

Life Goes On
Rev. John Allen

Like just about everyone alive at the time, I remember exactly where I was on September 11. I remember a vague announcement issued over the PA system, sending us home, without much of an explanation.

I remember the unfamiliar feeling of vulnerability coming from my teacher as she struggled under the weight of our questions, finally saying “We’ve been attacked.”

The look on her face told me right away that she wasn’t supposed to say that.

I remember walking home. With an eeriness hanging over everything.

I remember turning on the TV before my parents got home, normally not allowed, but somehow I thought today they wouldn’t mind.

Like everyone else, I was filled with the immediate sense that things were not the same as they were the day before.

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If you remember what that day felt like to you, you will have the beginnings of how the ancient Israelites felt the day Babylonian soldiers set fire to the temple, and marched the people out of their city, the one they had every confidence that God would always defend.

With only what they could carry on their backs, the people were sent away, into exile. To live as strangers in a strange land.

And all the stories of scripture written at the time attest to the simple fact that things were different now. They would never be the same.

Those people lived in their strange new world without any of the familiar rhythms of life. Without the familiar surroundings of home and family.

Questioning even whether or not God had made the journey with them.

Could songs be sung to God, in a strange land?

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I remember, after what seemed like an eternity, my father arriving home from work.

I shared with him that sense. That everything was different now.

There were already rumors of wars.

I remember he said to me: “We can’t let this change us too much.”

The pastor of this church at that time, Rev. Jeff Johnson, said about the same in his sermon a few days later:

On September 16 he preached from this pulpit: "we need to be saved from crippling fear. As I was talking with the diaconate about this particular service, many ideas were shared, one popular one is that we need to get back to life, we cannot lose our bearings. We cannot live in fear. We cannot drop out of life."

He went on to share stories of signs of life in the congregation which echo quite well the scripture from this morning: Doug and Brenda Gaff were married here on September 15. Niels and Marianna welcomed their twin daughters.

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And so it was with our earliest ancestors in faith. Off in exile. In a strange land. Their very world shattered.

Jeremiah wrote: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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.”

In other words: “I know the world is unrecognizable today. But don’t let it change you too much.”

Jeremiah’s call to his people was on a large scale, to people facing a enormous, and shared trauma.

But I think it is good advice to any one of us when our world falls apart.

After a loss.

Or a diagnosis.

A violation or a betrayal.

Plant a garden. Fall in love. Make a home.

And if you listen carefully, the advice is not cavalier. The invitation in this word of scripture is not for us to “just get over it” or “just move on.”

It is not pretending that nothing went wrong. Not putting on a strong face.

Rather the call to us from scripture in the midst of adversity is to make the ordinary activity of your life an act of defiance.

If sickness strives to deprive you of your joy, even if you don't much feel like it, muster up what you can and do something joyous.

If grief has you buried. Find something to make you laugh.

It's not a diversion. It's not "getting over it."

It is an opportunity for a small thread of hope in the midst of despair.

A reminder that even if the world feels like it is falling apart, you still are who you are.

Sometimes we have to do the thing we least feel like doing, in order to see for the first time a way out of the valley.

Jeremiah tells those exiles.

Plant a garden. Marry your love. Build a home.

Not because we are giving in to exile. But because in the face of it we will live as a hopeful people, each day enacting the simple fact that we are not defeated. We still are, who we are.

Quinn Caldwell, a United Church of Christ minister in Syracuse, tells his own story of this sort of faithful defiance so beautifully that I want to give him the last word.

He says: "I remember realizing, on that Christmas when my dad was dying, that Christmas trees are not always an expression of serene joy. They are not the gilding on the lily of a perfect life.

At least sometimes, they are the only beautiful thing in the middle of a wasteland, at least sometimes they are a giant, shiny, shimmery one-finger salute flashed in the face of a cruel world.

That year, every little glass ball I put on that tree felt like an act of defiance. As I hung each ornament, it was like shouting, "Take that, misery" "Eat it, addiction" "Bite me, cancer" "Die, death."

And he tells us advice, that is good anytime of year.

“Decorate something, whether you feel like it or not. Let every battered old ornament be the star that changes everything.

And if you can't manage to decorate your whole house, hang one decoration on a houseplant. Make it the best one you have. And tell despair to watch its back.”