

*Texts: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14*

*Subject: Letter to the Exiles*

*Theme: Around Here*

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2021; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

When I first moved to Las Vegas, I was working in the radio industry. I had worked on rock stations, and country radio stations, small college radio operations and national networks, and was looking for my next challenge. I came to begin working in advertising sales for some long established local stations here in our valley. I wanted to make money. And I did. But more than that, I fell in love - with my wife, yes, and also with this strange, wild, unique desert town. We know there's nothing like it, and yet those of us who live here and stay tuned into what's going on in our city and neighborhoods have plenty of thoughts and concerns about what needs to get done. We get involved with schools, neighborhood associations, community groups, clubs, and more. Why? Because we care about what happens around here. Las Vegas can be a place where people come and go, and don't really get entrenched in what is happening around them. It's just as easy to be disengaged here, and just go about your routine. But if we care about our future, and the lives of the ones who come after us, we will do our best to care for this city, to make it safer, to build opportunities for others, and to make it sustainable for the future.

A friend of mine was out at the Hoover Dam this week and shared pictures of the water level at Lake Mead. It's no surprise to us. We know that we are in an extended drought, and the most precious resource we have here is becoming frighteningly scarce. We care about water. We're collecting school supplies for students at Fremont

Middle School - who are still preparing for a new year of school, even as the building they've used since 1955 is being torn down and rebuilt. We care about our schools. We bring food for the pantry at Lutheran Social Services and bring clothes for Martin's mart, because we care about our neighbors who need what we have in abundance. Around here, we care about each other.

When the exile to Babylon began, it was first the elite, the powerful, the well-off ones who were taken away from Jerusalem. They wondered what to do in this new place, far from home. Back in Israel, they were used to getting their way, and having influence. They knew they had to do something. Some were sowing seeds of rebellion, false prophets calling for an uprising. They thought there was no way these powerful ones would stand by and be held captive. Some understood this to be a punishment from God, the people had been unfaithful, after all, they had not followed the law, they had turned away. All of them tried to make sense of this new reality. The prophet Jeremiah spoke a different word - a living Word from God. Here, the answer to the question: "What do we do now?"

*"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."*

The Lord speaks and tells the people to survive, and thrive in this new land, even as exiles, as strangers, to pray for the city, and care for it, to live their lives, caring for one

another. Why should they seek the welfare of this city? Why should they try to make a life among those who had destroyed their homeland? The promise from God, through the prophet might seem like a mixed message: there would be no quick relief. This struggle was going to last a while. But the bottom line was this: the suffering would be temporary. God would bring the people home in God's time. It would be a generation later, but a return would come for most. Historically, we know that even after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, some of the Jewish people remained in that place, though few remain today.

God calls the people to do in Babylon what God called them to do in Israel - the same thing God called them to do in the wilderness: Love God and one another. Care for the creation. Serve their neighbors. Keep the faith. The circumstances were difficult but the mission didn't change: Trust in the Lord. Know that God is near.

Maybe you've got this Bible verse hanging up in your home, or etched on a pillow somewhere. It can seem comforting:

"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 (Jer. 29:11)."

Sometimes we look around at our lives and wonder, *this is the plan?* We wonder for ourselves why we were born into *this* family, have faced trauma or difficult circumstances. We wonder why others have it easier, or harder, or we struggle to accept that our fate is determined by anything other than our own actions. The good news for Israel was that God had not abandoned them, and was still actively working even when the people could not perceive it. From the grip of persecution, exile, and change, their

lives would be restored and preserved. The Lord says, “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart (Jer. 29:13).”

This is good news for us too, since we have a similar promise from Jesus, who invites His people into prayerful relationships: “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you (Mat. 7.7). This is the promise that our struggles are not the end of the story.

We all face adversity, and sometimes tragedy and pain. We find ourselves asking the same question: *What do we do now?* God answers: trust. love. serve. Have faith. This is the core of who we are and what we do. God has shown through the ages a refusal to abandon God’s people. God stepped into our tragedy and trauma, our fear and pain, not because we deserved it, but because God loved us first. Around here, we proclaim Christ crucified - Jesus, God’s Son died and is risen that we would forever be made new, transformed in faith and love to live and serve for the sake of the world around us.

In the coming weeks and months, our city is going to be facing a deepening housing crisis. Prices are high and rising. By the end of next week, evictions will begin. Neighbors who have been out of work for more than a year will struggle to keep a roof over their heads without access to funding to keep them in their homes. Clark County has received funding through the American Rescue Plan Act to give relief to tenants and landlords, but access to these funds remains a problem. The system is difficult to navigate. It’s confusing. People don’t know where to seek help. One small way we, the people of Living Hope Church can advocate for these neighbors is by sending postcards

to our county commissioner to let him know that we support increased access to these emergency funds for those in need. As partners in the community with Nevadans for the Common Good, this is one way we can help residents around here who will be thrown into a system overwhelmed with people in need. I'll have these available after worship and hope you'll pick one up and fill it out before you leave today.

As the world changes around us so rapidly, as we continue to emerge from this pandemic, as we seeks ways to serve this city and care for the generations that come after us, we must continue to live faithfully, and hear God's voice through the noise: "when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you." We are here for a reason. We are here for one another. We are here for good. Live, love, pray, serve. That's what we do around here. Amen.