

Introduction:

The 1939 movie “The Wizard of Oz” tells the story of a young girl from Kansas, Dorothy, who is swept up by a tornado to the magical Land of Oz. While there, she encounters new, strange, and different creatures and characters and has to use her wits and bravery to face the Wicked Witch of the West. One of the iconic lines from the movie happens after she, her house, and her dog Toto land in Oz. Her world in Kansas was a plain and simple farmhouse, all in black and white tints. But in Oz, everything was in color, and the landscape was wild and different. Taking all of this in, Dorothy says, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

I believe that our church today is facing a similar situation, in which the world we know has suddenly changed and things look radically different. And like Dorothy, we are left marveling and wondering how we are going to navigate this new reality.

Our Scripture comes from the Prophet Jeremiah who was writing to the People of God as they too were facing a sudden change. This morning, we are going to look at the message God gave the frightened people through Jeremiah and discover how He would have us adjust to the new world we live in. In order to receive Jeremiah’s message, we are also going to look at the history of the church starting with Jesus and see how the way in which the church has interacted with and influenced culture

has changed dramatically over time and just like the Israelites, we need to adjust to our new future.

Christian History:

Early Christianity during the time of the apostles and the early church fathers was not a legally recognized religion. Due to this the church suffered through various persecutions under different emperors. The empire tried to force them to sacrifice incense to the emperor, who was viewed as a god. When Christians refused, they were often executed. The church existed outside of the sphere of government, but worked in the grassroots of culture.

Enter the emperor Constantine in the year 313 CE. When marching toward his enemy on the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had a vision of the cross in the sun and heard “Conquer by this sign.” He had his troops paint the sign of the cross on their shields and they defeated the rival emperor, united the West, and became a Christian all in one battle. Suddenly Christianity, which had been a persecuted religion since the beginning, was now the official state religion. We refer to this era of the church, when Constantine married church and state and put Christianity in the seat of power as “Christendom.”

All of the empire was baptized into Christianity, which changed everything. It was assumed that everyone was Christian. Because of this, there was a division between those who were

Christian in name only and those who were truly dedicated to their faith. Infants received baptism as membership into church and society, church leaders began to determine what was right belief according to the state, a strong divide was made between the clergy and laity so that eventually no commoner had access to a bible and communion was reserved only for the priests. And the church now saw its mission to Christianize the world by conquering pagan nations through violence and forcing faith upon them. Military became an arm of evangelistic outreach. The church, which began so long ago as the persecuted underdogs of faith in the Empire, was now the ruling class and were now persecuting others for their differing faiths.

Briscoe and Ford state that, "The Christian faith moved from being an integrated way of life that was lived out seven days a week to being an obligation that was fulfilled by attending a service at a set time."

Christendom lasted for over 1200 years, until the middle of the last century when it quickly and drastically slid out of the seat of power in Europe. This European shift eventually made its way to America. And now in the post-modern 21st century, the church has been dethroned from the center of our society, which now embraces a plurality of faiths and non-faiths as well

as the relativity of truth and a promotion of spirituality without religion.

Modern Christianity:

Our story now looks very similar to the people of Israel during the time of Jeremiah; we have gone from being an underground movement, to a people of power, to a people in exile. We are now in post-christendom, in which the seat of power has shifted away from the church and back to the culture.

Christendom was very much a trickle-down religion. Similar to trickle down economy, where a few own most of the wealth with the hopes that it will magically trickle down to the poor masses, Christendom put religion in the hands of the powerful, with the hopes that somehow discipleship would trickle down to everyone. But that wasn't the case, and while entire countries were considered "Christian," we can read in their history of some very unchristian practices.

Post-Christendom, then, needs to function as a grassroots movement in which spend our time not working to regain control of the government and forcibly make pagan society bend to our will, but rather we spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the people and work to influence the system by offering a different alternative to the consumer driven, schism creating, war-mongering culture around us.

This may seem like a radical idea to some, but the Kingdom of God, while it will someday be the only kingdom, was never meant to be married to the Kingdom of the world or use the kingdom of the world's tactics in order to get its way.

Jesus himself tells us in **John 18:36** that, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* And Paul calls us in **Romans 12:2** to *“not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* As followers of Christ, we are called out of the world. The New Testament is full of Scripture affirming our citizenship and allegiance to the kingdom of Heaven.

We are not in Kansas anymore. Christianity no longer rules America. And frankly, I think that is a fine thing, because a lot of awful things happened in the name of Jesus Christ. We stole land from and massacred the Native Peoples, we enslaved an entire race of people, we beat, abused, and oppressed women, we sexually abused children, and we've stolen embezzled millions of dollars all under the guise of Christianity. Christendom proved to the world that Christians are hypocritical and modeled a church that is unappealing to our modern society. Post-Christendom gives us an opportunity to reclaim the life of servant-discipleship that Jesus embodied and to show the world what it means to love our neighbors more than ourselves.

Jeremiah's Advice:

So, how do we as a church settle into this new reality?

I believe that Jeremiah's letter to the exiles has a lot to say to a church now experiencing exile in America.

Jeremiah 29 is a letter addressed to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It is first and foremost a letter of encouragement to their circumstances, encouragement to really root down in their new communities and make the best of things. But that encouragement hinged upon a discouraging reality that Jeremiah had to remind them of: they were going to be in exile for a while. In fact, Jeremiah 29:10 the prophet writes that the people of Israel will be in exile in Babylon for 70 years! For many, that would mean that they would die in captivity.

The people were not happy with this message, and many false prophets came forward to say that God would surely rescue them before this time. In Jeremiah chapters 27-28, Jeremiah is instructed to build a wooden yoke and wear it on his shoulders before the various kings in the area and declare that they needed to submit to the ruling of the king of Babylon or they would be destroyed. Hananiah, a false prophet, broke the yoke and said God would rescue them in two years. Jeremiah retorted that because Hananiah led the people into lies, he

would die, which he did shortly after. In the second half of Jeremiah 29, he names three more false prophets who would meet their destruction because they continued to declare lies that God would rescue them from Babylon shortly.

So Jeremiah declares in this letter that in order for the Israelites to accept their new reality, they had to first stop listening to those offering them false hope.

Jeremiah 29:8-⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

God was basically telling them that this is your new life, start dealing with it and stop hoping for something that wasn't going to happen. As long as they believed God was going to change things soon, they weren't going to learn to be content with what they had; and if they continued to listen to the false prophets, then they would eventually take up arms and try to overthrow Babylon, which would surely lead to their complete destruction.

What can we learn from this? I see a lot of online chatter and have heard many times sentiments like “I wish it could be like the old days” or “America needs to go back to who she used to be.” I have two responses to that. Firstly, I don't believe the

good old days were all that good. Last Saturday, I had the privilege of having breakfast with the living stones class, and we spent a fair amount of time discussing how most of them, at one point in their lives, did not have indoor plumbing or even toilet paper! Now, I don't know about you, but I love my indoor plumbing and wouldn't trade that for anything. Now beyond technological advances, we may look at the current state of things and say something like "Well there wouldn't be so many mass shootings if we allowed prayer back in school." But when prayer was in school, white people were fire-bombing black churches and lynching black fathers in front of their children, all in the name of God. Americans put Japanese citizens in internment camps during WWII in the name of public safety. Women weren't allowed to vote. The good old days were really only good for certain people.

My second response to those sentiments, though, is that the world has changed and we could try and try to resist it as if we still had a position of power, but all this does is make us more and more irrelevant to society around us and it takes valuable time and energy away from promotion of the gospel. If we spent as much time talking with our neighbors about the gospel as we do about trying to get a Christian president in office, our entire community would be going to church!

So firstly, if we hope to continue to be God's hands and feet to the world, we need to stop **listening to or being** the false prophets calling the church back into a Christendom that is no longer there.

Once we have come to terms with this new, and I would say better, reality, then we can move forward and discover how God is moving in our midst. Jeremiah gives his people three more commands for how to live in exile. As a missional church in exile, I think we should seriously consider these three commands too.

1) Root yourself in the community: In verse 5, Jeremiah tells them to build houses, to plant gardens and to eat the produce, to marry and to have children. None of these things are short term goals. All of them require commitment and dedication to a place. Now we live in a very transient society. The average person moves 11.7 times in their life. Workers stay in their jobs for an average of 4.4 years, and if you're a millennial or someone born between 1977 and 1997 you might only hold a job for 1-3 years. If we as individuals and a church truly desire to impact the community around us, we need to fight that transient urge to pick up and move anytime we get the itch, and we need to find ways to really root down in this community. We need to get involved, get to know our neighbors, find out its needs, its hurts and its desires. We need

to see this as the place God has placed us and search for His will through us.

2) Seek the Peace of the City

Rather than seek the upheaval of the current political, social or cultural trends, we instead to discover how we can be peacemakers in a chaotic world. There is so much discord in politics, fractured race relations, fragmented views on gun control, and disharmony in churches over LGBTQ issues and Christians, but instead of seeking the peace have become instigators and war-mongers. What if trying to change the things we don't like through hostility, threats and political jockeying we instead sought to influence the system through the love and peace of Christ? What if instead of creating deeper entrenched sectarian groups fighting against each other to see who is "most righteous," we took Paul's words seriously in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that we are ambassadors of Christ seeking to reconcile the world back to God?

3) Pray

Finally, we can pray for the place God has located us. In 1882, Frederick Nietzsche declared the "God is Dead" and the moral world tried to learn what it would be like to live without God. To the Israelites exiled in Babylon, it may have felt like God had abandoned them. And to some now, when we hear stories of an 11 year old boy in Tennessee shooting an 8 year old girl to

death because she wouldn't let him see her puppy, we may wonder where in the world is God. But this call to prayer is a reminder that God is in fact here among us and that He still has power in the world. By praying, we are declaring that God has not given up on us or on this community and that we believe He is and can be active and effective.

Jeremiah 29:11 is probably one of the most famous passages of Scripture in the entire Bible. After Jeremiah has laid out all this doom for the people, and then encouraged them to root down, seek the peace of the city, and pray during their time in exile, he conveys to them a final encouragement.

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

God wanted His people to know that even though they had lost everything, their land, their temple, their king, and that the future was now unknown and scary, they would be alright. He hadn't abandoned them, and in fact he has plans for them in this new world.

Unfortunately this verse is so often misused in the Christian world, pulled out of the context of Jeremiah and the Babylonian exile and read as an individualized fortune cookie pick-me-up. But this was written to a community, not an individual, and

specifically it was written to the exiled community of Israel to encourage them in their journey.

So what can we learn from it? The lesson is not that God has all of our individual lives planned out to the “T” and if we just trust then everything will be fine. Instead the message we can receive is that though the church is entering a new and for some frightening age, God still has plans for His church to be the Gospel to the world. Though things may look different, we have not been abandoned, and we still have an important purpose for the growth of God’s great Kingdom.