

Seek the Welfare of the City

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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

In an interview with the “Chestnut Hill Local,” the author noted that I am apt to quote Bruce Springsteen as often as the Bible. Not quite – I would get in trouble with my union. However... Bruce Springsteen – who just turned 70 – is an influence on me. One of the favorites in my own personal Bruce top ten list has a gospel-feel to it and a powerful back-story. Bruce wrote “My City of Ruins” as a kind of homage to Asbury Park, New Jersey, his hometown, which had, like many towns, fallen on hard times. The song has since transcended that original inspiration and meaning. I first heard it following the September 11 tragedy. I next heard it in reference to Hurricane Katrina, in Louisiana.

*“There is a blood red circle/On the cold dark ground/And the rain is falling down/The church door's thrown open/I can hear the organ's song/But the congregation's gone/My city of ruins.../Now the sweet bells of mercy/Drift through the evening trees/Young men on the corner/Like scattered leaves,/The boarded up windows,/The empty streets/While my brother's down on his knees/My city of ruins.”*

With these words Bruce sets the stage. Asbury Park. New York City. New Orleans. My parents’ city, Akron, Ohio. My former cities. This city. Are they cities of ruins? Or are they something else? Something more?

Bruce doesn’t stop there. Neither must we.

*“With these hands,/I pray for the strength, Lord/With these hands,/I pray for the faith, Lord/We pray for your love, Lord/We pray for the lost, Lord/We pray for this world, Lord/We pray for the strength, Lord/With these hands...”*

And then, repeated, a chorus, a prayer, an anthem: *“Come on rise up, come on rise up.”* I listened to it at least a dozen times yesterday as a kind of spiritual exercise. I would commend it to you.

A little autobiography, as we continue getting to know each other. I was born in a Pennsylvania town so small that I had to go to another city to be delivered. Then it was small town, small town, suburban town. It was not until seminary that I found the city, or, more accurately, the city found me. I believe that to be no accident. It has been cities ever since. No accident.

Like you. Where you came from and wherever you live now, here you are. Here we are. A church. In a city.

We are here, in the city, where God is, where Jesus comes. And it is glorious. And it is struggling. And it is beautiful. And it is dreadful. And God is here, and so are we.

So while we can accept the observation that the city is in ruins, now, we embrace ultimately the vision of “rise up” – and the invitation to use the hands God has given us, and the voice, and the strength, to rise up, on behalf of the city and all, all who live in it.

It is not just a Bruce thing. It is a God thing. Jesus came to the city. Our reformer John Calvin fled to the city, the city of Geneva, a city of refugees and commerce and a beautiful multi-cultural tapestry. The writer of Revelation envisioned a beautiful, beautiful city. God is here – in the city. We believe it. As did the prophet Jeremiah.

The book of the prophet Jeremiah reflects events some 600 years before Jesus’ life. Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. The Israelites were exiled. They longed to return home. It was the task of the prophet to provide theological interpretation for this political reality. Corrine Carvalho tells us that Jeremiah believed that “the exile was punishment for the sins of that particular generation.” That set up “the expectation that the exile would last, at most, the length of one generation...”

That didn’t happen. Exiled children were now adults, having their own children, in exile, in political captivity. How do we explore that immigrant experience, that refugee experience, and overlay it on our present moment. The issue of assimilation, whether it be Native Americans whose land was taken from them or Americans of African descent brought here as enslaved humans, or our Israelite forbears of 2600 years ago. If you come from one culture but are born in another, who are you? How do you live? Is home there, or here? And what do you believe? John Holbert asks the question pointedly: “how long was this humiliating exile to continue and what are we to do, trapped as we are in a heathenish city, characterized by customs and practices that are both repulsive to us and just as surely repulsive to (God?)”

Jeremiah, the prophet, speaks to that moment, unexpectedly. Rather than resisting, the exiled Israelites should settle. They should marry where they are. They should have families.

Then this. “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.” Seek the welfare of the city. It is enough of an admonition to us without the historical context. But given all the ways that God through Jeremiah could have helped the exiled Israelites understand their worldly condition, they are told not only to persevere where they are, to have patience, but to seek the “completeness and soundness,” to pursue the “peace” of the city where you are.

You will return to your home, Jeremiah tells them, in God’s time. For now, *this* city is your home, so you will worship God *here*, you will live by God’s values *here*, you will seek the welfare of *this* city *here*. You are exiled from home, but you are not exiled from God, so live out the values God would have you live out in the city where you are.

Patrick Miller says how “astonishing” and “strange” it is to be told to pray and work for the well-being of your captor’s home. (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume VI, page 792)

Monica Jyotsna Melancthon writes that “praying to God for the well-being of a foreign city as suggested by Jeremiah was both innovative and a great challenge to the exilic community. For the time being, they needed to accept that the places where they were settled within Babylon were home; they needed to ... work towards peace and community building in their own neighborhoods.”

That means, Melancthon writes, that “... (Jeremiah) calls for a movement away from the privateness of the church and into the world, into the public space to address issues affecting people, especially those on the margins, those that suffer from political, social and cultural insecurity and discrimination...”

That is to say, if we are called to seek the welfare of the city when we are in unwelcome exile, how much more should we embrace that vision now, in 2019, in this place, in this moment, in this city?

There is precedent in our tradition to ignore the question and therefore to ignore the city. Focus on God, on heaven, on what is to come, not the here and now, not the what is. Theologians even have a name for it – two kingdoms, heavenly and earthly, or two cities, even, the city of God and the human city. And it is certainly true that we are called to live in this world, but not of it, not to be conformed, but to transform.

But...the strength of our tradition has been lodged in Jeremiah’s vision. We don’t accept what is, but we also don’t pretend we don’t see it. A third way, a messier way, to work for change where change is needed, to transform, not blindly accept but also not categorically reject. Transform the city. Upbuild it. Seek its welfare. Not the city out there somewhere, but *this* city, where God has called us, where God has planted us.

It would be easy to live at arm’s length, at heart and soul’s length, as if we were strangers sojourning in a strange land. But Jeremiah says no. In terms of peace, and justice, and reconciliation, there are no artificial boundaries. There is only here. And there is only now. And there is only us. The human city *is* the city of God; the city of God’s future is the city of God’s present. The city of ruins is the city of hope. Where all are citizens, and not just some. Where we wrap our arms around the whole city, and not just parts of it.

In his great poem “Choruses from the Rock,” T.S. Eliot wrote:

“When the Stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?” What will you answer? “We all dwell together To make money from each other”? or “This is a community”?”

Our answer must be this – we huddle close together because we love each other, in community, even those we don't know, even those we wouldn't like, even those so vastly different for us we hardly know where to begin.

Your sign out front articulates the word “inclusive,” and in a joint meeting Tuesday, your Deacons and Session unpacked that word a bit. An inclusive church welcomes all – color, economic status, neurodiversity, social location, gender identity and affectional affinity – a beautiful city, if you ask me. And when people are not included, we take that as a clear and strong call. What does that look like? It can be very hands on, with things I am learning about like PIHN. It can stretch our minds and imaginations so we are inspired to lead change, with things like “Souls Shot.” The litany will evolve and expand, I hope, but the point is that once we hear the call to seek the city's welfare and choose to respond, rather than ignore, we will not be the same, the church will not be the same, and the city will be transformed.

“Come on, rise up,” Bruce Springsteen sings, and better yet, the best of our prophetic tradition sings. Come on, rise up. With these hands. We pray for faith. We chop vegetables for a meal. We add our names to a petition. We build Habitat homes. We hold signs to protest. We use the hands God gives us to pray and work and reach out and take hold. And we rise up. Come on. For your soul, and theirs. Rise up for the welfare of the city, the city of God. Amen.