

October 9, 2016
Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy
TEXT: Jeremiah 29:1, 4–9
TITLE: Seek Peace

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

*In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.
He had three ships and left from Spain; He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.
He sailed by night; he sailed by day; He used the stars to find his way.
A compass also helped him know how to find the way to go.
Ninety sailors were on board; some men worked while others snored.
Then the workers went to sleep; and others watched the ocean deep.
Day after day they looked for land; they dreamed of trees and rocks and sand.
October 12 their dream came true, you never saw a happier crew!
"Indians! Indians!" Columbus cried; His heart was filled with joyful pride.
But "India" the land was not; it was the Bahamas, and it was hot.
The Arakawa natives were very nice; they gave the sailors food and spice.*

That is a somewhat familiar poem, at least the first few verses, which were taught to children so they could remember the year Columbus discovered America. Aww, but had we been taught the last three stanzas, we would have known the truth. Tomorrow has been designated as a day to celebrate Columbus' discovery of American. But in reality Columbus Day is not much more than a day to find the best sales and bargains on appliances, furniture or the latest fashionable clothing, or for some it is a day to contemplate any number of things that have absolutely nothing to do with Columbus, and rightfully so.

To declare that America was discovered by anyone of European descent is a misnomer. North America may have been "newly found land" to them, but from the perspective of the native, indigenous people, the land was not lost; not to mention that it's virtually impossible to discover a place that is already inhabited. Now we can argue whether this so called discovery of new found land by the Europeans was good or bad for humanity, but we must acknowledge that ultimately the conquest was disastrous for the millions of inhabitants who were already here. The indigenous people were exploited, their culture annihilated, their land stolen; they were considered expendable, not fully human, savages who would either comply or be destroyed. We know how the story ends, those who rightly belong here were murdered, maimed, segregated and pushed to the edges of the country where the majority still live on reservations and are still fighting for the right to live on their land, defend their artifacts and burial grounds and preserve the natural habitat.

Right now as we worship, members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and others who are in solidarity with them are protesting and blocking the Dakota Access Pipeline that would carry 470,000 barrels of crude oil a day across four states. The pipeline would destroy the Tribe's burial and prayer sites and their culturally significant artifacts. The original inhabitants of the land of the free and the home of the brave have not known a peaceful existence in their land for a very long time. These are some of the reasons ELPC and other organizations have chosen to acknowledge Monday as Indigenous Peoples' Day.

“Seek the welfare, the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace you will find your peace.” This statement sums up God's directive to the Israelites, in Babylonian captivity: settle in, hunker down, live your lives; you're going to be here awhile and while you're here pray for the peace of the city. Yes, pray for those you consider your captors, for in their peace, you will find peace.

We can only imagine how angry and disappointed the Israelites were; exiled in a foreign land, living under Babylonian rule. They had been warned by prophet after prophet, including Jeremiah that if they didn't turn from their wicked ways, stop running after other gods and living as others who didn't know their God, they would lose their homes and their place of worship. Both were devastating losses for a people who had been promised by God to inhabit a land flowing with milk and honey. The Jewish Talmud describes the land of the Israelites as so holy that merely walking in it can gain you a place in the world to come. So, the Israelites were receptive to so-called prophets who proclaimed that their captivity would be short lived. Naturally, they wanted to go home, to return to their way of life and all that was familiar. But, then along comes God's chosen messenger, Jeremiah, who states: the others are false prophets, they are not the true messenger of God and if you follow their directives you will most assuredly suffer complete annihilation.

Jeremiah's prophesy to the exiles was stunning—these are God's words to “all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Any anger, resentment or upset the people may have directed towards the Babylonians was misplaced. Then, the directives from God: *“Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease.”* Settle in, you're going to be here for a while, live your lives.

You might say the Israelites were in position to be an evangelistic movement of God while in captivity. One commentator states that: “Both the dispossessed who have been stripped of all humanity and those possessed with oppressive power need to hear a word about liberation and salvation, a word that moves them from being the colonized ‘other’ or colonizer, toward the discovery of their redemption, even if that faith identity is based on a different religious or spiritual worldview than that of the one bringing the good news.”

How different America would be had those who came here seeking religious freedom had settled in, sought and lived peaceably among those who preceded them; married, had children, and shared the land, learned from one another to the mutual benefit of all; rather than drawing borders and pushing people to the fringes of the land and society, seeing them as dangerous, less than human, expendable. We often hear that the settlers stated, “we come in peace,” but it appears from all we now know they didn't seek peace.

In the Lukan passage read by Pam, Jesus found himself on the border of those who had been pushed outside of the community, between Galilee and Samaria. We know the disdain held by

the Galileans towards their southern neighbors, the Samaritans. On this particular day, Jesus encounters 10 lepers, seeking relief for their condition. In Biblical times, leprosy was a scourge, and those with the disease were stigmatized by society as unclean and were relegated to live outside of city, forced into segregation. Jesus saw the ten as in need of physical and spiritual healing. He instructed them to go present themselves to their priest, and as they made their way, they found they had been healed and could now return to society without fear of being ostracized. Out of the ten, only the Samaritan, the one who was considered doubly unclean, who returned to thank Jesus for his healing and restoration. Thanks to be God, Jesus freed the outcasts and people deemed as expendable, the other, and restored them so they could peaceably enter back into community.

I recently read this quote on Facebook: *“Things are not getting worse, they are just getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.”*

Beloved, all the negative and hate-filled rhetoric that we are bombarded with daily, as well as the violence that is meted out against people of color, non-Christians, women, children, the LGBTQ community, immigrants and aliens and/or anyone seen as different, all contribute to the unrest and anger in this country. People are still being treated as cultural lepers, as the other who is less than.

The veil is being pulled back and there is no peace in the city, any city. Be it Native Americans standing to protect their precious land; people of African descent declaring “Black Lives Matter,” families living in poverty without adequate housing, education or opportunities for employment and earning a livable wage; children poisoned by polluted water or land compromised by industrial waste. None of these phenomena are new, they are just being uncovered; and as they are uncovered, there is no peace. Or in the words of those who marched in the 1960’s and adopted by those who march today, “No justice, no peace, know justice, know peace.”

Jeremiah, instructed the exiled people of God: *“seek the welfare and peace of the city and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare peace you will find your welfare and peace.”* We are all pilgrims and strangers, exiled in a land that is not our home, but when we seek the peace of the city, in it we shall find our peace. Don’t misunderstand me or get it twisted, as the people of God there is a place for righteous indignation. It is appropriate to stand up, speak out, march and protest against injustice, inequality, degradation, and mistreatment of people. Period. But we must always seek to live peaceably among all, for we serve the prince of Peace, no Jesus, no peace; know Jesus, know peace.

Amen!