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Sermon: Dual Citizenship  
Text: Jeremiah 29/Isaiah 11:1-9  
July 2, 2023

### Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,

and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,

the spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

or decide by what his ears hear;

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,

and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

7 The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD

as the waters cover the sea.

On the surface, our passages from Jeremiah and Isaiah don't seem to have much to teach us. Both are exile passages, one from Jeremiah, encouraging the exiled Israelites in Babylon to 'build houses, plant gardens, be fruitful, and multiply' and even to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.' Probably not what every homeland loving Israelite wanted to hear...why not spend their time trying to get back home or overthrow the Babylonians? Why acquiesce and resign themselves to seeking the welfare of a city where they were not natives, where they were sent to exile?

Our passage from Isaiah also comes out of the exile of Israel, but it is a message to the exiles, not so much of living in solidarity with the city where they are exiles, but it is a vision of the kingdom that God will bring about beyond the exile, beyond what at the moment seems like only a stump and leftover fragment of what once was. Isaiah shows the exiles and us a vision of God's intention for us and all peoples and nations and creatures, living together in peace and harmony where even predators and prey no longer hunt or devour each other, but all live together peacefully on God's holy mountain. Because both of these passages come out of Israel's exile, neither may seem applicable to us twenty-first century Americans on the eve of our nation's 247<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We are not in exile. We are not singing the Lord's song, as the psalmist lamented, in a foreign land. Nor are we living in a warzone like Ukraine or the Middle East or Sudan. Still, all does not always feel calm and bright and tranquil. I recall a study several years ago by a professor at Wake Forest University who discovered consistent levels of high anxiety among students and young people who seemingly had no stressors in their lives. In some cases, the anxiety levels were on par with soldiers who were returning from wars generations ago. But no one could pinpoint exactly why the stress levels were skyrocketing.

On another note, in his book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop reminds us that in a society when all our disagreements and enemies are the same, the potential for civil unrest and destructive fragmentation occur. What he means is that when all our neighbors look alike and agree with us across the board politically and

ideologically, when we choose to insulate ourselves around an echo chamber or chorus of people where there is no difference in philosophy or tension surrounding any issues, and if society at-large embraces such a type of approach to life, then the potential for intractable discord and the breakdown of civil society increases exponentially. For the good of our society, Bishop reminds us that we need cross currents where we have allies or friends and neighbors with whom we are sympatico on certain issues but completely at loggerheads on other matters. That is what nourishes the soil of civil society and helps all find their place to flourish. Unfortunately, just like the rest of society, the 'big sort' has hit churches too and for the last generation or two churches have fallen victim to this accelerating polarization and sorting along the like-minded fault lines.<sup>1</sup> Not long ago, a congregation member I knew was retiring and relocating elsewhere, and remarked with excitement about where they would be living, 'we will be among the like-minded.' And just recently the eastern part of Oregon is petitioning for some kind of secession to be included into Idaho, because they have more in common with the politics, values, and ideals of those in Idaho rather than their fellow Oregonians on the Pacific coast. One of the virtues of democracy and what to me is best about living in America is *e pluribus unum* and that we truly are a country out of many seeking to become one. To surround ourselves only around people who think exactly as we do and reinforce all our prejudices and don't challenge us on any of our view points or crackpot opinions or beliefs, may not just be unhealthy for civil society, but may risk eroding what is best about America.

Our first scripture reading is written to exiles in a foreign land. They are not so much celebrating their country or even enjoying their homeland, but rather are homesick and even worse, despairing that the homeland they once knew no longer exists at all. The words of the prophet to them is not a word of nostalgia or even permission to wallow in their homesickness. In many ways I wonder if it is a word they wanted to hear. Bloom where you are planted and stop longing for a yesterday that no longer exists. I wonder if they wanted to hear that word. Seek the welfare of the city where you are, don't waste your time building a fortress of solitude or walling yourselves off from the world to stay away from all the people not of your tribe. No, Jeremiah tells them, build houses and live in them, plant gardens, pray to the Lord on behalf of the place where you find yourself, the land where you live, and in its welfare you will find your welfare.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 296-297.

Our second scripture reading is also a word to the exiles, but it is not really about their present reality or even whether or not they will ever get back home or whether their home country will ever be like it was or they want it to be. Rather, it is a vision for the future, and a reminder that their little nation and lives are part of an even greater story, one that challenges us by presenting us with the future we should be working toward, one of peace and harmony where there are no predators or prey, but a peaceable kingdom where enemies are forgiven and reconciled and live peaceably together, where nations study war no more, and where what we inflict on each other is not only unharmed, but enables us all to flourish before God.

Isaiah's message to Israel and to us is that is the reality and future that God is bringing about, even when we are stuck in exile or living through the tensions, polarized challenges, and tribal prejudices of many aspects of modern America. One of my favorite images from the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, a march by the way that ended on the steps of the Alabama capital where Dr. Martin Luther King's speech that day riffed on our last hymn we will sing; anyway one of the images from that march that followed US Highway 80 from Selma to Montgomery is of one of the marchers carrying an American flag as they marched. I love that image because these participants were not anti-American or unpatriotic, but were calling upon their country of birth, sweet land of liberty, to live fully up to the ideals that were born out of Jefferson's declaration two centuries before.

To paraphrase one of those who walked with King, Richard John Neuhaus, 'our task was not to burn the flag but to cleanse it; not to desecrate the ideals of America but to liberate them from their captivity to proudful arrogance.'<sup>2</sup> Seek the welfare of the city, plant your gardens, pray for all the inhabitants, seek their welfare, and work toward a vision of a day when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and no living being will be hurt or destroyed on God's holy mountain. That is the vision that lifts us up when we are in despair, that is the vision that fuels our labors, that is the vision that helps us love our country in all its messy complexity and to love the kingdom of God whose vision encompasses our nation and all the nations.

In the second or third century somewhere in the Greco-Roman world, a letter was written to a high ranking official of the establishment and empire trying to describe the peculiar way of life of the Christian community. The letter to Diognetus says this about these faith communities: 'For Christians cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 16.

distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life....Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their homeland, and yet for them ever homeland is a foreign land...They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require...to put it simply, what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In our second hymn, we sang a hymn of gratitude to God for life in this country but also remembered our brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly in places like Cuba where we have many years of relationships and ties, places like Ghana and Malawi where we have built relationships and helped build churches and schools, we remember immigrants at our southern border desperate for a better life that we seek to serve through the work of global mission, and we realize that we are dual citizens, grateful for the opportunities and responsibilities bestowed on us in the land of the free and the home of the brave, but also cognizant that we have responsibilities and a more expansive calling as citizens of Christ's kingdom that has no end, and that presses us an ethic upon us, not only do to the barest minimum of what the law requires, but to go far beyond it in service of not just of our own countrymen and women, but to all those who are bound to us in Jesus Christ. To quote the hymn we will sing shortly, 'as he died to make us holy, let us live to make all free, while God is marching on,' and as we march along following behind, we do so until the day comes when no one will hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain, when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, when Christ's kingdom comes. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Letter to Diognetus,' in *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril Richardson, ed., 216-218.