

In their restlessness to return home, God tells the people of Israel that true contentment will only come by making the most of Babylon.

God's Advice to Restless People

(Psalm 137:1-4, Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7)

The title of today's message is "*God's Advice to Restless People*." In my job, I talk to restless people all the time. Some of them are restless in their marriage. They say, "If I could just find a better spouse, then my life would be good." Others are restless in their jobs. They say, "If I could just get a better job, a larger salary, or a more prestigious position, then I would be content." Sometimes young people are restless at their school. They say, "If I could just attend a better high school, then I would be happy." I've met a lot of restless preachers. They say, "If I could just get a better church, then I would be satisfied." So often, people think that life—the good life—is happening somewhere else, and we are restless to get there. We think—if only I could get a new job, or make a better salary, or have a more exciting career. If only I could find a better church, or live in a more exciting city, or buy a larger house, or find a better spouse. If only I could—you fill in the blank—then I would be content.

That mentality is what's behind today's text from Jeremiah. The people of Israel are in exile in a land called Babylon. They are not in their homeland but in a foreign land. They are unhappy and restless, as we heard in the reading from Psalm 137 when they said, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" So what did they do? They began to fantasize about returning to Israel. If only they could go home again, they thought, then they would be happy. If only they could leave Babylon and return to Israel, then life would be good. And in that context God sends them some advice through the prophet Jeremiah. We could call it God's advice to restless people. Although we heard it a moment ago, let's listen again. ***(Read verse one Jeremiah 29, then ask them to join in reading the letter found in 29:4-7, which you can print in the bulletin for everyone to read together in unison).***

God's message to these restless exiles is very clear. He says to the people, "Quit fantasizing about returning to Israel. Instead, make the best of what you have." Later in the book, God tells them they will live in Babylon for seventy years. They will live and die and be buried in Babylon, so they need to put down roots. So God encourages them to "Build homes,

plant crops, have children and grandchildren, enjoy life in Babylon, and seek its welfare.” It’s interesting advice. The people of Israel want to go somewhere else, but God says stay where you are and make the best of it. In short, God is saying, “Quit fantasizing about leaving Babylon, and enjoy life where you already are.”

God know that external circumstances such as geographical location play a very small role in our overall contentment. Contentment isn’t about having the perfect job, or the perfect spouse, or belonging to the perfect church, or attending the perfect high school. Such things don’t exist. They never have and they never will. In one way or another, we always live in Babylon. External circumstances are never perfect. Therefore, the secret of a good life is learning to make the best out of the circumstances we have.

A few years ago, I had a long conversation with a minister friend in another denomination. In a rare moment of honesty, transparency and vulnerability, he told me that he had been struggling with discontent and restlessness. He said, “At first I thought the problem was my church. I thought, if I could get a bigger church, then I would be happy. But I got a bigger church and it didn’t help. So then I thought the problem was my vocation. So I spent a year working with a career advisor, exploring other vocational options, but none of them seemed a better fit for me than being a pastor.” Then he said, “I’ve finally figured out that the problem is not my church, or my vocation, but me. I’ve learned that my restlessness and discontent is not an external problem but an internal problem. So I have to learn how to make a good life right where I am.” And that’s exactly what he did. He recommitted himself to his family and his church and his community. And he dove deeper spiritually—renewing his spiritual practices like prayer and Bible study. He learned the truth of Augustine’s statement centuries ago, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” In short, my friend took Jeremiah’s advice to make the best of his current circumstances, and his life was greatly enriched by doing so.

We would do well to listen to God’s advice to these restless exiles in Babylon. Perhaps a few of us need to make a change—like get a new job, or move to a new city. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. But probably very few of us need to make those kinds of changes. Most of us need to follow God’s advice and make the best of our current situation—to flourish in Babylon. Make the best of our job, make the best of our marriage and family, make the best of our church, and make the best of our life. In other words, most of us need to quit fantasizing about a perfect life somewhere else and start living right where we are. Only then

will we overcome our restlessness and find contentment. I want to end today's sermon by telling you one of my favorite stories. It's called, "*The Stonecutter.*"

Once upon a time a stonecutter lived in a small village. He earned a modest income and lived a simple life. Although highly skilled in his craft, and deeply respected and loved by the people in his village, he often felt restless and discontent. He often thought, If only I had a more glamorous job and lived in a more exciting community, and then I would be content.

One day as the stonecutter worked with his hammer and chisel on a huge stone, he heard a noisy crowd gathering along the street. He joined the procession and soon saw what all the excitement was about. The king was passing through their humble village! The stonecutter gazed in awe as the king, dressed in marvelous silk, was greeted by his subjects. Oh, how I wish I had the power and glory of the king, he thought. He rides a magnificent horse. He has soldiers at his command. People bow to him in homage. There is no one more powerful than our king.

The heavens heard his cry, and immediately the humble stonecutter found him transformed into a powerful king. He found himself riding on a great horse, waving at crowds of people who flocked to see him. This is power, he thought. However, as the summer progressed, the new king watched the effects of the heat on his people. Men and animals became weary, and plants withered under the powerful rays of the sun. As he looked at the sky, the new king realized that the sun was far more powerful than any earthly ruler. How I wish I were as powerful as that, he thought. I wish I were the sun. Immediately his wish was granted.

He relished his new role as the sun and gloried in his power. As he sent bright rays to the earth, he watched kings and princes hide under their parasols. He watched powerful warriors become weak under his gaze. Even the crops in the field fell under his command. Then one day a large cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from the sun's bright rays. As hard as he tried, he could not penetrate the cloud. Seeing something more powerful than himself, he thought, I want to be a cloud. Again he received his wish.

Now he blocked the sun's rays and felt important. He became a gigantic cloud and began to pour down torrential rain upon the earth. Rivers formed where previously there were none, and water flooded the streets of the cities and the farmland. Everything—trees, animals, and

people—seemed awed by his power. Everything except a huge rock that remained untouched. Again he had discovered something more powerful. There is nothing, he thought, as powerful as a rock. How I wish I were a huge stone. Again his wish was granted.

As a massive stone he remained motionless and powerful, unmoved by either sun or rain or anything that nature could bring, making him feel superior over all things. Then one day a man approached him, carrying a bag. When he stopped, he pulled out a chisel and hammers and began to chip away at the rock. Realizing that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out, “Oh, how I want to be a stonecutter.” One final time the heavens heard his cry and granted his wish, and he became a stonecutter. Once again he lived a modest life in a simple village and made his living with a hammer and chisel. And he was content.

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