

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

These 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.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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.

Postmodern Pilgrims Rev. Janet Forbes September 30, 2007

Well, good morning, church! It is good to be here, and your sanctuary renovation is beautiful. I had not been back since you have done all this fantastic work. This is indeed holy ground for me, as for many of us. I think I was ordained in 1989 on this very spot, and so it is wonderful to be back in sacred space with the people of God.

When I get the opportunity to preach in other churches, I like to scare the clergy. And so this morning I arrived, I believe, at 8:01. I didn't quite arrange enough time from Highlands Ranch to Fort Collins, and I was working really hard, praying to that speeding angel to keep the police off my trail this morning, because I was going at about 85 at one point. I preached one time out in Holyoke and was late, speeding, and the policeman got me. He came up and I rolled down the window and said, "Sir, I'm late. I'm late for church," and he just stared at me. He said, "I don't think I've ever heard that excuse." But I was, almost. I'm grateful, Pam. Chuck, delightful to be here, thank you. Chuck and I have had many bonding moments over the last twelve years that we have shared the General Conference experience together, and we look forward to some bonding moments in Fort Worth next spring, as we go again to represent your voice, and your will and way at the General Conference in Fort Worth. I'm grateful also to the women, the United Methodist Women and to COSROW for inviting me to share leadership with them. As I watched your women dance, I remembered the United Methodist Women of Icolo e Bengo Church in Luanda, Angola, who danced for every song, their beauty and their joy, and I remembered the Palestinian women at the Lutheran church in Jerusalem and the ways in which they danced, very differently, that they danced in praise of God. And so I'm grateful for the music, for the leadership of your women in this place, and that I can share in it on this day. Will you pray with me?

Dear companion God, we have journeyed to this place, and here we pause. Our lives so far have brought us here. Our future stretches further than the eye can see. If thus far our journey you have shared, accompany us now. Give wisdom, light, and always joy,

so that in thought and gift and love our lives shall be to fellow travelers a witness to your presence in the world. Amen.

That Celtic prayer comes from a writer from North Wales. Saint Melangell's church in North Wales has been a place of pilgrimage for over a thousand years. The legend says that Melangell, the king's daughter, came to Wales from Ireland in order to escape a forced marriage. In the year 604, Prince Brockwell, the ruler of the region, was hunting in Pennant. His hounds pursued a rabbit into the brambles, and in the thicket, the prince discovered this young woman in prayer, and the rabbit had taken refuge under the hem of her garment. And so, in recognition of her holiness and her relationship to creation, Prince Brockwell gave Melangell this remote valley beneath the Berwyn Mountains, in that beautiful area of Wales, as a place of sanctuary, and she established a Christian pilgrim community and built friendships with all the animals. Last summer I visited Pennant Melangell in Wales, and it was a pilgrimage for me, and I had an experience that the Celts would call a "thin place." A thin place, the place where that veil between Heaven and Earth becomes almost transparent, you know you're in the presence. At that time in my life I had been looking for a thin place.

After eight years of ministry at First United Methodist Church in Cheyenne, Wyoming, I moved to Highlands Ranch, Colorado to serve St. Luke's United Methodist Church. Now, Highlands Ranch is a large planned community, a suburban community in Douglas County, south of Denver. I moved from a conservative, 135-year-old historic congregation with the average age of fifty-six, to a diverse 25-year-old congregation with the average age of thirty-two. I did not know how to lead this post-modern church. In fact, (Debbie and Lee, I'm sorry about this) they were pretty alien to me. An alien people. I mean, they were rocket scientists and computer geeks. Creative, visionary, unchurched or de-churched, polarized, distrustful, frenetic, and fun, and oh, I wanted to walk the spiritual journey with them, but I had no idea how to do that. And so I began a degree program to study leadership among this new generation. I became a post-modern pilgrim.

A traveler encounters a wise teacher, asleep on the side of the road and asks him, "Are you a deity?" "No." "Are you a prophet?" "No." "Are you a saint?" "No." "Well then, what are you?" "Awake, thank you very much." We are hearing a warning signal that is intent upon waking us up and keeping us awake, and the alarm sounds like this: "Wake up and smell the future. Wake up and breathe in the cold air of a dying age. Wake up and breathe out the fire of a post-modern world." Can we tell a reawakening world what is the best part of waking up? It may not simply be Folger's in your cup. Can we stop our predictable church dreams of trying to make a difference in the world, and start trying to dream God-size dreams to make the world different? If the future ain't what is used to be, according to that great philosopher Yogi Berra, can we make the future what God wants it to be?

Seismic changes are following this post-modern earthquake, about a 9.0 on the cultural Richter scale. It is described in a litany of posts. Post-establishment, post-denominational, post-Christian, post-modern. This flood of evolution is cutting a swathe across the world and gathering momentum. Technically the term "post-modern" is used to denote this forty-year period, give or take, of transition between the modern age and the age of convergence that scholars believe will begin about the year 2020. So we are in a time of vast cultural, global shift. Now, this time is being shaped by rapid change and high technology, pluralism, bio-ethical questions and networked intelligence, what we

know as the World Wide Web. People are yearning for meaning, hungering for relationship. They are deeply spiritual, but not often religious. Now, Leonard Sweet, one of my professors in my program at Drew University, developed a helpful way of defining change and our personal relationship to it. He read, in *Wired* magazine, about a digital citizens' survey in the year 2000. Now, the editors spent a lot of money hiring pollsters to see if they could discover if there is such a thing as a digital citizen, someone who is naturally at home in the post-modern culture. And the editors decided that the cut-off age was thirty-eight. Now, Dr. Sweet sees this as AC and BC. Certain people are born before computers, that's BC, and certain people are born AC, after computers. So he began to talk about a typology of immigrants and natives. Some of us are immigrants, born BC, before computers, and some of us are natives, born AC, after computers, and this is the great post-modern divide. Now, I want to know how many of us here to day are immigrants to the post-modern culture. We were older than thirty-eight in the year 2000. Let me see a show of hands. All right, I recognize a few of you immigrants. You are now living in a foreign land and trying to learn a new language.

Now, how many of us are native to the post-modern culture? We were younger than thirty-eight in the year 2000. Let me see hands. Bless you, you look at the rest of us and say, "Why don't you just get it?" Now, basically, though this divide is about age, it's more about attitude. I am an immigrant, but I am trying to learn the language as fast as I possible can, to be able to communicate. How open are we to the future, and what's going on in the world, whether immigrant or native? Are we keeping our spirits fresh and open to what God is doing out there?

Diana Butler Bass first caught my attention with the title of her second book, *From Nomads to Pilgrims*. She tells stories about Christian congregations who are finding the future, and I think Tinkertoys can tell the story. Tinkertoys can cast the vision. We are currently stuck in this first polarity. To the right must be the conservatives, and to the left, this must be the liberals. Indeed, we are in this polarity, liberal and conservative. And as we prepare for a national election, it feels like warfare for the soul of the nation. Church historians say that we have been stuck in this story since the 1870s, the first great awakening that swept across our country. Some churches resisted the upheaval, and therefore wanted to conserve the tradition. Others wanted to change everything and welcome a new spirit, and since then we have been divided in these two camps. Now, in the early 20th century it seemed like the liberals were winning. So the conservatives built their own seminaries and colleges and churches, and now in the early 21st century, it seems like the conservatives are winning. As Chuck and I prepare to go to General Conference in Fort Worth, it seems that both sides are inviting the other to leave the church and take their heresy with them. We're stuck.

Now the second dimension of this model of the Christian life today has to do with how the church community organizes, how we think about the nature of the church. There is the establishment church and the intentional church. Now, the establishment church is the church of my childhood. You may recognize it as well. God is "up there" somewhere, as judge and ruler. As a child, I used to think that God was a police cop that had this divine radar gun, and he would issue tickets for the infraction of the rules. Now, the church building is a building that dispenses religious stuff, that gives it out. And the clergy, the ministers, the experts, dispense the ministry. Christian education is all about information, getting the right information about God and about Jesus, and there are

correct answers to the catechism. And if you are good, and do your homework, you can actually graduate from Sunday School. And I have the pins, don't you? Now, from this perspective of the establishment church, it's all about right belief, getting the correct belief. Now, the intentional church focuses on formation, formation in the Christian life, and organizes the church around the spiritual gifts of Christians who walk the walk. Worship, study, prayer, service, fellowship, friendship. Relationships are more important than shared belief, because these communities are becoming more and more and more diverse. The second dimension.

Now, there is a third dimension that has to do with world-view. How do you understand and interpret the universe? And this basically can be a time-line, but also an attitude. The modern era is all about a search for truth, and that there is one truth on any matter. The rightly-formed individual will use intellect, reason, the scientific method to discern that truth. And in the search for that one truth, there is a tension caused between competing claims. We know that argument now, as we as Christians around the country continue to talk about creation science and evolution. And from a modern point of view, only one can be right. It's either, or. Not both things, only one can be right. And therefore we're at tension. In the post-modern era, the world-view is changing. There is an increased access to global information. The networks of connection are connecting us at any one time, and there is greater diversity even in our neighborhoods, and we are discovering that there are multiple claims to what is true, and they seem to share validity.

Now, I saw this shift happen, from the modern to the post-modern on television. Are any of you Trekkies? Oh, there have to be a few Trekkies here. Not as many at 9:15. What does this say about the church? *Star Trek*, the space series that's been in several generations. The first *Star Trek* was born out of the modern age. Captain Kirk was all about emotion. Mr. Spock was all about intellect. There was no gray area. In the second generation of *Star Trek*, born in the post-modern era, we have very different forms of leadership. Captain Picard is a musician, an explorer, and a philosopher. Data, the android, is pure logic, but is searching for his human side, the quest for wholeness. And Deanna Troy, the ship's counselor, is the spiritual director to multiple cultures and religious expressions. You hear the difference between the modern and the post-modern.

Now, if you're not a Trekkie, I have another example. There are differences between "Leave It to Beaver" and "Desperate Housewives." Now when the Beaver had a question, he went to the authority, who was Dad. Now in "Desperate Housewives," there is no authority. The girlfriends play poker while drinking Chardonnay. The questions they ask have no answers, but everyone feels better in the conversation. Care comes in simply being together in community. Radically different, "Leave it to Beaver" and "Desperate Housewives." Now here is the model. No wonder we are schizophrenic as a people these days. We are in a time not unlike what Martin Luther and others birthed in the Protestant Reformation. They birthed a new way of being church. But it took one hundred and fifty years of continuous warfare for the new church to emerge. If we stay in the modern mindset, we will see history repeat itself for decades to come. We are seeing it around the globe already. Most warfare is driven by religious ideology. In this transition to post-modernism, however, we have hope. The further we move into being intentional and post-modern, we begin to come together. In fact, the liberal and the conservative differences diminish, because only in modernity did truth depend on somebody being right and somebody being wrong. In post-modernity, that difference

diminishes. The establishment and the intentional differences diminish, because only in the establishment church did we all have to believe the same thing. In the intentional church, relationships are what's important, and we understand the vast diversity that we bring to the Christian life, and so therefore it is the practice of faith and our relationships that divide us. And so as we move out of the modern era, we have the opportunity to give leadership to this new landscape and derail another one hundred and fifty years of warfare. With all the religious warfare growing globally, our very existence is at stake.

We are pilgrims who carry our diversity into a diverse world, and we can recognize the conflicting realities of our stories, but practice relationship across those differences. We just reach out to each other in relationship. We are heroes of a history that's yet unsung, trying to stop another one hundred and fifty years of warfare. Not for the sake of Christianity but, I believe, for the survival of the human race. The prophet Jeremiah was speaking to a world undergoing sudden and dramatic change. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The people had been carried into a foreign land, into Babylon. Assyria was declining, Egypt and Babylon were fighting for domination over Palestine, and in the heart of this chapter 29, Jeremiah writes a prophetic pastoral letter to those in exile. "Surely, I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." But his words are unexpected. He says, "Do not resist your exile. Carry on you lives, learn to come to terms with this difficult situation. Settle in and build homes and farms and families here." The exiles are not to pray for the homeland, not to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, but to pray for the peace of Babylon, where they find themselves. They are enjoined to find their life now, in this new and difficult place, assured that by God, all life is possible, and that things will support them now and in the future. Stranger still is the prayer, to pray for the enemy capitol that took them into captivity in the first place, because when you pray for their welfare, your welfare emerges as well. So, Jeremiah says, "Seek the peace and well-being of Babylon. It is your own safeguard to have a future."

Our time is not unlike Jeremiah's. When you look outside, you see Fort Collins. But I want to challenge you to see Babylon. Because the land in which we are now living is not one that most of us are native to. And so I ask you to have a new heart, for a new commission in a new era. And it's not a bad age. Whether we are native to post-modernism or whether we are immigrants trying to learn a new language, I want us all to go native, because I think God is going to native. God always, always is willing to submit the holy to the particularity of a time, and to a cultural setting and to a new wineskin. And so, if we resist Babylon, if we resist this new era, if we resist the post-modern church, we will miss what God wants to bless in this day. And so, beloved, build homes and live in them. Plant gardens and eat the produce. Take wives in marriage, and give your sons and daughters away, and seek the welfare of the city in which God has sent us into exile. And pray to the lord on its behalf, for in its welfare we will find our purpose and our joy, and our future. We are indeed pilgrims in a post-modern land. Thanks be to God. Amen