

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • November 20, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
Jeremiah 29:4-7 (*The Message*)

This is the Message from GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, Israel's God, to all the exiles I've taken from Jerusalem to Babylon:

"Build houses and make yourselves at home.

"Put in gardens and eat what grows in that country.

"Marry and have children. Encourage your children to marry and have children so that you'll thrive in that country and not waste away.

"Make yourselves at home there and work for the country's welfare.

"Pray for Babylon's well-being. If things go well for Babylon, things will go well for you."

THE MESSAGE
"You Need to Get Out More: Abide"
Mark Briley

[Watch this video on YouTube] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ku2SivbAhxA>

"Wanna get away?" Do you remember that Southwest Airlines marketing campaign? It first launched in 1998 and has been revived each of the last two decades given its popularity and the rebranding effort of the airline. They mostly focused on embarrassing moments that would make you want to be anywhere other than where you were in that moment. They're always pretty funny.

You've been there, right? And... it can get a little more serious than just an embarrassing moment, right? Life gets pretty thick and challenging and hurtful at times. Things don't seem to be bouncing your way. You think society has lost its mind. You

find yourself driving in the car, approaching the fork in the road. Veer right and you head to work. Veer left and you'll be on the open road before anyone's noticed you've skipped town. "*Wanna get away?*" The stakes are a little higher now.

I heard a mother recently describe the feeling this way. "*Being a mom right now feels like five of us jumped out of an airplane. I make sure everyone gets their parachutes on, secured and functional, but don't have time to put on my own parachute. I hit the ground, but don't die, so I must get up and make dinner.*"

Wanna get away? Can you relate to this feeling? I bet we all can.

And yet, the message we find in Scripture today is just the opposite – stay put for a while. What?!? No wonder Jeremiah wasn't the most popular prophet. Really, you ask? Not that popular? Huh. I know Jeremiah. And we do, in most part because everyone's got a cousin or a childhood neighbor kid named Jeremiah; not to mention the plaque or poster your most religious aunt hung in her home from Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you, not harm you; to give you a future with hope.*" It's a lovely word. Of course, we know Jeremiah. But... truth is... not a lot of posters with Jeremiah quotes going up when he was alive.

You see, the Israelites were living in Babylonian exile. Exile, in the biblical sense, is a forced homelessness; a sense of being oppressed and trapped. Nearly one-third of the Bible is dedicated to describing the experience of exile in very honest and candid detail. It's a tough existence. We hear in Psalm 137 the despair: "*We sat down by the waters of Babylon, and we wept when we looked back, when we remembered what our lives used to be like. We put away our harps because it seemed that our singing days were over. We said, 'How could we possibly sing the Lord's song in exile?'*"

If you've ever given yourself completely to some high calling and purpose – a marriage, parenthood, a career, or cause – only to see it fail or experience some tremendous disappointment, then you know what it feels like to have invested fully in something that backfired.

Judah was defeated in battle, and the holy city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The religious leaders, artisans, and merchants have mostly been killed. Any survivors were driven across the desert by their captors to live in refugee camps in Babylon. They were stripped of their family, their land, and their faith. *Exile*. It's a terrible situation and many a prophet came to their side preaching the word to "*Grit it out; your homelessness will be short lived. Don't get comfortable here and don't let Babylon corrupt you.*" Makes sense. The prophets were saying, "*You don't belong in Babylon so don't make it home. Sit back, hold out, withdraw. Do not engage outsiders. Protect yourselves. Wait it out. Get lost in your 'wanna get away' daydreams.*"

People liked that message because they didn't want to be stuck there. Nobody would. But then here comes Jeremiah who is hanging out in this same exiled rubble but saying the exact opposite: *"Don't let those other prophets deceive you. You're not getting out of here any time soon. I know it's not your home but you're going to be planted here for a while so... build a house, fall in love, start a family, build a garden, and throw cul-de-sac parties with your neighbors. Increase while you're here, not decrease. Work for the peace and prosperity of the city you're in while you're there. If your city does well, you'll do well, too."*

This was just not well received. It's like saying, *"If you **have** to live in Lawrence, Kansas, you might as well cheer for the Jayhawks."* And there's an audible gasp in Tiger country.

Our friend's son was visiting last week from Indiana on a college visit to Mizzou. Some of you met him and made him feel at home when he and his mom came to worship with us. Thank you. He wanted to go to the basketball game that was happening while he was here, so we went. The Tigers are playing the Quakers from the University of Pennsylvania. Their very mascot represents a nice, peaceful, quiet people of faith. But, without fail, here comes the song, *"Mr. Brightside"* by the Killers. That song, seemingly having very little if any connection to a basketball or football game, is played in pivotal moments of every game and the college students eat it up. As it started, I leaned over to Tyler and said, *"This song is played at every single game, solely for the purpose of disparaging the Kansas Jayhawks with a less than hospitable chant at a particular part of the song."* *"But we're not playing KU."* he said. *"Oh, I know,"* I said. *"I know."* The venom runs deep.

Jeremiah's message to the people was so counterintuitive. Get involved. Pray for the city. Add to the beauty. Make your neighborhood home because as the neighborhood goes, so goes your own peace and fulfillment. He was asking them to live with such an attitude of gratitude even in the sadness and desolation of their own exile. Thanks, but no thanks, Jeremiah. Crank up *"Mr. Brightside"* and bring back those other prophets please. We like their message so much better.

But Jeremiah is saying, *"Don't sit on the sidelines of your one wild and precious life."* Don't just sit out, waiting for change to come to you but be part of the change you wish to see in the world. How does the old saying go? *"If you're not living, you're dying."*

There is so much about our circumstances that we cannot change. The only thing fully in our control is our effort and our attitude. We've all lived enough that we know the ups and downs of living in this world. Some of the downs have been way down, and those

moments are not easy ones to cling to a positive attitude or, as one of my good friends always likes to say, “*You’ve just got to mentally whip it.*”

The harshness of the downs, however, tend to feed off each other. My circumstance is challenging and so my attitude dips. I start to isolate myself from others. I give up on my exercise routine. One thing feeds the other and the downward spiral seems unavoidable. If the whole thing feels overwhelming, start with one thing.

Jeremiah says, plant a garden, grow a loving relationship, create something, encourage a friend. There are options! Start with one and let it build your spirit. And then add another. You may feel like the one thing won’t fix the whole and you’re probably right. But all need some abiding positivity in our lives. We all need to be taking a healthy step forward of some kind.

Pastor and author, Irene Rollins, who has written recently about her struggles with alcoholism, said, “*If you’re not working on your recovery, you’re working on your relapse.*”

What needs growing strength in your life right now? What are you recovering from? What is one step forward you can take right now to create a more positive spirit about your circumstance?

I was talking with a colleague and friend this week, and we were lamenting a bit about all the deconstructing that seems to be happening in life right now. It’s a season of adaptation – and society is working at that by rethinking systems and structures and deconstruction is part of that reality. But our spirits are designed to lean into the healthy construction of a life of faith, a relationship with Christ and one another. Jeremiah is saying, “*Don’t just spin your wheels in the deconstructing or in the waiting of the something other to happen. Get out there and create now.*”

The reality is that a healthy and balanced life, spiritually and otherwise, is a hospitable rhythm of advance and retreat. There is engagement and detachment. There is cause and pause.

This was a consistent pattern of Jesus throughout the Gospels. He would have this incredible and deeply-engaging moment with the world and then follow that time with retreat and prayer. He would feed 5,000 and then retreat to the mountainside to pray alone. The retreat was necessary so he could “*get out more*” with the next opportunity to live out his passion in the world.

If we waver in this balance, we either burnout not having built appropriate boundaries, or we retreat so far into apathy that we feel there’s no point in working a way out of it.

The current division we know in the world may increase your desire to retreat but the prophet reminds us to stay engaged. There is no scenario, place, church, or community that is perfect. The challenge is to find beauty in the mess and be part of bringing out the best in others. Create a Sabbath practice to keep your spirit and energy fresh but then get back out there and show your neighbors that you're "for them." And find a way to show them that you're for them.

That's a little mantra in my own family that we pull out from time to time... that no matter what is happening, what hardship there is, what uncertainty we face, we say, "Remember, I am for you. Remember, we are for each other." Who in your life knows that you are "for them"? How do they know? "Ah, they just know, pastor." Maybe so. Or maybe we take that awareness for granted. What makes this last? Who in your life would say without hesitation, "They truly abide with me." This takes some intentional and ongoing investment. It takes enduring some of those "Wanna get away?" moments and deciding to abide – plant a garden, love well, raise well, engage well.

Pastor Mark Feldmeir, whose book "You Need to Get Out More"¹ inspired this series, says, "We live in a culture of the Quick Savior. Too many people come and go as they wish, out of convenience, making a few small repairs to the neighborhood. But rarely does it last." And then he says this... to bring it home for our final installment in the series: "You need to get out more. And you need to stay longer." This doesn't always mean forever, but it means being invested long enough to make a true difference.

Jesus says, in Matthew 10, "When you go to a place, stay there until you leave." It's not a redundant commandment. It's simply about getting really clear – to be fully present. Fully live where you are while you're there with whatever you have to give.

Bruno Serato runs a successful Italian restaurant in Orange County near Disneyland. Some 15 years ago, his mother happened to be with him when he visited the local Boys and Girls Club. They walked up on a little boy eating potato chips for dinner. Bruno learned this boy, like many of the kids, were motel kids. They attended this afterschool program at the club because the alternative was to be surrounded by drugs and prostitution and violence of the motel culture. It captured his heart (and that of his mother) so he decided to feed these kids – that was what he could do – and not leftovers from the restaurant but fresh, specially prepared pasta for the children. It was the worst timing given the Great Recession that was setting in, but he was committed. Seven days a week, he feeds 200 hungry children that stay at this motel. "I started doing it," he said, "because my mama made me. But now I can't stop."

¹ *You Need to Get Out More: Four Practices for Hospitable Living*. Mark Feldmeir. 2012. Self-published. Feldmeir's book helped shape this current series and especially inspired this sermon, *Abide*. His chapter by the same title heavily influenced pieces of this message, including the stories of Serato and Lloyd. Other influence is sprinkled throughout, and I am grateful for his work and his ministry in Denver as pastor of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church.

“That’s great, Pastor, but I can’t do that. I don’t have the resources or the skills or the credentials.”

Consider Rachel Lloyd’s story. In 1998, no college degree; working with a borrowed computer and 30 bucks, she established Gems-Girls.org – Girls Educational and Mentoring Services. She would support girls and young women victimized by the commercial sex industry. GEMS became the nation’s largest organization offering direct services to domestic victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. Her efforts led to groundbreaking legislation in New York, a critically-acclaimed Showtime documentary called *“Very Young Girls,”* and she has now helped thousands of young women rehabilitate their lives. Nobody ever authorized, credentialed, or licensed Rachel Lloyd to do the work. None of the thousands she helped cared about her resumé. What mattered to them was her own story. Her personal experience of recovery and redemption made her the first woman most of them had ever met who actually made it off the streets. Your story in action is far more compelling than your list of credentials.

John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was really the Messiah or if he should keep looking. Jesus didn’t talk about his pedigree or where he went to seminary. He didn’t pull out the Nazareth Yearbook, Class of 18 C.E. and show JtB where his classmates picked him as *“Most likely to be the Messiah.”* No. When John says, *“Are you the One?”* Jesus simply replies, *“You tell me – the lame walk, the blind see, the dead are raised.”* (Luke 7:22).

The beautiful thing... every one of us has a way we can get out more – abide in the community we’re planted within right now – and make a beautiful difference.

It’s happening right here, right now. One of our own at Broadway, Julian Jackman, launched the local non-profit PEACE during his incarceration. PEACE is an acronym that stands for *People Embracing Another Choice Effectively.*² Their mission is rooted in this community, fully invested in helping the process of healing from hurt caused by criminal behavior. Through educating and investing in the lives of young people in Columbia and working side by side with criminal-justice agencies to break down any existing barriers with at-risk individuals and communities, Julian and his team are getting out in the community every day to build up these relationships for the growth and health of our entire community.

In a random church chat conversation one day, another one of our own, Craig Brumfield, discovered Julian’s office was operating on a single laptop – and it was

² peacecomo.org

Julian's! Julian was constantly giving up his laptop to help others coming in, who didn't have but needed computer access in order to connect with job opportunities or efforts to heal whatever their hurting situation may be. Craig said, "*Let me see if I can help with that.*" Craig's place of work, Veterans United – maybe you've heard of them? – was doing some computer overhaul at their campus. One inquiry led to another which led to 12 fresh and clean laptops soon to find their way to Julian and the team at PEACE, so they can serve our neighbors all the more.

Isn't that something!? Julian's been free and leading this charge in-person for ten months now. He could have taken a break, left the community, worried only about himself ... but here he is... abiding in this community where he's planted. And now, just this week, our city has nominated PEACE for the *Progress in Community Nonprofits Award* through the Missouriian Progress Awards. Just showing up with what they've got each day to make an impact.

And Craig? He's lived in Columbia his whole life. One of my favorite trivia pieces about Craig is that he's never been outside of Columbia at any stretch of his life for more than ten days. Talk about abiding! And he has ears to hear. He listens. He acts. And our community gets better.

St. Patrick lived by a very similar model. It was simple: "*Go to the people. Live among them. Learn from them. Love them. Begin with what they know. Build on what they have.*"

That *wanna-get-away* feeling is normal. We've all felt it. And sometimes we need to get away so that we can come back renewed and energized to do what we're called to do. But generally speaking, the choice is ours to bloom where we're planted or not; to retreat or advance; to run or put down roots. But Jesus? The prophet Jeremiah? What do they say? Choose the way of hospitality. Abide – stay a while. Improve the neighborhood. Make it home.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH