**“...'til we see what the Lord will do with us,”** a sermon in response to Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 and Luke 17:11-19 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, October 13, 2019.

Last week, we had a chance to see how devastated God’s People were to be removed from Jerusalem, across the desert, to a forced resettlement in Babylon. We read the words of the psalmist, who hung up his lyre, unable to sing the Lord’s Song in a foreign land. As exiles, they were “strangers in a strange land,” with no authority over their own lives. Worst of all, they believed their God had stayed behind, back in Israel, still at home in the Temple there. So far away, they were beyond help – beyond ***hope***. +++ The **one** thing they ***could*** cling to was the rest of Jeremiah’s prophecy:: he had told them **this exile will be a temporary situation**. “Didn’t he say our exile would come to an end?... If only we had *listened* to him, maybe we’d remember just ***how*** long it will be.” +++ And **now** there’s even been some **good** news, word was getting to them from Jerusalem about a ***new*** prophet named Hananiah. According to ***him***, they would be back home in less than 2 years! Wow, maybe this isn’t going to be so bad after all. +++ So, you can imagine the excitement of the exiles as today’s reading opens. They’ve just received a ***new*** letter from Jeremiah. What does it tell us? Probably that it’s time to start packing – time to go home!... I imagine they crowded around as one of the elders read the letter aloud:: “Thus says the… God of Israel, to all the exiles…: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters…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.” +++ Wait – that’s not what the letter was supposed to say! This makes it sound like we’re going to be here a while… like we should settle in and make the best of a bad situation. +++ In fact, the letter goes on after our reading concludes:: it will be another 70 **years** before they are called back home again. Seventy years?!? It’s not the news they wanted to hear. Their entire world in shambles. Stuck here – away from everything they knew – for 70 years?? … Now what do they do? How are they supposed to deal with that?

Unwelcome news… Entire communities facing futures they weren’t expecting. A dwindling sense of identity – a loss of direction… It’s tough. Many of ***us*** have seen our communities face unexpected and unwelcomed challenges. In the news, we see towns wrenched by natural disaster, by violence, economic failure, and scandal. I watched from a distance as the town where I grew up, Salisbury, NC, seemed to experience a slow-motion ***train wreck***. About the time I moved to NJ, in the mid-1980’s, things were going pretty well. The downtown was full of department stores and smaller shops – and the west side of town was growing like gangbusters. But developers overplayed their hand:: they built a mall out on the west side… The problem was, the department stores then left downtown and moved to the mall – and so commerce in town pretty much collapsed. Then, over time, the west side slowed back down as industry moved away. Eventually, the mall closed and all those businesses were just **gone**. You’d have to drive to another town to shop, unless you wanted something like Walmart or Target… ((And, you know, this same story, with minor variations, could be told about hundreds of towns and cities all over the country.)) Fortunately, the people of Salisbury are resilient – and now – a generation later – there’s a growing number of smaller boutique-sized shops opening up in town – more restaurants are appearing. Through it all, the churches continued praying – asking God what their next chapter would be. Now, many churches are involved in rebuilding – creating new community traditions – and reinventing public spaces. Thanks to the persistence of the residents and the grace of God, it feels like there’s a mini-Renaissance taking place in Salisbury. +++ +++ +++ ***You’ve*** seen unexpected – often unwelcome – change come to your community over the years as well, haven’t you? Any one of you could speak better to East Hampton’s recent history than I, but clearly there ***have*** been – and ***continue*** to be – challenges – and often pain – around the unrelenting growth of seasonal culture – property bought up by barely-even-part-time residents – pressure on the traditional fishing industry – economic and demographic disparities among sections of town – limited health and social services for a town of such wealth – and an undercurrent of resentment for all that’s been ***lost*** by **some** in exchange for all that’s been ***gained*** by **others**. +++ +++ **Unwelcome news**… Facing a future that’s not the one the community had hoped for. +++ It all begs the question:: “What are the People of God to do at such a time as this?” … Do we look for ways to go back to how things ***used*** to be? … Or, is there something we, the ***church,*** should be doing to help relieve the pain of these transitions?

Jeremiah answers that question in his letter to the homesick exiles… ***Jeremiah*** – who had dreaded the exile himself – who shared their pain – who wore a wooden yoke in solidarity with them – ***Jeremiah*** shared this word with them: “Build houses [in Babylon] and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” +++ It’s time to stop looking backwards. Look forwards. Your new life is in Babylon. Make the most of it. And, importantly:: pray. Pray for the welfare of your new home – pray on behalf of Babylon, “for in its welfare you will find your [own] welfare.” … Jeremiah wanted the exiles to understand that **THEIR** God is **THE** God of the whole world, including Babylon – not just Israel. +++ ***And, only when you embrace your new reality can you discern the Lord’s will for you.*** +++ **It’s a tough message**. Instead of resisting their reality – instead of resenting it – they should build new lives and be constructive. +++ Jeremiah challenges the exiled children of Israel, ***and he challenges us***, to be thankful for the time and place we are given – to take the good with the bad – to live faithfully – and, by doing so, to bear witness to the goodness and generosity of our God.

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This week, as I thought about faithful people making the most of their new context, I was drawn to look back at the history of this community – this congregation – and so I re-read much of the history provided by Emeritus Pastor John Ames for this church’s 350th anniversary in his essay, “A Brief History of The First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, 1648 – 1998” (which, by the way, is available on our website). Now, to be sure, this part of the colonies was not born out of poverty or fleeing persecution, but it wasn’t an easy life, either. “In the summer of 1648, a small group of men came from Connecticut to the south fork of Long Island and established a camp at what is now the village of East Hampton.” As a camp established by Puritans – the first order of business was to establish a place to worship and give thanks to God – a central meeting place. And so, by the first Sunday of the new community’s existence, the origins of The First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton had been laid. “Within three years there were thirty-three men and an unknown number of women and children in East Hampton:” saints with names that still dwell among us: “Conklin, Davis, Dayton, Hand, Hedges, Miller, Osborn, Osborne, Parsons, and Talmage.” Church elders were entrusted with caring for the poor, and for the spiritual life of the community. +++ Less than a year after the settlers’ first arrived, Lion Gardiner, “wrote to Governor Winthrop of Connecticut asking him to assist in finding a ‘suitable minister’ for East Hampton… ‘At present we are able to give this man a writ of Twenty Pounds a year,’ he wrote, ‘with such diet as I myself eat, **till we see what the Lord will do with us.**” By August, 1651, Thomas James arrived in East Hampton – ***your first pastor***. +++ +++ Now, when you are establishing a new community, there are ***so many*** things to do – ***so many*** things to worry about –… ***so many*** things to fear… – … and to regret. +++ But the forebearers of **this** town… **this** church… did as Jeremiah calls us all to do. They remembered that their God was with them in their new homes – that the Lord had a plan for them. – They thanked God, they “built houses and lived in them; planted gardens and ate what they produced. They married and had children – and their children had children – and they multiplied – they did not decrease.” +++ +++ Now – as the ***21st*** installed pastor of this congregation – I witness a community **still** tightly knit with this church and other, newer, houses of worship – a community **still** striving to meet its challenges with resolve and with honor… – not always agreeing – not always getting it right – but doing our best, in the words of Mr. Gardiner, “**‘till we see what the Lord will do with us**.”

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Our gospel lesson reminds us of the central role Christ longs to play in our individual lives, and the developing life of the community. Did you notice that the village ***he*** enters is in the region between Samaria and Galilee. So, we already know the town has its share of problems – with a mixed population of traditional enemies: Galilean Jews (like himself) and Samaritans. But Jesus doesn’t ask who’s who. 10 lepers approach Christ and he makes them all clean… But then, only 1 of the 10 turns back to Jesus to thank him – and he is a Samaritan… When we read this story, it’s easy to see it as a condemnation of the 9 who don’t turn back, isn’t it? But if you think about it, it’s actually pretty realistic:: God blesses the entire world – ***our entire community*** – just as he blessed all 10 lepers by healing them – with no questions asked. But how many of us actually remember, and make the effort, to turn back to Christ and **thank** him for our blessings? +++ How many of us “Do Faith,” as we discussed last week?:: orient ourselves to Christ, turn to him, with confidence that ***through him we are enough***? +++ I want to point out something about that Samaritan – all 10 lepers had been “made clean” and “healed,” but the Samaritan’s restoration goes further:: Christ tells him, “Your faith has ***made you well***.” That’s a different word from “made clean” or “healed.” When Christ says, “your faith has made you well” Luke uses the Greek verb ***Sozo***: which means “to save – or to preserve.” +++ Jesus blessed them **all** with healing – but a person’s ***own*** faithful response to Christ is what truly makes them whole. And a community’s faithful response to Christ is what makes ***it*** whole, as well.

The Good News is, today you are called to be made whole by ***your own*** faithful response to Christ… to embrace your reality instead of dwelling on how much better things could be ***if only***… You are called to turn back to Christ in thanks, and faithful confidence… And we are all called to live our best lives – to seek the welfare of our community – and to strengthen one another ‘till ***we*** see what the Lord will do with ***us***.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.