

St. Joseph's Episcopal Church  
Congregational Meeting  
September 12, 2020  
The Rev. Kassinda R.T. Ellis, Rector  
Opening Address based on Jeremiah 29:4-14

We begin this meeting with a reading from Jeremiah chapter 29: 4-14 reminding us that we are called, as children of God, to thrive regardless of our circumstances. Over the past few months, I have spent a lot of time praying, reflecting, and listening to the reports of concerns and complaints from members of the congregation. I want to thank Mr. Dacosta, who shared his thoughts and concerns after receiving the letter mailed out to the parish. During our conversation he said, "Mother Ellis, St. Joseph's members need to know that there is hope and a future for the church." His statement brings me back to the text read from Jeremiah.

The nation of Israel has yet again been exiled from Jerusalem and its residents are living in Babylon under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. It was a time of uncertainty and anxiety for Israel. They did not know how long their captivity would last and if they would ever return to Jerusalem. It was in this context that Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel a message sent by God.

*"<sup>4</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>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."*

God, in the words of Jeremiah, is encouraging Israel to *thrive* in the midst of captivity. Life cannot grind to a halt during times of trouble. It is unpleasant to be displaced or to be in captivity, but God says to Israel *live*, nonetheless. St. Joseph's, God is saying the same thing to us today.

When I agreed to come here in 2015, I could never have imagined God would call me to lead us into "exile". Along with the Bishop, my hopes and expectations were to shore up the foundation of the school; make it financially viable; and strengthen the congregation's commitment to this ministry. I could not have foreseen that the school would close, and, that we would be displaced from a space that has stood for 150 years.

Israel did not foresee they would be able to live again while in exile. I am sure many of us could not have imagined the whole world would be in exile from our everyday life. Or that the whole world would suffer a pandemic that would infect 29 million people and kill over 9 hundred thousand. I am sure many of you did not imagine a day we at St. Joseph's would not be worshipping

in person but online. Finally, I am sure none of us could have imagined a day we would leave this property in search of a new home.

However, listen again to what God says, “to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile”. We are not in this position by accident. We have been sent into exile by God for a reason and a purpose. In verse 11 of this chapter, God tells Israel and us, “... surely I know the plans I have for you ... plans for your good and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Our current situation is overwhelming; addressing the status of the physical building is more money than we collectively have. The building we have loved for so long and have cherished memories is literally decaying around us. So, we must leave this place for a time and a season. In our human eyes hope seems waning, yet we are not a people standing alone. We are children of God, a God who tell us I have a plan for you, to give you a future with hope!

Yet even in as we hope, we must remain alert. God warns us in verses 8 and 9, “Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.”

In every church that I have worshipped or served over my lifetime there have always been those who seek to hinder progress because they fear or do not want change. Even when Israel was freed from the bondage of slavery, some complained about being in the wilderness. Looking back to what was, rather than to what could be, as Moses led them to the Promised Land. Moses sent 12 surveyors to Canaan; the land God had promised. Even though they saw the milk and honey fear got the best of 10 of the surveyors. All they could see was the giants in the land therefor they could not go!

The church calls them “naysayers”, I call them “joy killers”. When we allow our fears and anxiety to permeate throughout the congregation, we do not allow God’s vision to shine forth. When fear and anxiety are at the helm, people can act as if *they* are key holders of salvation. This can easily lead them to think the church should revolves around *their* needs and wants, convincing others that if the work of the church is not done according to what *they* want “all hell will break loose”. These are the people who would rather see the church fall then succeed because they are not in charge. Every church has them, including St. Joseph’s. Therefore, we must remain alert and not be sidetracked by such behaviors. Our hope is in God who has a plan for our future, plans for our good and not for our harm.

St. Joseph’s, we are moving into exile because God is leading us there. God is expecting us to move ahead with our daily tasks; to plant seeds in the community God is sending us to build on the foundation that has existed for 150 years. To grow and multiply and not dwindle away. God

expects us to work for peace and prosperity wherever we are and to pray to Him for guidance. God tells the people of Israel and us in verse 14 “I will end your exile and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.” We will not be in exile forever. God has made this promise.

So, I challenge all of us to set aside our personal agendas and acknowledge our feelings of hurt, disappointment, loss, and anger. Let us open our hearts to God’s plans for St. Joseph’s knowing that we are not alone on this journey. It is my hope that we will listen to the facts being presented regarding the property and next steps planned. Please use this opportunity to ask the experts questions with the understanding that not all our questions will be answered today in this meeting.

Finally, St. Joseph’s, there is always hope when we put our trust in God. It is God who is sending us out to build towards a future that is far beyond what we can dream. Leaving this “brick and mortar” space is not the end of our church, but the beginning of the next chapter of our story. It is one where we are being called to live out our faith and do ministry in new and fascinating ways. We are being called out beyond the triangle onto the main streets of Queens Village. God is telling us to live and live abundantly during this period of exile for which we will not only find hope but joy.

In the words of Paul, may the God of hope fill us with joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with the hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen