

SERMON SERIES: "What Then Are We to Say?"
SERMON TITLE: "God Is for Us!"
SCRIPTURE TEXT: Romans 8:31-39 and Jeremiah 29:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 2, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus in China, impeachment hearings in Washington, D.C., deadly flu in Utah, constant talk about corruption, the deaths of two beloved members of our congregation, an impending snowstorm, the death of a basketball superstar, a high-profile sexual misconduct trial, the on-going conflicts and uncertainty within the United Methodist denomination—all these public things and many other, more-personal, concerns weigh heavily upon us. Even the most optimistic among us can't help but come to church worn down by at least some worries and troubles.

In that regard, we're not so different from God's people of earlier generations and millennia. Like a "Groundhog Day" repetition, over and over again the people of God have experienced a variety of troubles that they perceived were either self-inflicted or brought about by their enemies, by occurrences of nature, or by the hand of God's judgment.

In the middle of the first century, in his letter to the Christians who lived in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote about "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword." These were the stresses they were experiencing. And Paul's intent was to cheer them up, to move their minds to a better place, to realize that—even in very real times of terrible trouble—God is busy working for the good of those who are called according to God's purpose.

During these first three Sundays of February, I want us to think about and claim Paul's hopeful words. In Romans 8:31, Paul asks the rhetorical question: "What then are we to say about these things?" And then he gives three answers: "God is for us!", "Jesus intercedes for us!", and "Nothing can separate us from God's love." Today, using some help from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, we're going to embrace that first answer. Yes, indeed, God is for us!

THE SITUATION IN JEREMIAH'S DAY

I chose this passage from Jeremiah 29 because, like our stresses today and the concerns of the Christians in Rome in the first century, there was a lot weighing on the minds of the Jews of Jeremiah's time. Six hundred years before Jesus, the great power of Babylonia had swept into Judah, conquered the fortified city of Jerusalem, and destroyed their temple. Most of the leading citizens had been taken away as captives to Babylon.

Those Jews who were forced into exile in a foreign land were filled with grief and anger. Psalm 137 expresses their despair and agony like this:

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion . . .
 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right hand wither!
 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
 if I don't remember you.
 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
 and dash them against the rock!

These violent words seem shocking to us, but it's no wonder the captives felt so horrible. Their lives, absolutely, had been turned upside down.

But God didn't want the Jewish people to think that they had been abandoned, rejected, or punished to the point of annihilation. And that's why God used the Prophet Jeremiah to speak the positive words in chapter 29. In this letter, Jeremiah indicates that God was for them, and that God is for us, in three important ways.

1--GOD PROVIDES EXPECTATIONS

The first of these ways that God is for us is that God provides expectations. In the midst of the Jews' severe grief and agony, it wasn't Jeremiah's place to rub it in that he and many other prophets had

warned them that this was going to happen. But that was the truth. For centuries, Jeremiah and other prophets had been giving out warnings to the kings and other leaders that trouble was coming if they didn't put things in order. If they didn't commit themselves to God, if they didn't follow God's laws in regard to worship and ethics, if they didn't get their spiritual priorities straight, then a reckoning would surely come. Then, just as those prophets predicted, the consequences arrived with a vengeance. And, as Jeremiah said in his letter to the exiles in Babylon, this period of captivity wasn't going to be over quickly. It wasn't an inconvenience that they could hold their breath and wait out. It wasn't a nightmare that would be over in the morning. Jeremiah clearly wrote that this exile would last for several decades.

Sometimes we humans are so stubborn and slow to learn that it takes a generation or two before really bad habits can be unlearned and new ones can be incorporated. God wanted to make sure that the exiles finally learned that God's expectations were important. God provided laws for a reason—not for punishment or harm but for the promotion of human well-being. God's rules and laws are a positive gift of guidance that helps us to thrive. When we accept, trust, and obey God's expectations, then we can see that God is for us.

2—GOD PROVIDES CALM IN THE STORM

Of course, sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of trouble anyway. Because of our own fault or someone else's or because of other powers greater than us, we find ourselves in the midst of chaos and anxiety. And here's where we see a second way that God is for us. God provides calm in the storm. Most of us know the Bible story about Jesus and the disciples out in the boat during the storm at sea. The disciples can't understand how Jesus can sleep when the wind and the waves are tossing the boat to and fro. But, when they wake Jesus up, he simply commands the storm to be still.

This story in Jeremiah is kind of like that. Jeremiah doesn't command the storm, but he tells the Jewish exiles exactly what to do. Stop being anxious and trying to fight this reality. Quit listening to the

false prophets who say this is going to be over quickly. Instead, accept this as your new normal. Build yourself some houses. Plant some gardens. Eat what you plant. Make some lemonade out of those lemons. Get married. Have some kids and grandkids. Get along with and even seek the good of your Babylonian neighbors. Make Babylon your home. You're going to be there a while, so do what it takes to thrive.

Of course, Jeremiah wasn't just counseling the exiles to prosper materially. He was also encouraging them to trust in God's goodness. They needed to learn that God wasn't limited to Judea. God was also there in Babylonia. Obviously, the Jews hadn't been doing all that well spiritually while they lived in and around Jerusalem, so this shake-up was a new opportunity to seek and find God. This was a new chance to learn how to pray and call upon God with their whole hearts.

So, said Jeremiah to the exiles, take a deep spiritual breath. Count to 70. Look to God and relax in trust. God is eager and able to calm the storm. Remember, God is for us!

3—GOD GIVES A FUTURE WITH HOPE

Of course, God isn't just a God of the past who gave out expectations a long time ago, or even just a God of the present who calms the storms of life that we're facing today. In Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, we also see that God is for us by giving us a future with hope.

In verses 10 through 14, Jeremiah wrote that, when the 70 years of exile would be over, their spiritual life would be so much improved that they would be able to search and find God, and God would hear their prayers. At that time, God would restore their fortunes and bring the Jews back to Jerusalem from "all the nations and all the places" where God had scattered them.

That return did happen. When Persia conquered Babylon, King Cyrus of Persia granted the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their city and their temple. This mass migration took place in waves over a number of decades, and it wasn't easy, by any means. But it was a restoration that actually did come true.

And, in the early years of the exile, it was a wonderful promise that gave the captives a reason to get out of bed in the morning, straighten their shoulders, and lift up their chins. God was not going to let the Jews die off in that foreign land. They weren't going to be exterminated from the face of the earth. Yes, sure, some of the older ones would pass away in Babylon. Not everyone would be young and strong enough to make the journey back. But, as a community of Jewish people, they were going to find ways to thrive, and grow stronger, and return home again some day.

This story of the exiles gives us confidence that, no matter what our challenge is today, we too can be assured that God is for us, giving us a future with hope.

CONCLUSION

In the news this past week, we heard about some celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp in Germany. Fortunately, some concentration camp survivors are still alive to tell their stories and remind us about the horrible historical truth of what can happen if one group of people thinks that God is for them and not for another.

In this time of increasing nationalism around the world, it's very important that we realize that the Apostle Paul was not in any way, shape, or form saying that God is for us Jews and not for the Palestinians, or that God is for us U.S. Americans and not for those Central Americans, or that God is for us Kansas City Chiefs and not for those San Francisco 49ers. Paul's message in his letter to the Romans is all about God reconciling the diversity of people into one body through Christ. When Paul wrote "God is for us," he meant that God is rooting for *all of us* to be the best that we can be for ourselves and for each other. God makes that possible by providing us with expectations, calm in the storms, and a future with hope.

So, whether we're faced with cancer, betrayal, stress on the job, the death of a family member, our favorite team's disappointing loss, or a sticky international dilemma, the call and response is always the same: *What then can we say about these things?* **God is for us!** (repeat)