

**“1<sup>st</sup> Pres: Our Connections”**  
**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-9; John 17:20-23**

**1** 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.

**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.”

**8** Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

“Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

**9** They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

**Introduction**

If you would travel around the world and visit Christian churches in various countries and continents, you would find an amazing variety of cultures, traditions, worship styles, and ways of being “the church.” Just imagine the differences between congregations in South Africa and Communist China, or Mexico City and Seoul, Korea. All of them so different from Salt Lake City, Utah. Yet everywhere you would find love for the Lord, joy in Jesus Christ, and the special bonds of Christian fellowship. If you have ever experienced Christians in other parts of the world, you have experienced the oneness, the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

As Christian faith spread throughout history from culture to culture, churches have been organized in different ways. Roman Catholic or Episcopal churches have a top-down, pyramid structure of authority (Pope-Cardinal-Archbishop-Bishop-Monsignor-Priest and then Parish). Baptist, Congregational, Independent churches have the congregational form; each congregation stands alone and every person has voice and vote.

Presbyterians have used John Calvin's representative form led by elected elders. The word *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek word *presbeuteros*, for "elder." Decisions on behalf of the whole are made by pastors and elders chosen by the members.

1<sup>st</sup> Pres is one of 9,000 congregations in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Today you will elect three elders to serve on the 9-member board, the Session. Then, pastors and elders are commissioners from 20 churches to the Presbytery of Utah. Nationwide there are 170 presbyteries in the U.S.A. that commission pastors and elders to regional Synods and the national General Assembly.

So, like other mainline denominations, we are a connectional church. What we do here at 1<sup>st</sup> Pres is related to Mt. Olympus Pres on 3900S or Wasatch Pres at 17<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. Also, with 1<sup>st</sup> Pres in Houston or Seattle or Pittsburgh. We have a common Presbyterian and Reformed tradition with a Book of Order, Book of Confessions, Book of Common Worship. But this organizational unity is not what Jesus was praying in John 17.

With all that history and connection, the PCUSA denomination has major problems. In the last ten years, membership nationwide has declined steadily from 2.2 million members to 1.4 million (losses of 50,000 to 90,000 members each year). The average attendance in worship is only one-third of those members.

### **Jeremiah's Letter to his Connectional Church**

In Jeremiah 29, we read from a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to his connectional church, the people of Israel hauled off to exile in Babylon. I can hardly imagine what God's people felt as they experienced the destruction of Jerusalem, the merciless loss of life and the rounding up the strong ones forced to travel so far away. Jeremiah's letter is one of the most important documents of the Old Testament. In it he exhorts the people to 1) settle down and prepare for the long haul; 2) be good and helpful citizens in this strange land; 3) let them not be deceived by false prophets; and 4) realize that they have a future and a hope.

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those *I carried into exile* from Jerusalem to Babylon." God tells them that he is the one responsible for the captivity. A major component to our Biblical-Presbyterian-Reformed faith traditionally is the Sovereignty of God. God is in charge of human history. The Lord, the Almighty is the one who carried these people into exile for his purposes, for his plan. We must remember

that First Pres is here in Salt Lake City by God's design. With all of our ups and downs, our Lord has plans and purposes for this church.

Using Jeremiah's letter as a foil, here's what I think the Lord is saying. 1) "Bloom where you're planted!" God has put you and me here at this time and place. "Build, settle down, increase." Like Israel in exile, the church is being told to roll up your sleeves and get to the business of living. The Lord wants you to be active, fruitful and industrious. You have every opportunity to share the saving love of God in Christ with the people in your lives and with the people of Salt Lake City. Are you doing it? Why or why not?

2) "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city... Pray to the Lord for it." With both dominant and emerging culture (both LDS and irreligious American culture), God calls you to make this place better for you having been here. Christian churches in Utah have a history of becoming detached and passive, a hide-out haven finding relief from the culture. But God wants you to seek the peace and prosperity of the city. Another emphasis of our Biblical-Presbyterian-Reformed faith is the emphasis on grace. Where else will people hear about God's grace in Jesus Christ? "In the world, yet not of the world" is the call of the Christian church.

Is Salt Lake City on your prayer list? City Hall, Board of Education, businesses big and small, your neighborhood, the people you meet or have contact with every day? "Pray to the Lord for the city, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

3) "Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets or diviners among you deceive you... They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord."

Here is one of the most important cautions for 1<sup>st</sup> Pres as a mainline, protestant, Presbyterian church. Do not be deceived by the latest cultural opinions. Especially those promoted by people inside the church.

Here's where the PCUSA has gone off track in these recent decades. I started as a music and youth director 41 years ago in this denomination. I have heard pastors and elders offer incredibly false ideas and teachings. I heard one say we should eliminate the Cross as the central symbol of the Christian faith because they see the cross as "divine child abuse." That the Father would sacrifice his own Son? No wonder membership is declining. You cannot have biblical Christianity without the cross.

Or, the Resurrection of Jesus was an invention of the early church to secure its belief in Jesus as Messiah-Redeemer. One pastor I heard with my own ears put it this way. “On Easter we remember Jesus. And when we remember Jesus, then he is alive. That’s why you should be a good person in life, because when you’re dead and gone, if people remember you, then you are alive again.” Excuse me? One could smirk or laugh at this but it’s a seriously sad state of affairs with many leaders in the PCUSA.

Add to these many other theological errors and divisive cultural issues that call God’s revealed will in Scripture into question. And we wonder why the mainline church is in free-fall decline. If things do not change, if we don’t take seriously one of our treasured Presbyterian mantras, “Reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God,” the PCUSA will be gone within the present generation (1.4 million members divided by losing a projected 75,000 members a year gives about 19 years before it hits zero).

### **Conclusion**

Jeremiah said it to the exiles and I believe the Lord says it to us today. Build and settle down; pray for the city; do not be deceived; and lastly, despite how it may seem, we have a future and a hope. When we hear of the troubles, divisions, and decline, we have lots of reasons to feel utterly hopeless. Later in verse 13, God says, “You will seek me and find me; when you search for me with all your heart.”

Not only would exiles come back to Jerusalem, they would come back home to the Lord. We too should read this letter as a letter from home, the kind that will keep us from falling away in this land of exile. That the Lord would sustain us until we come into the new Jerusalem.

Let us pray for the church. Let us pray for the city.