



Message from Mary

Build, Plant, Eat

Silver Lake UMC; October 13, 2013

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MOST USEFUL

Today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah includes perhaps the most useful words in the Bible. Yes, you heard me right – MOST USEFUL words in the entire Bible. Those words are:

Build. Plant. Eat.

WHY

And you may be disagreeing with me already in your minds, thinking, "If they're truly the most useful words in the Bible, then why aren't they more familiar? Why haven't we heard them before? Why didn't we memorize them in Sunday school?"

I don't know.

Memorize them now: Build. Plant. Eat.

BACKGROUND

And let me fill you in on the background for Jeremiah's words.

Jeremiah was a prophet and he lived and preached during the time of exile. In the year 587 BCE, Babylonians invaded Israel. Part of their strategy for a lasting victory was this: they would deprive the nation of Israel of its strongest and brightest leaders. When they conquered the nation militarily, they rounded up all the people. Then they selected the most essential people and took them back to Babylonia. They took political leaders and artisans. They broke up families.

They thought that if they took away the best and the brightest that the people left in Israel wouldn't have the tools to rebel. The Babylonians took their prisoners hundreds of miles and into a foreign culture. Everything that held meaning for the exiles was gone – they lost their homeland, they lost their friends and families. They lost their holy place of worship.

Psalms 137 (rarely read in church) gets at the anguish and the anger of the captives:

Psalms 137

Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,



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and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of 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 do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'
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!

That's anger. And the severity of the situation is one that most of us have not experienced, so we can only imagine what it was like.

Now the prophet Jeremiah was not taken into exile.

He had been prophesying bad news to the people for years. He was miserable – he hated having to share God's warnings. But he did it, and when Jerusalem was destroyed and the leaders taken away, Jeremiah was left behind.

And so he wrote a letter to the angry, frightened, displaced leaders in exile.

He wrote them with some advice (very useful advice). He told them to LIVE.

"Build, plant and eat," he tells them. "Don't become part of the Babylonian culture but don't put your lives on hold while you're waiting to go back. Build lives for yourselves. LIVE, and live fully."

MESSAGE TURNS

And it's here that Jeremiah's message of gloom and doom turns into a message of hope. "Build homes, get married, and raise children and plant gardens. And pay attention to the city. When you help the city be a better place, your lives will be better too."

FOR US



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Now most of us have not experienced the total devastation of losing our homes and our friends and our nation and our faith communities in the same way that the people of Israel did. But there are varying degrees of exile.

Have you ever been thrust into a situation that you didn't choose?
Did it change everything for you?
Did you ever find yourself angry or bitter about your life circumstances?
Did you ever decide to put your life on hold, just waiting for a change?
These are elements of exile.

The people of Israel had been given a commission from God – they were to be a blessing. And they were supposed to be a blessing even when their life circumstances stopped them from feeling blessed.

STORY

One woman tells her story of exile that may sound familiar to some of you.

She says, “I was less than a year into a new relationship with a man I care for very much. We were going along pretty well. One weekend a month his kids came to our house for a big get together with lots of food. They were accepting me into their world & into their dad's life.

And I was thinking about getting out of my high pressure job with the corporate world & into something a little more creative & fulfilling.

Then the heart attack happened.

Out of nowhere – no symptoms, no signs. It was massive and Bob is lucky to be alive. But now what?

He was taking care of me. Now I'm taking care of him. I thought I knew how to cook, but now it's all wrong. I have to take classes to learn how to measure and plan our food intake.

This is not the gig I signed up for.”

Do you hear elements of exile in this story? There's the sudden thrust into strange territory that demands new skills. And first, there's anger, confusion and exhaustion.

When the dust settles will this woman be able to “build, plant, eat?”\

JEREMIAH

Back to Jeremiah's letter to the people in exile:

He tells the people to get on with their lives, and his advice is about the future. He tells the people to reframe their picture of the future.

They had pictured growing old in their own country.

This can't happen anymore, and the longer they hang on to the old picture, the more miserable they will be.

Jeremiah says, “You can still have a blessed future, only now it will be different.”



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BUT picking up that first brick to build something new is a way of shaping that future. When you plant some flowers, it's an investment in the future. When you eat what you plant, you nourish both your body and your soul, giving thanks to God who makes all things possible.

BUILD PLANT EAT

So build, plant and eat.

God is with us (we are not alone).

Grow where we're planted. Seek the welfare of this community.

In doing so, we discover the richness and fullness of life with God in this moment and bless the lives of those whose lives we touch.