

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
28 November 2021

10:30 a.m. & 6:30 p.m. MT Worship
First Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“When the Table We’re Setting is Unsettling”

First sermon in the Advent Series: *Setting the Table*

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

New Revised Standard Version

The word Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means *arrival, approach, visit, appearance*.¹

This idea of preparing for an arrival is why – in the context of our yearlong theme, “A Place at the Table,” – we chose for our subtheme of Advent – “Setting the Table.” Because Advent is a season of preparation. So often when we are preparing for guests in our home, perhaps even this past Thursday if you had family or friends over for Thanksgiving – we think in advance about how we set our table – we put intentionality into thinking about what we will make, how we’ll set the table, we might even make place cards for the people who are coming (this was my job growing up at my house – making the place cards with my colored pencils and creativity). In short, we ensure there are enough places at the table for everyone who’s

coming and enough food for everyone to enjoy.

But how often, when we are setting the table, do we leave room for the unexpected or random surprise guest? I’m guessing...not that often.

And in terms of our Advent preparations – when we set the table for Jesus to join us – just setting out an extra name plate and place setting ain’t gonna cut it. Sometimes I think that while we *are celebrating* the arrival of Christ – we forget that we can’t control the circumstances of when or how he shows up – OR how he shakes things up!

Even if you are leaving space open at your table for the presence of God to show up – just pulling up a chair is not enough. I mean, think about how Jesus arrives on Christmas – should we really be pulling up an extra chair or should we be

¹ Latin definition accessed on 28 Nov. 2021 at <https://latin-dictionary.net/definition/1747/adventus-adventus>.

setting out a high chair? Or more accurately, a comfy rocker for a teenage mother to sit in as she nurses her infant. While we're putting out a blanket on that rocker for Mary, we might as well pull out the sleeper sofa for Joseph – Lord knows he's gonna be tired and need a place to kick up his feet after walking beside that donkey for miles.

And yes – go ahead and go down to the basement or up to the attic and pull out all the folding chairs you can find because the shepherds are showing up too. And get the dogs out of the backyard because the sheep need a place to graze. Oh and you may as well take down the chandelier above your table as you can expect some angels to be flitting about and hovering around. And after dinner and all the hubbub and commotion just when you think you'll have a moment of peace and quiet because you've sent away all the guests and tucked Mary and Joseph and baby up in the guest room to rest...just when you are ready to sit down and put your feet up. Knock knock knock. Three wise guys are at your door. And there are some wise women there too...you just can't see them because they are in the driveway (someone had to remember to tie up the camels and elephants

so they wouldn't wander away.) These wise ones have come to spend time with Jesus...and of course – they don't show up on time...their late to the party. But what are you gonna do...you let them in.

My point is – if we're gonna set the table for Jesus to show up this Christmas – we need to remember that Jesus always has an entourage with him. Even God incarnate does not operate in the world alone. So if we're preparing to welcome Jesus into our homes and hearts this season – if you're going to 'set the Table' for Christ to arrive anew in your life – consider this fair warning: it's probably not gonna be a silent night or a solo crowd.

Advent and Christmas, with all their glorious traditions that we love, are really about celebrating an event that is anything but predictable and traditional. We cannot properly prepare for what will happen when Jesus comes into the world, but we can, at the very least, remove our expectations of how *we want* him to come...and work on creating space in our hearts for him to arrive however he will arrive. But one thing is for sure – no matter how we set the table –

with fine China or Chinese take out – we need to leave way more room than we think is enough. We need to do our best to let go of our expectations, and give in to God’s preparations.

Now I know that Jeremiah is not the first text that comes to mind when you think about Advent. But this is a text about holding on to hope and ‘setting the Table’ in the most unsettling circumstances.

Last week our prophetic text from Isaiah was about helping people who were suffering have hope because a “child would be born who would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9). Well, fast forward 100 years. No child has been born – yet. But another prophet has been...Jeremiah. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah is from the southern kingdom, Judah, and he’s in the city of Jerusalem and he’s writing to elders, priests, prophets, and other leaders who have been taken into captivity. More specifically he’s writing to the first wave of exiles taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. As you might recall, last week in Isaiah’s time the big threat was the Assyrians...now it’s the

Babylonians. Israel just can’t catch a break. Anyone else feel this way? Just when Israel seems to get one moment of peace or prosperity along comes another external intruder; they are always being attacked, conquered, and taken captive by some neighboring country.

While those of us born in the United States in recent generations may not be able to relate to the reality of exile – many refugees, immigrants, and victims of colonization can. Personally I struggle to comprehend the depths of disorientation and devastation that these people in exile were feeling. Their whole lives had been tumped over. Like a toddler kicking down the sandcastle she just sculpted or ramming a toy truck into the lego tower he just built...life as they knew it had been wiped out in an instant.

And because Jeremiah is writing to the first wave of exiles, they do not yet know that ten years later, the Temple in Jerusalem would fall and all those who remained in Jerusalem would also be exiled to Babylon or

Egypt.² For all they know, now, there is still some shred of hope to hang on to – that maybe they'll get home again one day.

After all, as we read in Jeremiah chapter 28, other prophets such as Hananiah had been saying that this exile would only last two years. (Sounds like pandemic predictions right?) Just as we know now from doctors and scientists that this pandemic is gonna be way longer than two years, so too is Jeremiah is speaking the truth to his people – saying – I know you want this to be over in two years. But it's not going to be. In fact, it's not going to be over in 10 years. It's not even going to be over in your lifetime.

Those in exile now – would remain in exile for at least 3.5 generations (70 years...generations were about 20 years back then). This means, that those alive now would never see their home again, let alone their homeland, or Solomon's grand Temple where they gathered to experience God's presence together as a community. It also means that their children and grandchildren would grow up in

a place that did not share their customs or language or culture; they wouldn't even know what the Temple looked like or what life was like in Jerusalem "back home."

It's natural that these exiles wanted to fight back against their captors, but Jeremiah tells them – don't. Just be. Instead of trying to "win" by fighting back – simply don't let them "win" by making their land your home. If you stay miserable and unhappy – they win; they accomplish what they wanted to accomplish. But if you start to put down roots where you are – as unsettling as it is – then you show them your strength and faith. (This is not a prescription for how to handle all injustices, by the way, but this is what God is telling the people to do right now with this injustice.)

Beyond just telling them to build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, have children and celebrate marriages so your children can have children – all of which are things to ensure their livelihoods and way of life and ground them in their dignity and personhood and purpose –

² Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 469: Jeremiah's Letter to Exiles – Nov. 28, 2021," *Working Preacher* (21 Nov.

2021), accessed on Nov. 28, 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/469-jeremiahs-letter-to-exiles-nov-28-2021>.

Jeremiah **also** says, “*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,*” (29:8). This is insane. Help those who are harming us? Yet, this is essentially a concrete example of what Jesus will mean when he says, “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*” (Matthew 5:44).

Jeremiah is telling these people not to harm the Babylonians or even to wish harm on them, but instead to seek their welfare.

What is often translated here as the word *welfare*, *peace*, or *prosperity* is the Hebrew word *shalom*. With our Western mindsets, we often think about *shalom* as simply meaning the kind of peace that is the absence of conflict, but *shalom* is much more than that. *Shalom* is about wholeness. It’s an intensely relational word...insisting that we were made to flourish in our relationships with God, with one another, with our own selves, with the systems and structures that govern us, and with the whole of the created order.”³

³ Drew Jackson, “On Seeking the Shalom of Your Neighborhood,” *Hope for New York Blog* (30 Nov. 2018), accessed on Nov. 28, 2021 at <https://www.hfny.org/blog/seeking-shalom-your-neighborhood>.

Lisa Sharon Harper, author of *The Very Good Gospel*, writes: “*Shalom is what the Kingdom of God looks like. Shalom is when all people have enough. It’s when families are healed. It’s when churches, schools, and public policies protect human dignity. Shalom is when the image of God is recognized, protected and cultivated in every single human. Shalom is our calling as followers of Jesus’ gospel. It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the restoration God desires for every broken relationship. Shalom is what our souls long for.*”⁴

Jeremiah seems to understand this. That in order for the Israelites to live their most whole lives in this foreign land without any of the familiarity of home or any of the symbols of their faith around them that are meaningful – they have to seek wholeness for their enemies too. If their enemies are not healed and whole – there is no chance at welfare for anyone; they will keep oppressing. And if the Israelites (the oppressed) are continually bitter and resentful as the ones who are in captivity,

⁴ Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*. Quote accessed on Nov. 28, 2021 at <https://lisasharonharper.com/the-very-good-gospel/>.

there is no chance at their welfare or healing either, as they are still giving their captors power over them that is not theirs to have.

In other words, Jeremiah is saying to his beloved people in exile – acknowledge your circumstances as your reality. Your *long-lasting* reality for years to come. Because only then, will new and hopeful things be able to be birthed and grown and established. If you are always waiting to get out of exile, to get out of the present circumstances you find yourself in, then you will never be able to move forward. You'll just be wanting to get out. You'll get stuck in what tomorrow might bring instead of living for what today has already brought.

Jeremiah says to the people, don't try to dig out...instead, dig in. You are in an in between time, but don't treat it as such – don't think of it as not where you are from or not where you are eventually hoping to go. Treat it as the home where you are meant to be right now. Make the best of it. You have one another, and more importantly – you have God.

And this was a key lesson for a people for whom the presence

of God was located primarily and most powerfully in the Temple. The Lord is saying to them, through Jeremiah, that he will still hear their prayers even when they're not in the Temple. The Lord is not confined to one place. The Lord is with them – even in this land where all they feel is loss. Even in the horrendous situation they are in, even when they feel abandoned and trapped and like their world is ending as they know it – the Lord is there...present with them. And not only that – the Lord says – I will fulfill my promise to you and bring you back, one day, to the place from which I sent you: *“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,”* (29:11).

This is one of the most beloved verses in Scripture – and for good reason – who of us doesn't need to hear these words and let them wash over us? So many of us need to be assured that there is some greater plan out there for our lives. But notice that the verse doesn't say, “For surely YOU know the plans I have for you...” No. It says, “For surely I know the plans I have for you.” Which is maddening, I know! The Lord gets to know and we

don't...even though it's OUR lives we're talking about here. (sigh)

The Lord never promises the people that *they* will know the grand plan of their lives, but God knows. And this is one of the biggest challenges of our faith. The Lord may know where our lives are going – but we do not. And even still, I'm not sure that this verse even promises that the Lord knows where our lives are going in a specific sense...but rather what is promised is that the Lord has plans for our welfare – our shalom – to give us a future with hope. The Lord does not want harm done to us – but rather desires for us to live in shalom – wholeness and wellness with one another and ourselves – and that is what will lead us into our future with hope...this is what we are waiting on to arrive in Advent – the gift of God in human form to come down and show us what it means to live our lives with the kind of love that loves others as we love ourselves, and that even loves enemies...creating true shalom.

And listen, if no one has said this to you recently – hear it today: God wants you to thrive. God desires for you to live your

best life – to have the gifts of home and food, provision and safety, people who love you around you, purpose and meaning for your life. God desires for ALL of us to have these things. While suffering is certainly a part of the human experience and enduring through suffering is part of faith (as we see in the life of Jesus himself) – suffering is not the end of the story. God wants us all to be whole and well and fulfilled; to experience joy and hope and to look forward to what is to come and to be a part of creating the shalom we long to celebrate. But we can't create shalom if we are stuck in the story of "I CAN'T because of this, that, or the other." We create shalom by moving from I Can't to We Can. Because none of us can do this on our own.

The truth is, the circumstances of our lives – then and now – will often be brutal and unkind. But our faith remains. We can create new life – even in cycles of suffering. We can dig in create new life instead of digging out to try to run back to a former life that no longer exists or a future life that doesn't yet exist.

The hope in this passage comes through trusting that God is with

us – Emmanuel – no matter where we find ourselves in life. God is present – in exile and elsewhere. And God is rooting for our welfare, our shalom, our peace/wholeness/prosperity/livelihood. And sometimes in order for us to find that, we have to root for ourselves, that is, put down roots where we are – even in unfamiliar circumstances and suffering surroundings – and know that while we would rather be anywhere else but here...God is here with us and would rather us acknowledge that God is here with us than pretend that God is elsewhere in some other place or time when “life is good or better than it is here.” When we so desperately want to be somewhere else so badly – and trust me, I know what this feels like – when we so desperately want to be somewhere else, are we ignoring the fact that God is here with us – right here, right now? And if God is here, where else do we need to be?

This idea of setting the Table in unsettling circumstances – is similar to something author Jim Collins wrote about in his book *Good to Great*. It’s called “The

Stockdale Paradox,”⁵ and essentially is a powerful psychological duality. On the one hand, you stoically accept the brutal facts of reality. On the other hand, you maintain an unwavering faith in the endgame, and a commitment to prevail despite the brutal facts.

Jim Collins explains:

“The name refers to Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the ‘Hanoi Hilton’ prisoner-of-war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. Tortured over twenty times during his eight-year imprisonment from 1965 to 1973, Stockdale lived out the war without any prisoner’s rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again. ...”

But he did survive. Just reading about his plight made Collins incredibly depressed (and he knew that the story had a good ending and that Stockdale survived and got to reunite with his family and become a professor!) – so when Collins met Stockdale he asked him

⁵ James Paulgaard, “Bible Study – The Way Maker 3: Life with Hope (Jeremiah 29:1-14),” *Farewell to Shadowlands* (20 Oct. 2019), accessed on Nov. 28, 2021

at <https://jamespaulgaard.com/2019/10/20/bible-study-the-way-maker-3-life-with-hope-jeremiah-291-14/>.

about how he endured in such dire circumstances when he didn't know the end of the story. It just seemed so bleak—the uncertainty of his fate, the brutality of his captors, and so forth.

Stockdale replied: “I never lost faith in the end of the story...I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life.”

Collins was blown away by this faith, and pressed Stockdale more, asking who *didn't* make it out?

Stockdale, walking beside Collins and still limping from injuries he endured while being tortured, injuries he never recovered from, said:

“The optimists.”

“The optimists?” Collins repeated? “I don't understand,” He was completely confused, given what Stockdale said just a few moments ago.

Stockdale clarified:

“The optimists [didn't make it out] because they were the ones who said, ‘We're going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, ‘We're going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart,” [or a broken spirit you might say, because of getting their hopes up and constantly having those hopes not come true – broken, unfilled expectations can do a number on you. They were just waiting for an escape out, not for hope or strength to endure what they were in.]

Then Stockdale told Collins a very important lesson as he called it, it's something that really coined the concept of the Stockdale paradox: “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be,”⁶ [and deal with them and not push them away].

⁶ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*. Excerpts found on Nov. 28, 2021 at

<https://www.jimcollins.com/concepts/Stockdale-Concept.html>.

To clarify, the Stockdale Paradox *does not* maintain that people should not try to change external conditions, nor that we should have no emotional responses to them. People are neither sheep nor robots. In the words of Marsha Linehan:

*“Radical acceptance doesn’t mean you don’t try to change things ... You can’t change anything if you don’t accept it, because if you don’t accept it, you’ll try to change something else that you think is reality.”*⁷

The Stockdale Paradox acknowledges the negative reality without letting the future hope get sucked down into its void. And really, researchers have found that what helps one maintain this paradox is faith, or personal spirituality or values.

The role of faith and “personal spirituality functions in a deceptively simple way. When a person who has lived for themselves and their immediacy is thrown into a new and frightening environment, be it a prison camp or a liferaft, a mountain range or a war zone, they become uprooted and disorientated. They have learnt their former life too well and

cannot adapt to the change in circumstances. Their world has sunk and they along with it. On the other hand, those people who possess a personal ideal will take it with them, wherever they go, and wherever they happen to find themselves.”⁸

If you have faith and a values system that transcends circumstance then you can have hope wherever you are. If, however, your hope is born of successful circumstances or comfort – then when you lose those things – you lose your hope.

This really invites us to think about what gives us hope in the first place – which is also what Jeremiah is trying to remind his people of. Our hope comes from God’s promise to be present with us no matter what and from God’s desire and plan for us to be thrive and be well – to have a future full of hope, not despair. This is our endgame, in which we have faith.

Jeremiah’s version of the Stockdale Paradox is quite clear. The brutal facts are that the people of Israel are in exile. Their lives are upside down and

⁷ Boris Groysberg & Robin Abrahams, “What the Stockdale Paradox Tells Us About Crisis Leadership,” *Harvard Business School – Working Knowledge Website* (17 Aug. 2020), accessed on Nov. 28, 2021 at

<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-the-stockdale-paradox-tells-us-about-crisis-leadership>.

⁸ Groysberg & Abrahams, *ibid.*

nothing what they expected or imagined. They are frightened. Disoriented. Angry. Longing for home. Longing for a different reality. And. They are not just people – they are the people of God. God is with them. While they may be far away from their homes, God is at home with them there in Babylon.

Wherever they are, God is. And whether worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem, or starting from scratch all over again in a new place – having to make neighbors with your worst enemies – God’s plan is for God’s people to experience shalom, not harm, to have a future with hope. Nothing about their present can change that plan. Nothing about their present circumstances can change that eternal promise. THAT is their endgame.

Whatever your exile experience is right now – instead of waiting for exile to be over – the invitation to us this Advent is to prepare for Christ to come NOT into our perfect ideal of what the world should be like or how Christmas “should feel” – but for Christ to arrive and come into the very circumstances in which we find ourselves (whatever they are).

The invitation of Advent is to set the Table in the midst of the unsettling and trust that God IS with us...and that Christ is coming into our lives not to take us to a new place but to help us experience Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love right where we are...in the manger of our mangled and messy lives.

Amen.