

Finding Our Way

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14, Matthew 6: 25-33

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Isn't it nice to know you can go on vacation for a couple weeks and absolutely nothing happens while you are gone?

In all seriousness, I know this has been a significant few weeks for us as a congregation, as we have been adjusting to Tom's departure as music minister, as we have received word of Eric's impending departure as Principal Minister, and as we have begun to make sense of what this means for us as a church.

As you might imagine, I have had time to wonder what it means for me, too. And my feelings run the gamut: full of delight for Eric, a bit of sadness and worry for the days ahead, but also a growing excitement for what possibilities will come our way.

There has been a lot to think about in recent weeks, a lot to pray about, and if there's one message I've heard over and over again, it's "Trust God."

Our scripture readings this morning are obvious in that regard.

First, there is Jeremiah, writing to the Israelites who are in exile in a foreign land. As they wander and wait, Jeremiah reminds them that God has not forgotten about them, that they won't be stuck in limbo forever, that God knows the plans God has for them—plans for their welfare and not for harm, plans for their future with hope.

A similar message echoes from the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not worry." "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" "Don't you know that your heavenly God will take care of you?"

The implications for us at First Church seem obvious here, but I think there is a deeper message, too. It's not simply "trust God" and "do not worry." It's also "be present."

And this is the part that is perhaps harder to do, for when things take a turn, it's tempting to disengage, to bow out, to withdraw. I think that's why Jeremiah tells the Israelites in Babylon to build houses and sleep in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. Get married. Have families. Pray for the city that holds you captive.

In essence, Jeremiah is saying that the Israelites are to be engaged where they are, fully engaged, even in the midst of a difficult journey.

Now it's one thing to hear these things, but it's another to live them out. And that's what I've been learning on my summer vacation.

Going to the Boundary Waters has been on my wish list for years, and so you can imagine my delight two weeks ago, when my friend Sarah and I turned our car onto the Gunflint Trail, canoe strapped tightly to the roof, windows down, cruising past the soaring pines toward that beckoning Seagull Lake.

We were ready for a week of wilderness adventure. And adventure we got.

It started about five minutes into our trip, when Sarah got the brilliant idea that we should actually test the canoe before setting out in it, since it had been sitting in her parents' garage for the past few years. We put the canoe in the water, and sure enough, that canoe started to take on water. There was a big tear in the side of the boat.

As we watched the water seep in, we reviewed our options. We could drive back an hour and get a new canoe. We could drive back half an hour and get a patch kit. Or, I said, we have duct tape.

A few minutes later, our red canoe had a wonderful silver band-aid. We packed our stuff in, pushed off, and headed to our campsite.

But the adventure was only beginning. The next morning we went to check the time of our departure only to find out that Sarah's watch had stopped working. With no watch, we had no idea what time we were setting out, and no way to gauge how fast or slow we were canoeing.

Well, we thought, people have gauged time by the sun for years, so I suppose we can do it, too. And, anyway, we still have our map and our compass, so at least we know where we're headed.

But then, yes, the next morning, we lost the compass. Sarah turned around to hand me the map and the compass fell out of her hand, right into the drink. We tried to grab it, but down, down, down it sank. And we were sunk, too.

Here we were, two and a half days into our trip, miles from our car, in a duct-taped boat, with no watch and no compass. It was just us and the trees and the loons. And like the Israelites, we were strangers in a very strange land.

We sat for a minute, looking around, taking stock of our situation. Well, we said, we could turn around and try to go back, but really we didn't know that we could get back to where we came from. We could sit here and wait for someone to come by. Or we could try to push forward, matching the map with landscape, and trying to orient ourselves as best we could.

We opted for the latter, so off we went, nervously at first, since now we had to pay close, close attention to our surroundings. Our conversations changed from playful banter to questions like "Do you think that's an island?" Or "Would you say that's an inlet over there?" Or "Could those trees be our portage point?"

We spent the next few hours like that, cautiously skirting shorelines, while we tried to get our bearings.

It was daunting at first, and yet gradually something in us shifted.

I don't that it was a voice saying, "Do not worry," but I do know that our senses became more attuned to the landscape. Pretty soon we were able to tell islands by the nuances of their color and the movement of the water around them. Before long we could scan the horizon and find the few matted trees that signaled a portage.

The tools we relied on to schedule our day, set our pace, give our direction were gone. Yet the more of them we lost, the more resourceful we became—honing our senses, working together, discovering gifts and abilities we didn't even know we had.

As it happened, we spent the next three days relaxing into our surroundings. Time melted away as we stopped for swims and to watch wildlife. Direction found its way to us, as we skirted shorelines and paddled to portages.

We became adventurers, paying attention to abundant life around us. We may have been strangers in a strange land, and we were living fully in it.

What we learned in those few days is that when it came right down to it, we got by just fine without the watch and the compass. For it was not the watch that set our time—it just put a number on it. The rhythm was already there, in the sun, in the stars, in our bones.

And it was not the compass that set our direction. It was the North Pole pulling upon the compass—a pole that pulls all the time, on our bodies and in our lives, whether or not there's a little magnetic hand pointing the way.

What I learned in that experience is what I imagine the Israelites learned in exile. It was God's assurance, "Do not worry. Live fully in this foreign land, for I am with you."

Of course, throughout that experience, I couldn't help but think about us here. It's no shock to anyone that at First Church we are about to enter a new wilderness, some uncharted territory. God is asking us to trust. God is asking us not to worry. But I also hear God asking us to "be present."

I'm not sure what kind of landscape we'll face in the coming months, but I know we'll be invited to live fully in it. We will have a chance to hone our senses, to put our heads together, to live without our watch and our compass, guided by the rhythm and pull of God on us directly.

We will see things we didn't know were out there. We will discover gifts we didn't know we had. And together we will steer this ship, following the contours of faith, and finding our direction along the way.

Amen.