

Perspectives and Reflections Service
August 27, 2013

Seek the Welfare of the City Where I Have Sent You

John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you. 49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." 51 And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Jeremiah 29:1-11

1 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.

2 This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.

3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

It said:

4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

6 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.

7 But 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.

8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:

10 For thus says the Lord:

Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,

*9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name;
I did not send them, says the Lord.*

*Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you,
and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.*

*11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

I woke up in Chicago on June 12.

My wife, my kids, my parents, and I flew up there on June 11. We were scheduled to board an Air Berlin flight departing at 3:25pm on the 12th.

Because it was an international flight, the Air Berlin people had advised us to arrive at the airport three hours before our scheduled departure time. So we showed up at O'Hare Airport just after noon.

When we passed through security and got to the gate, we were informed that our plane had a minor maintenance issue and that completion of the necessary repairs would result in a delay of just over an hour before we would depart for Berlin.

I remember thinking at the time,
*No big deal.
For a nine-hour transatlantic flight,
I think we can wait an hour to be sure that everything's in good working order.*

After our originally-scheduled departure time of 3:25pm – but *before* our actual departure time after the repairs – a series of huge thunderstorms developed and struck the Chicago area.

O'Hare was closed to all traffic for just over three hours. The delay caused the cancellation of several flights, which meant that hundreds of long-distance travelers had to find hotel rooms for the night in the area around the airport.

We figured that stuff just happens sometimes when you travel. We'd take off a couple hours late and arrive in Berlin at 10 or 11 in the morning instead of the 7:00am that was printed on our tickets.

Then – just after 6pm – an Air Berlin agent got onto the microphone at our gate and told us that – since our flight was going to be delayed for over three hours – the legal limit of

the time that the flight crew could remain in the air before their mandatory rest period would expire while we were somewhere above the Atlantic.

So they canceled our flight until 2:30pm the next day.

They didn't have a backup crew.

And since the airport had already been closed for three hours the closest available hotel rooms were 40 miles away – at least a \$200 cab ride.

So we hunkered down, tried to get comfortable, and spent 26 hours in O'Hare Airport.

After I finished reading everything I had brought with me to read, I decided to spend a few minutes thinking about what I was going to say to you today.

For some reason – I found myself reflecting on the passage of time. Go figure.

I'm gonna get my 20-year pin in a few minutes. And as I sat there in O'Hare I thought about some of what it might mean for me to have come to work in this building every day for 20 years.

To be honest – although I have loved every day working here – my feelings about living in Sherman for that long have kind of waxed and waned.

Through the years, my attitude toward this town has been similar to various characters from the passages Sarah just read to us.

When I was offered the job as Associate Chaplain and Director of Church Relations in July of 1993, Bob Bradshaw asked me to commit to stay for at least three years. And I wasn't sure I was ready to do that.

You see – I had lived in Sherman from 1980 to 1984.

The smell from Anderson-Clayton Foods was still burned into my memory. So was the sensation of never completely getting all the shampoo rinsed out of my hair; and the disappointment of losing the NPR signal from Dallas just as I drove past the Sherman city limit sign.

When I graduated from here in 1984, my attitude toward Sherman was a lot like Nathaniel's attitude toward Nazareth. Beyond Austin College, I wasn't really sure that anything good could come out of Sherman, Texas.

I mean, what can you say about a town that named a freeway after one of the stars of Hee-Haw?

But we moved up here.
And it's been great.

My kids were born here.
Sherman has definitely grown on me.
I'm not planning on going anywhere else any time soon.

But still – as I think we all know – there are times when living and working here is a little bit like being one of the exiles that Jeremiah was writing to.

The folks to whom Jeremiah was writing were somewhere other than where they had expected to be. They lived among people who didn't necessarily hate them, they were just indifferent. The exiled Jews were a tiny community in a large culture that didn't really understand them and didn't share their values and traditions.

I don't want to go too crazy talking about our status as exiles, but I think it's fair to say that not everyone in this town understands what we do or how or why we do it.

And in some ways it's even worse outside Sherman.

I bet we've all had a conversation that goes something like this:

*Where do you work?
Austin College.
Yeah – Austin's a great town.*

Every now and then, some of us feel like exiles.

That's okay, but I think we need to pay particular attention to two other parts of Jeremiah's message when we start thinking that way.

When I read Jeremiah 29:8

*Do not let the prophets and the diviners
who are among you deceive you,
and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,*

I'm reminded of voices I've heard on this campus in the last 20 years saying some version of

We should be more like that old, prestigious, highly endowed school that is somewhere else.

Of course we should have aspirations and we should never simply stand pat. But we shouldn't spend any time or energy wishing we were some other school in some other place.

That's as far as I got in my notes from O'Hare Airport. It was a decent three-point outline.

- I. Sometimes we're skeptical like Nathaniel
- II. Sometimes we feel like exiles
- III. We need to beware of false prophets and diviners who tell us we'd be better off if we were a different sort of place.

When I got home from Europe, I thought I was finished.

But I had barely gotten started. All of my reflections and ruminations turned out to be nothing but prologue.

By the time we got back to town on July 4, Sara Bernice Moseley was in the hospital. She died on July 18.

And I had the great honor – along with Dr. Hass and Rev. Neill Morgan of Covenant Presbyterian Church – of celebrating her amazing life as we participated in her funeral on July 25. Sara Bernice was remembered, honored, and celebrated all over the country for her leadership in the Presbyterian Church. And she will be quoted, revered, missed, and loved around here for a long, long time.

Then, last week, Austin College alumnus and Senior Trustee Ray Stephens died. His Memorial service was here in Wynne Chapel last Thursday.

During a long and distinguished career as an Ob/Gyn, Ray delivered over 10,000 babies – almost all of whom were born in Grayson County.

Hundreds of Austin College students who have studied abroad in the last decade have benefitted from Ray's generosity – as have homeless and at-risk youth from the entire Texoma area.

Both Sara Bernice and Ray were part of the Austin College community and part of the Sherman community for over 60 years.

They both touched countless lives through their lives of service, generosity, graciousness, and faithfulness.

And they did it right here.

In this town.

Often on this campus.

And the world will never be the same.

Jeremiah 29:7 says

*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.*

That's a relevant lesson for us as we look to another year.

This is where we are.

Now is when we're here.

We know what to do.

Like Sara Bernice Moseley and Ray Stephens and so many more colleagues and students and alumni, we need to be about the business of ensuring that our individual and institutional giftedness is good news for this community and for every community touched by Austin College.

We need to be more concerned with transforming this community than transcending it.

We're all capable of being part of that work.

We have everything we need.

Right here. Right now.

So let's get busy.