

Jeremiah 29:1, 10-14 – God of intimacy and future

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29These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon....¹⁰ 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. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

When I was a teen-ager I took an extended trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong, traveling alone. My memories of that trip have served me since as a lesson in coping with doubt and even hopelessness by reaching for God's presence and love. Even though it was exciting to be abroad, spending most of my days alone sometimes felt more like exile than adventure. In those afternoons wandering through the markets and streets of Taipei, visiting the monuments and museums, my goal was to see as much as I could of that unfamiliar place. But I had no frame of reference for my experiences – no community to share them with, and my life was at once hectic and purposeless. The excitement of newness became the kind of distraction I seek when I know something in my life is not right – and after a few weeks, though surrounded by literally millions of people, I began to experience a deep loneliness. Back in my room at night I uncovered my miniature Bible and read. Then in quiet moments of solitude, I reached out for God's presence, and felt hope and love there. There are no better words of assurance than those God gave Jeremiah for the exiles in Babylon: "I will hear you...you will find me...I will bring you back."

The Exiles in the book of Jeremiah were, like me on my extended trip, displaced geographically, but I believe that today, like many of us, if I don't pay attention, I can exile myself from God in other ways. As my attention migrates from one task to another and I cross off items on my "to do" lists, how much closer am I to God? And if I search for security and solace in acquiring things, or in pursuing a life I assume I deserve, how can I see the fortunes God will restore for me? But when I seek God with all my heart, I find the hope I lost as an exile. Just as God assured those in exile in Babylon, I am assured today that God has plans for my welfare and a future with hope.

Prayer:

God, as I seek you with all my heart,
Grant me a future with hope.