

Mission Garden

Based on Jeremiah 29:1-14

"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 a hope and a future." — Jeremiah 29:11

SERMON SUMMARY

This week's sermon invited us to think about all the mundane things that have filled our days recently — emails sent, meals made, noses wiped, fields worked, meetings attended. Then it asked a deceptively simple question: what does the most famous promise in the Bible have to do with those ordinary moments?

Jeremiah 29:11 — "For I know the plans I have for you" — appears on bumper stickers and wall hangings and is claimed by young people at their professions of faith. But pulled out of its context, its power is diminished. Placed back in the story from which it comes, it becomes something far more surprising and demanding.

The Context: Letters from Exile

The setting is 597 BC. Babylon, the world's dominant empire, has besieged Jerusalem and carried away its most successful people — the king, the queen mother, the officers, the craftsmen, the artisans — roughly 10,000 people in all. They have lost everything: their homes, their businesses, their identities, their homeland. They are refugees in a foreign country.

Into that situation, the prophet Jeremiah — writing from Jerusalem — sends a letter. He names the letter carriers deliberately: trustworthy men in a time of untrustworthy voices. One carrier's brother had saved Jeremiah's life. The other's father had found the book of the Law in the temple. The word of God is being delivered by men whose families have a track record of faithfulness to it.

Jeremiah 29:1 "This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem 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."

The Problem: False Prophets, False Hope, False Posture

The exiles were not without voices offering comfort. False prophets were telling them what they wanted to hear: that Babylon's power would be broken within two years, that the temple treasures would be returned, that everyone would be home soon. Things are bad now, but they'll get better quickly. Just hold on.

The result of this false hope was a false posture — passivity. Why build a house if you'll be home in two years? Why plant a garden if God is about to uproot you from this foreign soil and return you to the promised land? The false prophecy produced people who were simply waiting, doing nothing, adjusting to nothing.

Jeremiah's word was harder and truer: things are not going to get better quickly. They are going to get worse. This exile will last 70 years. Old people will die here. Middle-aged people will grow old here. The little ones will grow up here. There is no quick rescue coming.

The Command: Don't Live Like a Refugee

And yet — in the midst of this hard truth — God issues a stunning set of commands. Not commands to pray for deliverance, not commands to resist Babylon, not commands to prepare for a great return. Instead:

Jeremiah 29:5-7 "Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

The sermon drew out the heart of this: don't live like a refugee — live like a resident. Bloom where you're planted by planting things that bloom. Grab a hoe. Till the ground. Put seed in the soil. Water it. Weed it. Raise crops. Raise a family. Build homes. The mission is in the mundane.

Remarkably, this list echoes Genesis 1 — the creation mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. God is not asking the exiles to do something new. He is reminding them to keep doing what they were always made to do, no matter where they find themselves. And he adds something new for the first time in the Old Testament: pray for your enemies. Seek the peace of the city that enslaved you. Love even the Babylonians.

The Application: Then and Now

The sermon acknowledged the real differences between ancient exiles in Babylon and those of us living today. But it pushed back on the assumption that the theological distance is as large as it might seem. Peter, James, and Paul all address God's people as exiles and pilgrims whose true home is with the Lord. We too are living in a kind of exile, waiting for Christ's return to make all things new.

And we too face false prophets. Some preach that history is spiraling toward catastrophe and all we can do is prepare for Armageddon — which produces the same passivity the Babylonian exiles felt: why plant a garden if it's all going to burn? Others swing the opposite direction, calling us to transform cities and raise up institutions and do great things for God — which sounds compelling but often ends in disillusionment when the empire of Babylon proves as corrupt as ever.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life. You should mind your own business and work with your hands... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders."

The sermon offered three grounding truths in response to both errors:

1. God calls us to a hope that finds expression in daily life — not in great things, but in planting a garden. The mission is in the mundane. The email. The meeting. The meal. The child. God is in every one of those things, working through us.
2. God calls us to live out his purposes as we live under his promises — both the creational mandate (be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth) and the redemptive mandate (be a blessing to the nations, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you).
3. God calls us to a hope grounded in him — not in what we accomplish. It is God who carried them into exile. It is God who says "I will come and fulfill my gracious promise." It is God who says "I know the plans I have for you." He is the subject of every verb of hope.

The Beautiful Reversal

The sermon closed with a quietly stunning observation. Just before commanding the exiles to plant gardens, God speaks through Jeremiah with this image: "My eyes will watch over them for their good... I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not uproot them." God is the one doing the building and planting. We are his garden.

And how do we see that same God at work on Palm Sunday? As a man riding a donkey into a city that would kill him, seeking the peace and prosperity of that city — by dying for it. We tend our gardens because God is tending us as his garden.

Key Takeaway

Jeremiah 29:11 is not a promise about your personal future plans. It is a promise to exiles that God is at work — sovereign, purposeful, and faithful — even in the most ordinary and discouraging seasons. The right response is not passive waiting or heroic striving. It is faithful, daily, mundane faithfulness: plant a garden.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

The sermon began by asking you to think of the mundane things filling your days. What came to mind? And how does it feel to consider that God might be at work in and through those ordinary moments?

2

Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most popular verses in Scripture — but in context, it's a promise given to people being told their exile will last 70 years. How does the context change the way you hear the verse? Does it make it more or less meaningful to you?

3

The false prophets offered a false hope that produced passivity: "Just wait — God will fix it soon." Have you ever found yourself in that posture — spiritually waiting for something big to happen before you engage fully with where you are? What does that look like for you?

4

God told the exiles to seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon — the very city that had conquered and oppressed them. He told them to pray for it. What is the equivalent of "Babylon" in your life right now — a place, a person, a situation — that you are called to seek the good of rather than simply endure?

5

The sermon said the list of commands in Jeremiah 29 (build, plant, marry, multiply) echoes the creation mandate in Genesis 1. What does it mean that God's call to faithfulness in exile is simply a call to keep doing what we were always made to do? How does that reframe the way you think about your daily work and family life?

6

The sermon named two errors: the passivity of "why bother, it's all going to burn" and the disillusionment of "we need to do something great for God." Which of these two errors do you find yourself more naturally drawn toward? Why?

7

God says to the exiles: "I will plant them and not uproot them" — meaning God himself is the gardener and we are his garden. How does it change your sense of purpose and identity to think of yourself not as the one doing great things for God, but as the one being tended by God?

LIVING IT OUT

The call of this sermon is not to do more, but to see differently — to recognize that the ordinary faithfulness of your daily life is the mission.

In Your Inner Life

- Take Jeremiah 29:11 off the wall hanging and put it back in its context this week. Read all of Jeremiah 29:1-14 slowly, once a day for three days. Let the full story — exile, hard truth, mundane commands, grounded hope — form your imagination for where God meets us.
- Reflect on the question the sermon asked: what if God was in every mundane thing you did this week — working through you? Choose one ordinary task you do daily and, before you do it, offer it to God as an act of faithful presence. A meal. A meeting. A commute.
- Memorize Jeremiah 29:7 alongside verse 11: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Let both verses sit together.

In Your Closest Relationships

- The exiles were commanded to marry, have children, and raise families — to invest in the next generation even in uncertain times. This week, identify one concrete way to invest more deliberately in someone younger in your life — a child, a grandchild, a young neighbor, or a new believer.
- The sermon quoted Martin Luther: God does not look at the insignificance of the acts, but at the heart that serves him in such little things. Tell someone in your household or close circle specifically what you appreciate about their faithful, ordinary, unnoticed work this week. Name it. Don't assume they know.
- Is there a relationship in your life that feels like "Babylon" — difficult, draining, maybe even hostile? Ask God this week for the grace to seek the good of that person, not merely to tolerate them.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon's challenge was simple: grab a hoe. Whatever your version of tending a garden is — your work, your craft, your neighborhood, your household — do it this week with the awareness that it is your act of faithful exile living. It is your participation in God's mission.
- Resist the pull toward the grand gesture. If you find yourself waiting for a big opportunity to do something significant for God, notice it — and then look for the small, quiet, faithful thing in front of you instead.
- The sermon referenced the Banner article "In Praise of Obscurity." Consider whether God might be calling you to embrace a season of quieter, more hidden faithfulness. What would that look like in your specific situation right now?

In Your Faith Community

- God commanded the exiles to pray for Babylon — the only time in the Old Testament that God's people were told to pray for their enemies. Identify one person or group that it would be genuinely difficult for you to pray for, and pray for them by name this week.
- Share the central image from this sermon — "we tend our gardens because God is tending us as his garden" — with someone in your church or small group. Talk together about what it means for how you understand your own daily calling.
- If your congregation has a Lenten discipline or practice underway, engage with it this week as an act of faithful exile living — not as spiritual performance, but as the planting of a small seed in an ordinary season.

A Word to Carry

You are not waiting for your real life to begin. You are already in it — in the emails, the meals, the work, the relationships, the ordinary Tuesday. God's plans for you are not separate from those things. They are working through them.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Jeremiah 29:7 commands God's people to seek the peace and prosperity of the city where they find themselves. This week, we take that literally.

This Week's Challenge: Seek the Peace of Your City

The exiles were told to seek the prosperity of Babylon — not when conditions improved, but now, in the midst of exile. This week, we do the same where God has placed us.

Step 1 — Name Your Place.

Identify one specific place where God has currently planted you — your neighborhood, your workplace, your school, your street. Write it down. This is your Babylon. This is where your garden goes.

Step 2 — Do One Mundane Thing for Its Good.

Not something grand. Something small and faithful. Introduce yourself to a neighbor. Bring something to a coworker who is struggling. Pick up litter on your block. Volunteer an hour somewhere nearby. Do the ordinary thing with intentional love.

Step 3 — Pray for It.

Pray specifically for the place where God has planted you. Pray for the people who live or work around you. Pray for the leaders of your city. This is what Jeremiah 29:7 commands — and it is still countercultural today.

Step 4 — Name Someone.

Identify one person in your immediate community who is in need — a neighbor going through hardship, an isolated coworker, someone who has lost something. Turn toward them with one simple act of presence or practical help this week.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share briefly what you did and what you noticed. The mundane things, done in faith, are worth naming together.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Find one local organization — a food pantry, a school, a community garden, a shelter — doing quiet, unglamorous work in your city. Volunteer or donate this week, not to change the world, but to seek the peace of the place where God has planted you.
- Start something small and long-term: plant a literal garden if you're able, or begin one small act of regular, faithful service in your community that you can sustain through the coming months. Think less about impact and more about faithfulness.
- Write down the names of five people in your neighborhood or workplace whom you rarely or never pray for. Pray for each of them by name every day this week.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — that God is sovereign even in exile, that his plans are not derailed by difficult circumstances, and that our ordinary lives are part of his mission.
- Confess honestly — the ways we have been passively waiting for life to begin, or striving for something grand while neglecting the faithful and small.
- Ask for eyes to see — that God would help us recognize the sacred weight of ordinary faithfulness this week, in our work, our families, and our neighborhoods.
- Pray for your city — by name, specifically, as Jeremiah 29:7 commands. Name your street, your workplace, your school, the leaders of your community. Seek its peace out loud.

"We tend our gardens because God is tending us as his garden."

— From This Week's Sermon