

“Stand Your Ground”

Psalm 111; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 – Tesa Hauser
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 9, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might seek justice and compassion grounded in the truth of your mercy and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The first reading this morning is the well-known Psalm 111, which in Hebrew is an acrostic poem used most likely for Jewish festivals. If you were ever wondering or have had anyone ask where in the scriptures one could find out about God in the most concise way, you could send them to this Psalm. The beginning says to praise God, the end says to praise God, and in the middle, we hear why. God's actions of justice, mercy, righteousness, deliverance, and covenant-keeping have proven to the Israelite people that God should be praised.

The Psalm says that God's relationship with humanity shows that God cares for creation, and as a reaction, we praise God with our whole hearts. However, the heart within this context and for the Israelite people wasn't just a host for emotion but a host for "morality, spirituality, determination, and intellect." So the praise we give is one living out our lives in such a way that imitates the God of compassion, justice, and mercy in action, as the psalmist notes. The word "deed" or "action" is noted multiple times throughout the Psalm - it is about an active faith, active praise to the one who models what it is we need to do. How do we read Jeremiah knowing the words of Psalm 111? Jeremiah is speaking to a people removed from

their homes and brought to a foreign land as captives of war, dealing with the destruction of their identity and their foundation as the people of God, especially when he is saying things that contradict the other prophets of his time.

In contrast to Jeremiah, other prophets talked about the fact that the exile would be over quickly. Many said two or three years at most they would be exiled. Jeremiah's mention of building houses, planting gardens, and multiple generations, means that the people will be there for some time. Jeremiah reminds the people that your foundation, your home, where you build your life, does not need to be a place but is found in your God. Which is confusing when people are wondering, "Why, God?" They know Psalm 111, which talks about God being the protector and provider and who will deliver God's people as God had in the great Exodus.

The letter goes through a political emissary to the upper ranks of the Israelite community in exile. Many scholars share that the people mentioned in Jeremiah 29:1 are provided the opportunity at creating a new life in Babylon. Still, they are in a foreign land after being taken as a captive of war, with the inability to return to the land they call their own.

No matter where the Israelite people were, Jeremiah shared that they are to be grounded in the promises of God, even in exile. The truth of Psalm 111 follows the people into exile; they are to build a life and to praise God, for there is hope in deliverance as was in the past and will be in the future. In the meantime, live a life

that also looks out for the welfare of the place you currently reside, for their well-being will also mean your well-being. Show the mercy and compassion you know to be true of your God, even among foreigners and enemies. Ground yourself, plant yourself, for you will be in exile for quite some time and create a new life ultimately grounded in the promises of God. As you did in Israel, may it be so now.

Further along in this Jeremiah section, there is the well-known verse, Jeremiah 29:10-11 says, "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Captivity in Babylon is the context of this verse of welfare and not harm. Many of the Israelite people at this time believed their exceptionalism would protect them from harm. That is why we have the other false prophets stating this would be over in 2 years, and then Israel would be prosperous again! We know this is not the case.

There are times when hardships allow us to grow in strength and resiliency. Other times, hardships allow us to reflect on our lives and ways we can change or improve. And other times, it reveals the state of the world around us in ways we hadn't seen before. Hardships are a part of life, some inevitable, but our response matters as much as the circumstance. The response to the hardships that don't

impact us also matters. We don't read Jeremiah and think the Israelite people deserved to be a part of this war. Today, we know that Israel wasn't punished by God but used that language and framework to make sense of their circumstances. We know that the Israelite people persevere; their history before exile shows that to be true. We know the ending of this story, one of hope and the end of exile, and the ability of the community to come and rebuild a new life.

However, we also know that war is an unfortunate part of life and was even more true for those living in the Ancient Near East, and as humans, power-grabbing is the ultimate facade of safety, protection, and comfort. It did allow for reflection on their part, in how they viewed God and one another. The situation of the exiled Israelite people is not a parallel for us to emulate this type of hardship as necessary, but a reminder that their circumstances taught them to worship God anywhere. Synagogues became a vital part of the community after the exile and caring for the community and community building were also important.

Though we only read Psalm 111 today, Psalms 111 and 112 go together; Psalm 111 speaks about who God is and what God has done, while Psalm 112 shares how the people of God should conduct themselves in response. I think it also speaks a little to what we see in the passage of Jeremiah, Psalm 112:4-6 says, "They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct

their affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever." It goes on to say that they are not fearful of evil; their hearts are secure in the Lord. They are grounded in God and as a result, they can deal with their enemies and still provide for the poor and needy by distributing what they have. Even in exile, Jeremiah exhorts the people to remember Psalm 112 while residing in a foreign and enemy land. Their foundation in God and being God's people is what will bring life out of this terrible situation.

How do we respond to hardship while staying grounded in the promises of God? It involves creating a life where there is none, creating a community and a new foundation. It may look like therapy and saying, "I need help." It involves knowing that God does want the best for us and that sometimes what may not be in our control is a world filled with those vying for power at the expense of people and creation. But how do we respond to that?

It may look like taking a stance against policies that continue to criminalize our neighbors without housing and criminalize our immigrant neighbors looking for a better life in a foreign land. It involves understanding and knowing who God is (Psalm 111) and what we have been called to do (Psalm 112), when some try to claim a Christianity that ignores the Psalms, we speak up and push back. The bedrock is that God cares, that God loves, and that God has made it known to all creation and will continue to do so. And that is our foundation, we stand our

ground there, in all that we do. In our love of God, our love for another, and for the neighbor, the stranger, and even sometimes our enemy. Alleluia and amen.