leaders, had been killed (or maybe they were only imprisoned—like I've said, the text is confusing at best) so that they would not be able to rally their people to rebellion. However, the craftspeople, skilled workers, and even the many of the religious scholars who were taken were allowed to live according to their own customs and follow their own rules and beliefs. Indeed, there is evidence that, despite the trauma of captivity, they lived relatively comfortably in their own district of the city, and—according to the Book of Daniel and other writings from that period—at least some of them were able to rise to positions of wealth and power.

In his letter, Jeremiah sends a word of hope, reminding the exiles—and us today—that even when things are looking about as bad as possible, God is still present wherever we are. To those who long for a return to their lost land, to those who yearn for the old ways and the old days, God says through Jeremiah: Build houses live in them, **here and now**; plant gardens and eat what they produce **here and now**; raise families and encourage your children to do so, **here and now**. Instead of wishing things could be the way they used to be, seek the welfare of **this** place and time, for in seeking the welfare of the time and place in which you find yourself, you will find your own welfare also.

I think that this is an important word for us in our place and time as well as for those long-ago Israelites who had to figure out how to live in Babylon, because here at Seekers, pretty much all of us come from somewhere else in one way or another. All of us are, in a very real sense, exiles from

somewhere, strangers in a strange land.

While it may be possible that one or two of us has some small amount of indigenous ancestry, I don't think that anyone in this congregation can trace their entire lineage to this continent. Most of our ancestors came from another place. Maybe some of our earliest family members on this continent were among the first intentional settlers in North America four hundred years ago. Maybe some of them came as enslaved persons around that same time. Maybe our migrant ancestors came to this continent more than a bit later, so that we are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Or maybe we, ourselves, are migrants, coming from other countries in our own lifetimes, for our own reasons. More than a few of us learned (or at least heard) languages other than English in the homes we grew up in, and some of us learned English as a second or third language.

Whatever our ancestry or language skills, most of us moved to this area from somewhere else, and none of those who regularly attend worship (except Erica, who surely gets tired of hearing this) can claim to have grown up in this church. Pretty much all of us grew up in very different kinds of churches, in other religions, or in no religion at all. Of our current membership, only a very few can remember hearing Gordon Cosby's 1976 New Lands sermons, which led to the creation of Seekers and the other small churches that today make up the Church of the Saviour. And, of course, Seekers today is very different from the Church of the Saviour of those days.

We all have memories of other places and other ways. And while those memories may or may not be fond, those other places and other ways are what formed us. In a very real sense, we are all in exile, refugees from our former lives, whether we left willingly, were taken captive, or were driven out. Here at Seekers, we have found something new and different. And that, for me, is what makes Seekers such a special church.

It is also why I think that God's word, as recorded in Jeremiah's letter to the captive Israelites living in Babylon, might as well be directed to us, here today. Finding ourselves here, in this strange land called Seekers Church, we bring our memories and expectations, our dreams and yearnings. And here, I believe, God is saying to each of us: Build a home for yourself and for other wanderers to live in; plant gardens, eat what they produce, and share it with others; form chosen families and deep friendships, and encourage others to grow and thrive in this unfamiliar, challenging, loving environment. Seek the welfare of this place in which you have found shelter, for here you will find your own welfare also.

It seems to me that Jeremiah was saying to the captives: make a commitment to live fully, here and now. Don't yearn for your former lives, but rather bring your whole self here, because this is where you are.

Of course, making commitments and living them out is not easy. As we've been going through this Recommitment season, I've been making a few notes about what various people have said about commitment, and how I've reacted to what they said.

A few weeks ago, someone admitted that commitment sounds like a burden. This discomfort with the idea is not uncommon. In a culture that idolizes personal freedom and individual expression, many people prefer to keep their options open.

Even so, we do make commitments. We promise to meet a friend for lunch next Tuesday at a particular time and place. We make appointments with doctors and hairdressers and plumbers, and try to show up on time while hoping that they won't make us wait. We apply for credit cards and agree to pay for the things we buy today out of our future income. We sign leases on apartments or buy houses and take on 30-year mortgages. Some of us even agree to preach or teach a class in the School for Christian Growth. And then the time comes to actually preach or teach, and I wonder, what was I thinking!

On another Sunday, someone else said "commitment is doing what I said I would even when I don't feel like it." As I've been working though healing from my knee surgery, now more than two months ago, I keep rediscovering the value of that kind of commitment. There are a lot of mornings when I REALLY do not want to do my physical therapy exercises. It takes a lot of time that I'd rather be using for something else (like maybe sleeping another half hour or so). And even if don't have any pain when I start (yes, it has gotten to that point, I'm happy to say), by the time I've done three sets of whatever incredibly difficult things the physical therapists told me to do the last time I saw them, I'm pretty much guaranteed that I will barely be able to hobble across the room. However, I notice over and over that when I try that same exercise the next day or the next week, it is much less painful and I am stronger than I could have imagined just a couple of days before. For me, the payoff for making a commitment to do what I don't want to do is that somehow, without my being able to exactly pin down how it works, a miracle happens.

In the 12 Step world, we say that while God does for us what are unable do on our own, we are responsible to do the footwork. As I reflect on my physical healing, it is clear to me that I have no idea what is really going on inside my body. I cannot even imagine how the muscles that were cut apart grow together, how the adhesions that keep things from moving smoothly are able to release their hold, or how the skin knits itself together. I cannot command any of this to happen. What I do know is that if I skip a day, or whine that this or that is just too hard and refuse to do it, then the healing slows down or even stops, and I risk losing whatever abilities I still have the potential to regain. So I keep coming back to physical therapy. I do what I'd really rather not do in between appointments, and somehow the miracle happens and I can walk, or go down one or two steps (if not yet the whole staircase) without pain.

Whether the situation we are facing is physical healing or life in community, commitment is ultimately a spiritual practice. And, as our reflection paragraph for this season has been reminding us, the spiritual life is ultimately about love. A couple of weeks ago, someone said that they learned about commitment from the Dr Seuss book *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Horton the elephant lived by the motto "I said what I meant and I meant what I said, an elephant's faithful one hundred per cent."

As you probably recall, the flighty bird Mayzie, who did not believe in making commitments, left an egg with Horton before going on an extended vacation, and Horton promised to protect the egg no matter what. Eventually, the egg hatched into the improbable and somewhat magical elephant-bird, rewarding Horton's faithfulness with love and an enlarged sense of belonging to something greater than either or both of them. Mayzie, on the other hand, was amazed, but ultimately left alone.

Like Horton, I never quite know what will happen when I make a commitment, so I'm learning to choose them carefully instead of saying "yes" to every enticing offer that comes my way. Writing liturgy, leading worship, and, yes, even preaching are some of the things that still make my heart sing, even after doing them for more years than I can count. Seeing all of you, here in person and on the screen, fills my heart with love beyond measure, as together we learn how to be the Body of Christ, which continually pours itself out for the healing of the world.

And, oddly enough, sitting in the circle of Stewards month after month, helping to look after the organizational health of the mystical, magical, peculiar elephant-bird called "Seekers Church," still brings me joy (at least most of the time). And so, in a little while, I will stand with the other Stewards as we commit once again to living in the spiritual home that we are all building together, to planting gardens of

faith and love that nourish us all, to living and loving you, my chosen family made up of refugees and exiles from our former lives, as together we seek the welfare of this Body.

Before that, however, everyone who is committing to be Members of this church will be invited to stand, whether in this room or attending on zoom, as we recite the commitment statement together. I hope that all of you will be making that commitment to be with us for another year, to deepen our relationships in this local expression of the Body of Christ, to share our gifts from God with others who worship here, as well as with the world outside our doors, and to sign the membership book if you have not already done so.

As I've learned from Jeremiah, from my physical therapists, from my 12 Step fellowship, and from Horton, when we do our part, God does for us what we cannot do alone. In making commitments to myself and to others, in living out those commitments even when I don't feel like it, and in being as faithful as I can possibly be, I keep finding my own welfare and healing. I pray that it is the same way for you. Amen.