

Athelstone Uniting Church - 19 July 2020

Rev Linda Driver

Time For New Dreams

Throughout this unraveled worship series we have been exploring stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling.. unraveling our plans, and us, into something new.

Today we hear about the prophet Jeremiah's startling message to the Israelites in Babylon...

Bible Reading ... Jeremiah 29:1-7 NIV

29 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. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin^[a] and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³ He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, 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."

Ahh, it's so good to be back... isn't it!?

Yet, there's at least one thing that I am missing this morning....

My ugg boots! (*get them out from where they are hiding behind lectern!*)

I think I wore these nearly every Sunday morning for the last 18 weeks. It was quite lovely to have warm snuggly feet.

Who wore their ugg boots today? (*anyone online?*)

For me, putting on my ugg boots is a sign that I'm home and settling in. Perhaps you do something similar? You might have a favourite pair of slippers you put on when you get home.. or you might change into comfy home clothes

.. we all have certain things we do to make us feel at home!

I wonder... What is being at home feel like for you?

In "The Wizard of Oz," Dorothy said "There's no place like home," as she clicked her heels and hoped for the return to the comforts of her own bed and her beloved Auntie Em and Uncle Henry.

Someone wrote that

home is: "A gathering place for family to join together in laughter. The one place you will always be surrounded by those who love you. A place or feeling of belonging."

Author, Gladys Hunt wrote

"What is home? My favorite definition is "a safe place," a place where one is free from attack, a place where one experiences secure relationships and affirmation. It's a place where people share and understand each other. Its relationships are nurturing. The people in it do not need to be perfect; instead, they need to be honest, loving, supportive, recognizing a common humanity that makes all of us vulnerable."¹

For the Israelites, Jerusalem was home.

But the Babylonians had forced them into exile. They had to leave Jerusalem and live in Babylon for many, many years.. this time of exile robbed them not just of their home, but their identity, their welfare, and being close to God. (Because they believed that God lived in Jerusalem)

Here they were in a strange land, surrounded by strange people who had other ideas about religion, ate different foods and did many things differently.

This is the context into which the letter from Jeremiah arrived, ..a word from God.

The Israelites would have been excited – at last there would be good news... God would provide a way for them to return home soon! Their dreams were about to come true!

But no, the prophet Jeremiah delivered a startling message to the Israelites stuck in Babylon —settle in, build homes, plant gardens, grow your families, marry the strange people - stay there in that strange foreign land and let it become your home. Not just for a little while,.. but for several generations!

Their dreams had unraveled ..

Yet... their dreams unraveled into a vision with possibility:

if Babylon prospers, Jeremiah wrote, you too will prosper! Pray to the LORD for it!

¹ — Gladys Hunt, *Honey for a Child's Heart: The Imaginative Use of Books in Family Life*
Sermon 19 July 2020

God was saying that it was OK to settle in this strange place.. it was ok to own land, plant gardens, build close relationships with the Babylonians. And even work for the welfare of their host country. It was OK to make this place their home for the time being

The good news was that even though the Israelites were far from their home, God was with them and helped them to make a new and good home while they were in exile.

Another way of describing what Jeremiah was saying could be:

'it's time to live. To flourish where you are and to see those around you flourish too.'

In verse 7, the words peace and prosperity come from the Hebrew word shalom.

Shalom appears in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Old Testament hundreds of times in reference to peace, wholeness, or completeness. For millions of people shalom or it's Arabic equivalent, salaam, is used to greet others, build relationships, and express a desire to see God's peace realized in the world.

God was calling those people who found themselves in exile - to seek peace and prosperity – to bring shalom – a sign of God's presence to the city. And by doing this, they too will prosper – they too will experience God's shalom.

So what does that mean for us today?

Perhaps like the Israelites, we find ourselves in a place we don't recognise.

18 weeks ago, we thought we knew where we were going. Our journey through Lent to the cross was marked out by this long piece of purple cloth.

Instead, we were taken on a detour.

An unraveling

Yes, God has been present with us the whole time, but the journey has been nothing like what we expected!

It may not be exile, but the changes that have been forced upon us by COVID-19 have had a major impact on every part of our lives. Work, play, shopping, school, celebrations, worship

Even as restrictions ease, nothing seems normal anymore.

Physical distancing, hand sanitisers, COVID safe plans, listening for the latest data from interstate, anxiously wondering if there will be any new cases in SA

It is hard to know how long this will go on for

If we all comply with distancing and hygiene and staying when sick

and if a vaccine or a cure is found ...

perhaps then life will begin to return to what *normal* felt like...

And I think in a way it's that *normal* that we are missing – a bit like being homesick

We liked showing human affection through touch. We miss hand shaking and hugs.

We liked big gatherings and meals and celebrations

We liked going to the footy and big concerts without feeling nervous about touching handrails or being coughed on

Are we homesick for the past? A past that may no longer exist?

It's not just COVID...

It's our memories of the church of the past that we long for too...

when everyone went to church on Sunday, when social life revolved around church life.

Memories of youth groups, church camps, Sunday school anniversaries and picnics..

Memories of needing to keep adding to this church property to be able to accommodate the growing numbers.

Are we homesick for the past? A past that may no longer exist?

Is it time for us to stop pining for the past and to put down roots in the present?

Perhaps it is time "to embrace the place where God has us now and find ways to be faithful in our living..."

So what might that look like?

Church Council are working on a new mission statement – you might have noticed Jeff saying it earlier:

At Athelstone Uniting Church we have a heart for connection: with God, our community, our world and each other.

What does that mean?

It means we feel deeply connected to God, which we express in our worship – wherever we are

Out of that flows our desire for connection with our community, our world and each other.

We have a heart for shalom, for peace and prosperity in all our relationships. And we want our community and our world to flourish.

How?

Let's start with the things we are already doing:

We have made space for Medical HQ and the Federal Govt to set up a GP respirator clinic right here on our premises. What better way to invest in our community by providing such a vital service?

We support our local businesses by shopping locally, and frequenting local cafes and pubs

A number of our regular activities are intentionally held in public places, not only are we visible – demonstrating our Christian care for one another - but we are also supporting local business – which has been hard hit in this season

We've been giving generously so that people in the local area can receive food and essential groceries through Uniting Communities

We have our beautiful Wirra that celebrates our connection with the first peoples of this place, the Kurna people, through its naming wakwakurnaku wirra and the careful selection and care of endemic plants. A peaceful place where many locals walk through or sit to enjoy their lunch.

We have been adding colour and hopefully a smile to people's faces – through the heart tree on the corner, the colourful additions to the Wirra and our community artwork.

We have been investing in families by sending resources through Stay and Play at home and Messy Church at home.

Many of us work and volunteer in the local community. Investing in the common good.

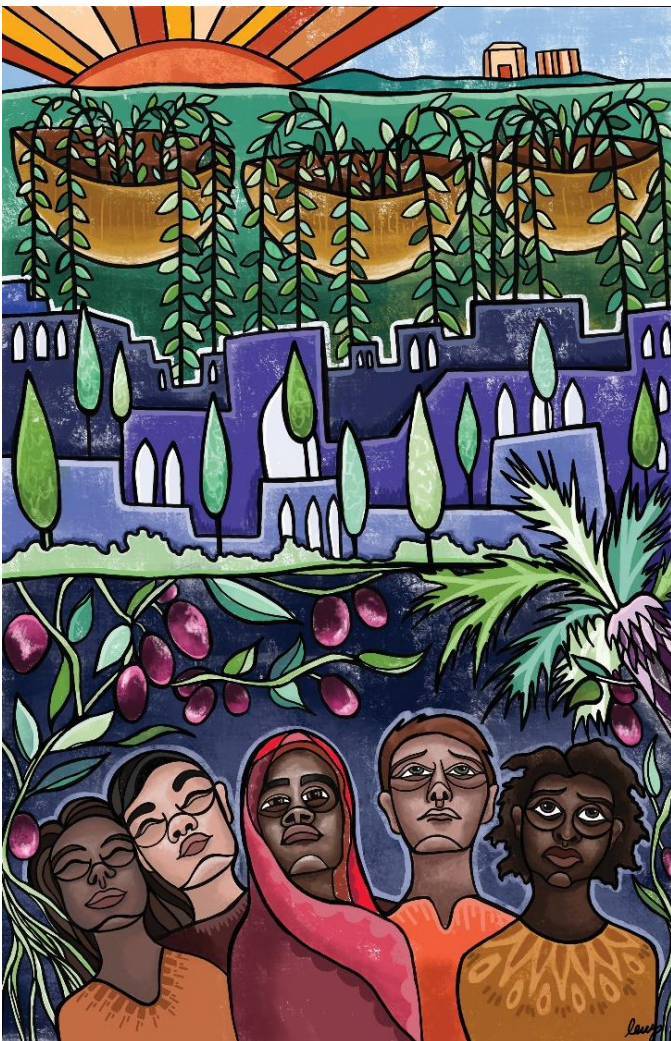
We have been praying. When we pray, God moves through us and in us..

What is God calling us to next? That is the challenge before Church Council right now. Where do we see God at work in and through us? Where do we see life and growth in the community around us – where we can join in? what do we need to build? what planting do we need to do? What relationships do we need to nurture?

Perhaps as God plants a new vision in us, we will feel less home sick and more like we're making ourselves –'at home' –a place where many will feel safe to join together in laughter. a place marked by love and kindness – a place or feeling of belonging.

I am going to pause now and give you some time to reflect...

We'll do this through the artwork for this week....."New Roots" by Lauren Wright Pittman.



New Roots
(Encouraging the Israelites in
exile to plant gardens and
build houses.)
by Lauren Wright Pittman
inspired by jeremiah 29:1-7

For those present here today, this *won't* be a time for discussion, *rather*, this is a time for your own personal silent reflection. You might like to make notes on the back of your copy of the artwork. Those who are watching on line, are of course welcome to use this time to reflect together or journal.

Take a few moments to gaze upon the artwork. Breathe deeply in quiet meditation as you observe the visual qualities of what you see: color, line, texture, movement, shape, form.

Now take a deeper look. What parts of the image are your eyes most drawn to? What parts of the image did you overlook? Let's take a few minutes to do this.

As you continue to look at the artwork, listen to what the artist, Lauren has to say:

"I moved to a new state. As I write, I'm living out of boxes, the trunk of my car, and a storage unit. It's a jarring experience to move, even when it's a conscious choice. I've found myself in a place that resembles almost nothing like what I'd envisioned for my life. I left a city burgeoning with opportunities and culture; now I'm in a small town where I'd be thrilled to find one decent, local coffee shop. I'm beginning to realize visions about the future I wasn't even aware of. These unrealized dreams took root in my being in a way that feels defining to who I am.

Something happens deep in our core when we feel out of place. The day I moved my immune system failed and I became sick and disoriented. The Israelites were forced into exile, ripped from their homes, places of worship, and way of life. They find themselves in Babylon where they dream of the day they'd return to where they belong. Jeremiah's words are comforting, yet painful. They are told to stay, plant gardens, and allow their families to flourish in this strange land. I'm sure this was disappointing, but when you hold onto the past, you miss the richness of the present. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you" (Jer. 29:7). Maybe when our lives unravel in transition, the loose ends of our dreams, the friends we leave behind, and the paths untraveled can become the roots that stabilize us in the new place where we find ourselves. These threads can create grounding that nourishes and transforms us into something new. This new place can be a gift—a place of flourishing and a conduit for deep, authentic connection with self and community."

— *lauren wright pittman* ©

I invite you to pick up your piece of purple cloth..²

Close your eyes and spend some time in prayer...

As we re-connect after this time apart, what is God calling you to do?

Do you need to let go of dreams of the past?

Do you have a heart for something that council needs to hear about in our discerning?

What might God be saying to you about setting roots in the place you find yourself in right now?

What might God be saying to you about seeking the welfare of our local community?

² Members of the congregation had been sent pieces of cloth cut from the large purple cloth used during Lent. These were to be placed next to their candle or use as a bookmark as a reminder of their connection to our community

Take some time to listen for God's words to you.

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from the joys of the past to the challenges of today:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Build relationships. Create a safe place. A home. Also, seek the peace and prosperity for this time and this place where I have carried you. Seek shalom. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it flourishes, you too will flourish."

Amen

After the service, I invite you to place your piece of purple cloth up here on the platform. A symbol of re-connection and perhaps re-commitment.

For those who are watching or reading online, I invite you to find an opportunity to bring your piece of fabric in when you can.

My hope is that we will bring these many pieces of fabric together to create something new – something to remind us of the time when we were apart. Please let me know if you are interested in being part of this project.

Benediction

As you go into a new week, know that

wherever you are right now,

whatever is happening for you,

whatever is unraveling for you:

God blesses you with strength for the journey;

Jesus walks beside you;

and the Spirit guides you with dreams and visions of a glorious tomorrow.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you;

the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.. Amen!