

Disciples Make the Best of Babylon

Part 6 of Sermon Series:
What Disciples Do

a sermon based on
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

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One of my guilty pleasures is watching “survival” shows on television, but not “Survivor.” When I first heard about that show, I was interested and thought “That would be an interesting challenge.” Then when I watched a few episodes, I started to realize that it had little to do with survival skills and more to do with manipulating people and relationships to keep from being voted off. I’m more inclined to the Bear Grylls and his “How to Stay Alive” program, or “Naked and Afraid,” in which two people (sometimes more) get left out in a wilderness with a map, one survival item each, and nothing else – not even clothes. I wonder, “Could I do that?” I wonder not because of the naked part – the no shoes thing (go figure) would be a challenge, and so would the bugs. The thing that makes me wonder though is whether I’d be up to the physical demands.

Most of the participants on any of these shows are younger than me, and fitter than me. Could I survive when so many others fail? If I did survive such a challenge, would that be success? At the end of every episode of “Naked and Afraid,” the participants are rated for their survival skills and they show side-by-side (with blurring) before and after pictures noting how much weight that each person lost during the challenge. Even for the best participants, I’ve never seen anyone gain weight or just stay close to the same. They all lose weight.

Although they may have survived the challenge – none thrive. That’s an important distinction. You can survive on gummy worms. I remember once several years ago (twenty-five or more) knowing a woman who survived on vodka. That was her only sustenance. Do you think she was thriving? Socially? Mentally? Physically? Spiritually?

Without going into an extended biblical history lesson, that’s what had happened to Israel and Judah. Through a series of kings and leaders who not only neglected their relationship with the LORD God but at times worshiped other gods – occasionally interspersed with righteous kings – they degenerated. Instead of following the guidance that God offered them through Scripture and the prophets, they chose to look at what other kings were doing and to become insular building up themselves instead of caring for God’s people. They became complacent almost as if they were entitled to the Promised Land instead of delighting in God’s blessing.

They survived. They made alliances with foreign kings. Eventually, Israel (the northern kingdom) was conquered by the Assyrians. After Babylon conquered the Assyrians, Nebuchadnezzar put his sights on Judah. This is the context for what we hear in Jeremiah, today. Leaders and princes are being taken away. We know some of their names: Daniel along with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Whom you may know better by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.) Empires did this to weaken their vassal states. It was a sad state for the chosen people. It seemed as if God had withdrawn his promise. But did he?

Instead, Jeremiah says, “Look, this is where we are. Much of it is our own doing. Not because God chose to punish us, but because we didn’t avail ourselves of the strength – the fortitude – that comes by attending to his promise. Now we have a choice. We can gripe about what’s lost – and how things used to be. We can look at the Babylonians and start to be like them so that we can survive. Or... Or we can make accept that things aren’t like they used to be so that we can look for ways to thrive in the midst of Babylon.”

We don’t have to give up or give in when things turn against us. That’s a word for us today. As Christians who look at a world that is becoming less and less religious. We can bemoan it. We can recall the days when we had to build extra Sunday School rooms to contain all the children. We can recall the days when we had to set out extra chairs for Easter and Christmas Eve services. That applies here, but we’re not alone. So many churches and Christians are facing the same fear. What will happen? How will we keep the doors open? How will we survive?

The last is the problem: “How will we survive?” Maybe we need to mimic secular entertainment? Maybe we need to “relax” some of our values to be more appealing? These are real discussions that happen. But then what?

In the midst of everything that was going wrong, Jeremiah calls out: quit thinking about survival – start striving to thrive. Survival turns us inward. What do I need? Is that person useful for what I want? Who or what threatens what I hold dear?

So he gives this instruction: Live. Get married. Have children. Plant crops and harvest them (even though you know that your overseers are going to take a chunk). Pray for Babylon. Pray for Babylon; AND do whatever you can to make a better place for everybody. Do that because God hasn't forgotten his promise. Do that so that you can remember who you are – the chosen people – and when you remember that – you'll find the promise waiting.

Now in the case of Babylonian exile or captivity, it took a couple of centuries; and included the rise of the Persian-Mede Empire. But it happened.

One of the struggles we face in the Church – the greater Church and in local congregations – in North America, right now, is that we get this sense that we're being pulled into or pushed into exile. So we try to cling to what we have so that we can survive. The irony is that we look back to the glory days when the Church was central to the greater culture and our communities and long for what was – while at the same time we pull back because we can't do those things anymore or there's too much competition. If only there was some way to overwhelm those outside forces.

Let's think back though to when the church thrived. The church was at the center of public education – not only in the founding of universities – but Sunday School to teach people to read. (Did you know that that is why Sunday Schools were started?). The church was at the center of public health starting hospitals and training healthcare workers. The church was the center of social life in the community. Are we going to go back to those days? Probably not. Do we need to? I think, yes and no, but that's a different discussion. My point is that when the church thrived was when it lived as the fulfillment of God's promise even in the midst of the world, and when it lived for the sake of the world.

Before I go into what this all means for us as individuals, I want to lift that question up to all of us here. What would it look like to thrive? What are we together and you in particular going to do that? I hope by thriving we mean the church is improving the world.

Now let's take this to a personal level – this idea of making the best of Babylon. This might surprise you but sometimes life won't go like you want it to. Just saying. Sometimes things are just going to go haywire. The easy thing is to just throw in the towel and to move on. Maybe your job just isn't what you want and your co-workers are annoying. Jeremiah would say, do your best work anyway, do your best to help others to succeed in their work and to look good. It'll help you. That's contrary to what we so often hear, to look out for number one or to knock down someone else; but really successful and happy people know that building up others makes the difference. Think about George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life." When Babylon was ready to turn on him, the faithful remnant returned with blessing.

Jeremiah invites us to dare to look out for one another and to live in such a way that we make the world better even when it's not perfect. That invitation includes the promise that God has not forgotten us and that he will work out wonders that we can't even imagine.

Think about Daniel and the others. Daniel – like Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt – didn't complain about exile. Instead, he served the king (while maintaining his integrity) so faithfully that like Joseph in Egypt he was made second in charge. So centuries later, by his influence another king would allow Nehemiah and Zechariah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

We don't have to accept those things that are wrong in the world or in our lives. But we don't get to just abandon relationships or involvement in our careers or community because it isn't ideal. Instead God offers us the promise that if we give ourselves to building up people around

us – just like he gave himself to us dying on the cross for our sake not his – that we won't merely survive until we don't – but that we will thrive. Today, that's the invitation to strive to thrive so that together – with the hope of Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit with us – we can make the best for the world. AMEN.