



## SUNDAY SERMON

# In the Name of God-Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

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Last week I met with our J2A group—that's the high-school aged youth—to get their input about where we might go on our biannual pilgrimage next summer. J2A stands for "Journey to Adulthood," and we talked about how adolescence is a liminal time, an inbetween time, when the young people are on a journey from one place to another.

Adolescence is neither here nor there: you're no longer a child, but you're not yet an adult. You're in between—and all inbetween times are inherently uncomfortable. It's stressful not knowing what comes next. It's hard to keep being handed more responsibility, but not have the final decision making authority. And who gets to decide, anyway, when you've finally crossed the threshold from child to adult?

I don't know about you, but I feel like we've been stuck in an in-between phase as a country for a while now, and it's as stressful and anxiety-producing as being a teenager, probably worse. The 18-month election season we've been living through has something to do with that, but I think our dilemma is deeper than just one election cycle. I remember learning about an America in my High School history class where both ends of the political spectrum wanted the same basic things for our country—they just had different ideas about how to get there. The end goal though—the place we were journeying towards together—everyone more or less agreed on what that looked like.

I don't think that's the case anymore. I think we really are caught between competing visions of the American future, and that's a weird, difficult, uncomfortable place to be. Who are we going to be, as a people? Open or closed? Are we more heart, or more head? Are we motivated by fear? Or are we motivated by love?

Well, if you think we've got it bad, consider what the little nation of Israel was going through when Jeremiah wrote the letter we heard this morning. In about the year 609 before the common era the great, reforming King Josiah died, leaving Israel bereft of strong leadership and open to attack by one of the great world powers that surrounded them.

The Jewish people certainly had a special place in God's heart, but they were by no means a world dominating power.

Into this vacuum stepped King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who besieged Jerusalem until the rulers of the city agreed to pay tribute to him. When the Jewish authorities stopped paying the tribute after a few years, Nebuchadnezzar came back, and this time captured the king, the royal court, the priests, and much of the ruling class, taking them into exile in Babylon—about 700 miles east of Jerusalem, or 70 miles south of modern Baghdad. Nebuchadnezzar and his successors would hold the Jews in Babylon for the better part of a century, and some would never return—the Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel.

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### DATE

Twenty-first Sunday after  
Pentecost  
Sunday, Oct. 9, 2016

### PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

This century-long exile in Babylon had a profound effect on the Jewish character. It marked the beginning of a Jewish diaspora—the scattering of the Jewish peoples around the world which continues to this day. They had to learn to live without a country, and without a temple. They held onto their faith in God by turning to their stories, and their book: the Torah.

It is during the exile that the Torah reached its final form—so is it any wonder that the central faith story that they remembered, that they told one another over and over and over, year after year, was the story of liberation from bondage in Egypt? Just as God's strong hand had reached down and rescued them from the slavemaster in Egypt, so once more they believed God would rescue them from exile in Babylon.

We keep telling the stories of our faith because they keep meaning something. Bondage and liberation. Exile and return. At first these stories seem so far away, so dramatic and long ago. But they are our stories too. I look around our country today and think—something's not right here. This isn't my country; these aren't my people; these are not my values. If you've ever felt out of place, out of sorts, like you don't belong and you don't want to belong because you can't understand how people can be so unkind or cruel or indifferent: take heart! You're not crazy. It's because the followers of Jesus are citizens of another country: of God's country. Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God.

In God's country, there's enough food for everyone to have enough to eat. Resources are shared so there's enough to go around: enough beds, enough houses, enough work and enough play. Peace, justice, and equality is the bedrock of God's country. It is a place no one is shut out from the love of God.

All of this is our birthright by baptism. And we know in our bones this is the way the world is meant to be—this is the way the world would be, if God alone ruled in the hearts of human beings. But like the people of Israel, we too are in exile. We have been captured by the things of this world: love of money, love of power. Most of all, we've been captured by fear: fear that we'll lose what we have, that there isn't enough to go around, that someone else might get more than us.

Those of us who have gotten a taste of God's Kingdom know that we can do better, and we yearn to escape this world of violence and greed and get back to where we belong. This is as it should be, but the result of this yearning can go in one of two ways: we can turn our backs on the world, and try to build a safe haven within these walls, and hope that God shows up in some miraculous way and fixes this mess we find ourselves in. And if not, then at least we hope that whatever comes after this life is better and more like it's supposed to be.

But there is another way—it's the way that Jeremiah counsels the exiles in Babylon to go. He writes to those in captivity: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . . 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 where I have sent you into exile. That's why we are here, you see: the Kingdom of God is ours to build, in the here and now, brick by brick and stone by stone. God is calling us to build shelter for the homeless and set a table for the hungry—to seek the welfare of the city where we have been sent. And our welfare is tied up in working for the welfare of all. With God's help, we will make this place of exile into God's Kingdom. On Earth as in heaven.

Amen.