

SERMON TITLE: "Post-Traumatic Advice"
SERMON TEXT: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: Nov. 13, 2016, Presentation of Vets Tribute Run Check (\$8600)
to GEW Vets Home, Honoring Vets & Active Military, Post-Election Thoughts

INTRODUCTION

I'm so glad our church has sponsored the Veterans Tribute Run and Chili Cook-off for nine years now, and that we are able to provide a check in the amount of \$8600 for quality-of-life activities for the veterans and spouses who reside at the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home. Our hope is that, in this act of support, our veterans and their spouses might see that we acknowledge and care about the real suffering they have borne on our behalf. Far too often, our troops have come home with wounds to their bodies, their minds, and their spirits—only to have those wounds be denied or dismissed rather than treated with respect and dignity.

The need to acknowledge the sacrifices and trauma experienced by our veterans is one reason why I have chosen to preach from Jeremiah 29 today. Another reason is that, even when we human beings aren't subject to the damaging effects of war and military service, we can and do experience other kinds of traumatic and shocking events that cause us grief, damage our sense of well-being, and put us on edge. Whether such experiences come from domestic violence, a natural disaster, a car accident, a sexual assault, or the unexpected election of a new president—we find ourselves suffering from bad dreams, feeling afraid and panicked, over-reacting with anger, feeling depressed or on high alert, and worrying excessively about the future.

Because sometimes the post-traumatic stress we feel can cause us even more trouble than the original trauma, maybe it would be helpful to connect with some biblical wisdom. So, whether you're a veteran, someone who cares about veterans, or someone who has had some other difficult experiences, I invite you to consider what happened to the Jewish people and see what we can learn from the Prophet Jeremiah's post-traumatic advice.

1—ACCEPT THAT THE TRAUMA WAS REAL

OK, so here's the story. About 2600 years ago, the armies of Babylon invaded and conquered Jerusalem. In that battle, many Jews were killed, many were wounded, and a large number of the survivors were taken as hostages into exile in Babylon. Their king, Zedekiah, was one of the exiles. He was tortured, and his eyes were poked out, making him blind.

Somehow the Prophet Jeremiah escaped being caught up in that sweep and remained in Jerusalem a while longer. The city wall was broken down, the temple was destroyed, the city was in shambles, and those left behind suffered from a severe lack of food and continuing threat from multiple enemies. So Jeremiah wasn't writing from a place of comfortable security, by any means. Yet, somehow, he was able to hear God's message and send a letter to his people that counseled them what they should do while in exile in Babylon.

The first piece of advice in Jeremiah's letter was that the exiles should accept their situation as real. We get the impression from verses eight and nine that, among the Jews, there were some false prophets who were denying the truth. Probably in an attempt to cheer up their people, those prophets were making light of their bad turn of events. They were telling the Jews that this was just a temporary situation. But the wise prophet Jeremiah wrote differently. This was no bad dream that would be over in the morning. Jeremiah advised his countrymen and women that this Babylonian captivity was not going to be short-lived. In fact, in verse 10, Jeremiah told them their exile would last 70 years.

Most of us don't like to hear bad news. And, when bad things happen, we don't really like anyone to confirm it or make us think about it too much. We'd rather believe a fairy-tale version that we could simply kiss a frog or a sleeping princess, and all would suddenly be well. Or maybe we could turn into the sleeping princess and wake up much later when this mess is all over. We like magic because it eases our pain quickly. With fairy dust or alcohol or drugs or over-eating or gambling or shopping 'til we drop or engaging in extreme sports or obsessing even in our religious practices, we

distract ourselves from the truth and ignore what's going on around us. That sort of escapism from anxiety feels good for a while, until our post-traumatic behavior takes on a life of its own and creates another whole level of traumatic experiences.

That's why Jeremiah didn't advise the exiles in Babylon to make light of their situation. Being conquered by the Babylonians was no small thing. They needed to face it head on. Denying its horrors and their losses would do them no good. This sad deportation and grievous captivity was an actual thing that was going to have a harsh impact on even the brightest and the strongest among them. No matter how capable or faithful they were, they weren't going to be able to muscle or think their way through this in a hurry. They were going to be living there in this pain and suffering for a long time. They needed to accept their counselor's help and advice. They needed to accept that their trauma was real.

When bad things happen to us today, we also need to accept that those traumas are real. When we get a serious diagnosis, when we lose a loved one to death, when we suffer from a terrible shock or betrayal, or when we suddenly feel vulnerable, those losses of well-being shake our sense of trust in God, in the world, and in our own abilities. Our natural inclination is to try to protect ourselves and others from pain by falsely denying the extent of what happened. But, when we do that, we prevent ourselves from taking the next steps toward healing. So, according to Jeremiah's post-traumatic advice, the best way to start is by accepting that our trauma was and is real.

2—BLOOM WHERE WE ARE PLANTED

In verses five and six, Jeremiah writes a second piece of post-traumatic advice: Bloom where you are planted. Speaking through Jeremiah, the Lord says to the exiles, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters [and grandchildren] . . . multiply there, and do not decrease." Once we have stopped trying to avoid the truth of our situation, then it's appropriate to begin making the best of where we are. Sometimes that might involve using one's hands in a constructive project like building a house. Sometimes making the best of a bad

situation involves the therapy of digging in the dirt; observing God's miracle of new life bursting forth from a tiny, dead-looking seed; and nurturing that life through watering, weeding, pruning, and harvesting. Then, there's the healthiness of eating nutritious, life-giving produce. And, of course, making the best of a situation very often involves some quality relationships, in which one opens one's heart in affection and trust, healing oneself and each other through deep conversation and love.

Today, we who have suffered trauma might bloom where we are planted in similar ways. For those who are reeling from the election of Donald Trump as our president, it would be easy to be overwhelmed by all the changes that could possibly happen in the first 100 days or four years of his administration. Jeremiah doesn't want us to live in denial of what might be coming, but the Prophet doesn't want us to die from despair or anger, either. Jeremiah's advice would be to get up and start doing what we can to promote health and welfare in our country, for it's in the well-being of our country that we'll find our own individual well-being.

I heard that two of our church members attended a workshop on Wednesday evening. The workshop was to help them mentor refugees who have moved into our Ogden area. Even if walls get built and immigration is curtailed, we can certainly help the refugees who are already here. We can help them establish housing, find work, acquire adequate food, and develop vital relationships. We can help them heal from their earlier traumas that caused them to flee from their countries of origin and their later traumas that occurred along their arduous journey to Utah. We can reach out in love to those refugees who are already here in Ogden, and, in so doing, we can heal ourselves. We can help them bloom where they are planted, and in so doing, we can bloom where we are planted too.

3—CLAIM GOD'S HOPEFUL FUTURE

Jeremiah's third piece of post-traumatic advice is found in verses 10-14. There the prophet counseled his fellow Jews to claim God's hopeful future. It's hard to envision and trust God's promise to "restore your fortunes" when you're in the middle of a crisis, suffering from physical pain and emotional

distress. It may take 70 years to find a way out of the trauma—maybe an entire lifetime. Maybe only our children or grandchildren will see the better day that is ahead. Or maybe we'll only see it in heaven. But, even at that, Jeremiah urged his exiled brothers and sisters to stand on the promise that God cared for them, that God's plans were not for harm, but for healing and hope.

Trusting in God's good plans is really difficult when we're overcome by post-traumatic stress. Believing that God even exists may be nearly impossible when God's goodness seems so distant and inaccessible. But, as the wise counselor Jeremiah advises, a time will come when it will be possible to seek and find God, to know that your prayers are heard, and to be restored to the good fortunes that were lost. Whether we see that bright day before or after we die, it's a source of blessed assurance *now* to anticipate and claim God's hopeful future.

CONCLUSION

I've never served in the military or been married to someone who has. But I do know a thing or two about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In 1982, I was in two car accidents in one week, and that traumatic experience continues to cause me a lot of anxiety while driving and especially while riding in a car that someone else is driving. My husband Steve still suffers from his traumatic experience of an explosion that destroyed his house when he was a small child. And Steve and I together adopted two children from the country of Colombia. At the ages of eight and six, Angie and Oscar had already suffered incredible hardship and abuse that horribly wounded their emotions and continues to impair their ability to function today.

From all that personal experience, I know that Jeremiah spoke truth when he said that we have to accept that the trauma is real and might last a lifetime. It doesn't do us any good to try to escape from it, because the only way to gain any ground with PTSD is to bloom where we are planted by engaging ourselves in healthy, life-affirming activity and developing supportive relationships. And, of

course, no matter how hard it seems and how unlikely success might be, we can't give up trying. No matter how far out there it may be, we have to claim God's hopeful future.

I'm not saying any of this is easy. It sure isn't. But I think Jeremiah's letter to the exiles tells us something really important. If you're hurting from something that happened in your past, or if you know someone else who is suffering in that way, I hope you will hear and heed Jeremiah's post-traumatic advice.