

Serving

“Foundations of the New Normal” | August 15-16
Jeremiah 29:4-7; Matthew 10:5-15

Pastor Rob O’Neal
Valley Community Baptist Church

WHAT SHOULD WE DO AFTER WE LAMENT?

“Sad Songs” by Elton John says that sometimes sad songs are the only songs that can say how we feel.

When we face pain, we can’t always put our feelings into words.

When that happens, sad songs can give us the words to say or reach through our tough exterior and let the feelings start to flow. Then the chorus says:

“So turn 'em on, turn 'em on
Turn on those sad songs
When all hope is gone
Why don't you tune in and turn them on?
They reach into your room
Just feel their gentle touch
When all hope is gone
Sad songs say so much.”

The people of Judah knew how to write their own sad songs, like Psalm 137:1-3.

*By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

Psalm 137 talks about the days when the leaders of Judah were sent to live in exile in Babylon.

When they arrived, the Psalm says that they sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept.

They were too sad to make music and sing.

The Babylonians loved their songs, so they tried to get them to sing.

But the only song they could sing was the sad song of lament.

The new normal drives us to lament and sing sad songs

The new normal has cost all of us so much.

The new normal pulls us to lament the way that life has changed.

I went into one more store this week and had to wear a facemask and sanitize my hands. I realized that I am sick and tired of wearing a mask, and sanitizing my hands, and staying so far away from people. There are times when it feels like we live in an apocalyptic wasteland!

Has anyone written a song called “The COVID Blues” yet? The new normal drives us to lament, and that’s important. We need to be honest; there are things to lament right now.

But what should we do after we lament?

When we’re sad, it’s important that we acknowledge that we are sad.

But what do we do after we acknowledge and experience sadness?

How do we move on? The new normal isn’t an event or a point in time. It’s a season. And we have to keep living during this season. So what comes after we sing sad songs?

JEREMIAH WROTE TO PEOPLE LAMENTING A NEW NORMAL

Jeremiah the prophet lived a life apart, from an early age.

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, probably when he was a teenager.

God told Jeremiah that He created him to bring God’s message to the nations.

Jeremiah would even bring judgment to his own people. The people of Judah were sinning boldly. They were worshipping idols, and their hearts did not belong to God.

It would be a lonely life. His words would make kings angry. People would reject him.

However, God promised to make him strong enough to live as an outsider.

And God promised that while people would fight against Jeremiah, God would protect him.

Storm clouds quickly gathered during Jeremiah’s ministry.

During the late seventh century B.C., the old Assyrian Empire was declining.

The Babylonian Empire spread quickly through the old Assyrian lands.

Judah, the land where Jeremiah lived, enjoyed a period of relative independence.

Josiah, a good king, tried to clean out the idols.

However, in 609 B.C., Pharaoh Necco of Egypt set out to stop the advancing Babylonian armies and help his old allies, the Assyrians.

Fearing anyone who helped the Assyrians, Josiah tried to stop the Egyptians and was killed in a battle. The people quickly went back to their idols.

Consequently, around 605 B.C., God sent away a first group of exiles to Babylonia.

The Babylonians finally defeated the Egyptians and the remnants of the old Assyrian Empire.

Nebuchadnezzar became king of the Babylonians.

After becoming king, Nebuchadnezzar came to Judah in full force.

When he arrived at Jerusalem, it seems that Judah didn’t fight. Instead, King Jehoiakim offered him tribute, including riches from the Temple and a group of nobles to serve in his court.

Nebuchadnezzar was satisfied and left Judah alone for a while. But nothing really changed.

Then in 597 B.C., God sent away a second group of exiles to Babylonia.

Jehoiakim rebelled against the Babylonians, and they sent an army.

While the Babylonian army was laying siege to Jerusalem, Jehoiakim died. He was succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin. Just three months later, the Babylonians breached the walls.

They took another group of captives, including the king, court officials, and skilled craftsmen. The Babylonians took around 10,000 people captive this time.

The Babylonians installed a king they thought they could control, and left.

Jeremiah sent a letter to these gathered exiles.

Regular correspondence was going back and forth between Judah and Babylon.

Once the exiles began to settle down, Jeremiah sent a letter by way of the king's messengers, to deliver to the people of Judah living in Babylon.

This letter is critical! Because these are people who were living in a new normal.

First, they lamented. I read that to you already. But what should they have done after they lamented?

They wanted to get back to Judah and their old normal lives as quickly as possible. What did Jeremiah write to them? What did God say to them through Jeremiah?

JEREMIAH TELLS US HOW TO THINK AFTER WE LAMENT

In Jeremiah 29:4-7, the prophet told the exiles (and us) how to live in a foreign land.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 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. But 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."

There are four things Jeremiah says to them that I want to highlight for us today, because what Jeremiah told the people of Judah living in Babylon can help us know how to think in the new normal -- once we've faced our disappointment and frustration.

1: Push past blame.

When the people of Judah found themselves in exile in Babylon, they had questions.

They believed that the LORD had promised to protect them from foreigners, and that He had given them their land as their unconditional possession.

So when they were defeated and deported, they wondered what had happened. Had the LORD been defeated? Had the LORD abandoned them?

So the way the LORD addressed them here was important.

The LORD identifies himself as "The LORD of hosts." That means that He is the LORD who is in charge of vast armies. God has plenty of power. He has not been defeated by the Babylonians.

Next, the LORD identified himself as “The God of Israel.” In other words, God is still with them. God is still their god, and they are still the LORD’s people.

Then God clarified what happened. He said in verse 4 that He had sent them to exile.

God said, “I did this. I did it for a reason and a purpose.”

And that’s an important word for us to hear today.

As we think about where we are in our new normal, God has put us right here, right now, for a reason. He knows what He is doing; He is with us, and His power is not tapped out in any way.

2: Put down roots in the new normal.

The exiles in Babylonia wanted desperately to be freed, to return to Judah, and to get back to their old lives as the big deals of Judah.

Jeremiah told them to let go of that, to let go of their old normal.

Instead, he told them to make the new normal their home.

He was very specific. They were to build houses, which means to make families for generations.

They were to plant gardens, which means very literally to put things in the ground, watch them put down roots, and then watch good things come up.

And they were to get on with life. Get married. Have children. Grow over generations.

All the while, though, they were to resist becoming Babylonians.

They were to live as God’s people, citizens of Judah, in a foreign land. They were to obey the laws of that land when they could, but they were to remember that God’s Law always took precedence. They might learn the language and customs of Babylon. But they were to remember that their hearts belonged to Judah, and their values came from God.

These words are important for us. We have to put down roots in our own new normal.

We have to live here, do life here, and embrace it instead of fighting it. We have to put down roots and build households.

Still, we are always strangers in this land with basic values that come from somewhere else.

3: Bless the new normal.

The Bible says that Jeremiah told them to seek the welfare of their city.

Very literally, Jeremiah told them to seek the *shalom* of their city.

That means to seek that all be well, all be right, and that everything and everyone prosper.

He went on to call the people to pray for their city -- which is shocking! How could God’s people pray for the enemy that defeated them and held them captive?

The answer was simple: if God gave the Babylonians *shalom*, they would get *shalom* too.

Like them, we bless and seek to build up the places where we live.

This is critical for us as followers of Jesus. We need to make the places where we live better.

We don’t separate ourselves, stand apart from, judge, and lob grenades at the places where we live. Instead, we roll up our sleeves, we pray, and we get to work to make things better.

4: Update your mental passport for the new normal.

Passports tell us where we’re from.

Our passport is given to us by our homeland and identifies us when we travel to a foreign land.

I am a citizen of the United States. I took my passport with me when I traveled to Mexico, and my passport identified who I was, and that I was from the United States.

It was thousands of years ago, but the people of Judah had to update their passports when they lived in Babylon. They didn't become Babylonians. They were from Judah. Even as generations passed, they were always foreigners from Judah, with allegiance to Judah, living in Babylon. They were strangers in a foreign land with loyalty ultimately to a different sovereign.

You may be surprised to discover that we are strangers living in a foreign land, as well.

If you live in the United States and were born here, that may surprise you to hear at first.

But please understand that our first loyalty is always to God. In a very real sense, God is our King. And he rules over the Kingdom of God. When we are followers of Jesus, we are first and foremost citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Colossians 1:13 reminds us that we have had our citizenship and loyalty changed: *"He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,"*

Hebrews 11:16 tells us that we have to keep that fact in the front of our minds, because God expects it: *"But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."*

All the lands in which we live, then, are foreign lands to us!

We have to think, "Citizen of the Kingdom of God, subject of King Jesus, living in this land."

That makes us miniature outposts of his Kingdom, representing God's values and interests in the lands in which we dwell.

If we're going to thrive in the new normal, this is how we're going to think after we lament. Jesus fills in the picture in the New Testament, with more on what we are to do.

JESUS TELLS US WHAT TO DO IN THE NEW NORMAL

Matthew 10:5-15 is from Jesus' charge to his disciples as they prepared for another new normal.

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

As we look at what Jesus said, three things stand out that we should do in the new normal.

These are not like the mental shifts that Jeremiah gave us. They are commands and even actions, mission-oriented.

1: Get out there.

In the earlier verses in Matthew 10, Jesus gathered 12 of His disciples, or students.

He gave these 12 particular disciples an additional blessing that came with power. He gave them miraculous authority from Himself to cast out demons and heal.

Then he designated them apostles. To be an apostle simply means to be a “sent one.”

He placed temporary restrictions on where they were to go and where they were being sent. He told them to avoid areas dominated by Gentiles and (specifically) the Samaritans. Instead, He told them to go to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He lifted this temporary restriction later and sent His representatives to “all nations” or “Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

We don’t necessarily occupy the biblical office of apostle. Nor do many of us possess the spiritual gift of apostleship. (Those are topics for another day.)

However, we are all now “sent ones.” In His Great Commission, Jesus acknowledged the fact that we all go about our lives. As we go, we are to do much of this mission.

The Good News is that we are all saved and consequently sent out to represent Jesus.

That’s important as we figure out what to DO in the new normal. We’ve got to go and represent Jesus in the new normal. That’s step one.

2: Serve people in Jesus’ name.

Jesus began His practical instructions to His new apostles by telling them to preach or proclaim broadly that the Kingdom of Heaven (or God) was near. They were to call people to follow Jesus and become part of the Kingdom of God.

And they were to serve people as they went. They were to exercise the authority Jesus had given them to change people’s lives and demonstrate the power of God. They were to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons.

Proclaiming and serving go hand in hand. We’ll say much more about proclaiming next week.

For this week, we want to focus on the fact that Jesus expected His apostles to change the lives of the people they reached.

This is critical for us to understand! We are to serve people in the new normal. We’ve got to get out there and we’ve got to serve people in Jesus’ name. Two steps. Now a third:

3: Keep blessings flowing outward.

Jesus spent a great deal of time identifying the way that blessing flows and making sure that the apostles or sent ones matched His expectations.

Basically, Jesus said that God has poured blessing into our lives and is free. It costs us nothing.

Therefore, as we get out there and serve people, we are not to charge people for blessing. Rather, we are to serve freely and give away freely, without asking for anything in return.

We don’t hoard.

We give freely if people will take.

Jesus isn’t saying that we won’t ever get anything in return.

What He’s saying is that as His sent messengers, we need to be giving away the good things God has given to us and making people’s lives better, rather than taking from them.

That has to be our guiding thought in the new normal. How can blessings from God flow through us to the people around us? The world desperately needs us right now.

Our church's friends in Beirut set the bar for what to do in a new normal.

You may have seen in the news that there was a massive, tragic explosion in Beirut.

A large supply of chemicals exploded in the port of Beirut, destroying or damaging a good portion of the Lebanese capital.

Over 150 people died. More than 60 are still missing. The city is devastated.

Our church has a group of friends in Beirut serving the people there.

People in this group of friends lost their homes. Several were injured. Two were killed.

This group of friends moved into a new normal pretty quickly.

They estimate that at least 300,000 Lebanese people are now homeless and displaced.

And they are out helping, doing what Jesus said we are supposed to do.

They're helping neighbors and cleaning up. They're providing water, food, and shelter. They're buying medicine and cleaning supplies. They're taking people into their homes.

They're living in the new normal. But they're thinking the way Jeremiah told us to think and doing what Jesus told us to do.

WE ARE AMBASSADORS

Ambassadors have critically important jobs.

An ambassador is a commissioned representative from one head of state to another.

Ambassadors are able to speak on behalf of the nation and its government to the head of state and people of another nation.

Ambassadors further the interests of the government that sends them.

They should embody the values of the nation that sends them.

John Adams showed us what an ambassador is supposed to do.

Before he became the first Vice President and then the second President of the United States, John Adams was a representative of the American Colonies during the Revolutionary War.

He represented the colonists' interests in France, where he met with mixed success at best.

In frustration, he went to the Netherlands toward the end of the Revolutionary War.

While Adams was there, the Netherlands became the first country to formally recognize the United States as a sovereign nation. Consequently, they received John Adams as this country's first ambassador.

Adams then was able to negotiate a line of credit from the Netherlands that buoyed the brand new government in America.

John Adams represented the United States — our interests and our values — as our ambassador. And he worked tirelessly on our behalf. That's what ambassadors do.

We are called to think and act like ambassadors.

It sums up everything we've said so far.

It's a term Paul the Apostle specifically applies to us as followers of Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul wrote, *“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”*

We are ambassadors!

That means we think of ourselves as ambassadors. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God, representing King Jesus to the people of this land. Our first loyalty is to Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

That means we are also to act like ambassadors. We embody the values of the Kingdom of God and of King Jesus. We advance the interests of the Kingdom of God and of King Jesus whenever we can and wherever we can. But we do that by serving the needs of the people of this land where we live! We serve people here and now in the name of Jesus!

Let’s go act like ambassadors.