

We Seek the Flourishing of Washington, DC

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 March 2017

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] in their home country. So they're a long-time resident, and in every way, through their courtesy and their hard work and their diplomacy, they work, and a good diplomat recognizes that the better they do here, the more courteous, the more humble, the more respectful, the more they love, the more they invest, the more they work hard, the more they benefit the country that they're living in, that that's actually furthering the interests of their homeland.

They recognize that they're linked, right? In its welfare, you will find your welfare. D.C. is full of embassies. So this is, I think, a familiar image for us.

And we need to recognize that Jeremiah 29 is telling us that the church is the embassy of the kingdom of heaven. The church community is the embassy of the kingdom of heaven.

And we ask, well, what does this actually look like on the ground? And there's this great letter from the 2nd century A.D., a letter to someone named Diognetus. And this letter describes this kind of growing group of Christians.

And it's this interesting description from an outsider perspective of what these Christians are like. And just listen to this description. Christians are indistinguishable from other men, either by nationality, language, or customs.

[1 : 2 2] They do not inhabit separate cities of their own or speak a strange dialect or follow some outlandish way of life. And with regard to dress, food, and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in.

And yet, there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens.

Any country can be their homeland, but for them, their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them, meaning leaving unwanted kids out to die.

They share their tables, but not their beds. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

Do you feel the tension in this description? They have not assimilated, and yet they have not separated, right? They are living in the tension in between those two things.

[2 : 3 5] They're fully integrated into the culture, and yet, key words, and yet, there is something extraordinary about their lives. And I think that those two words are the key to living as an ambassador of the kingdom in this world.

Those words, and yet. Is there an and yetness to our life? You know, imagine if someone were to today write a letter about our community, Church of the Advent, and what might that letter say?

What kinds of descriptions might we find in that letter? Just imagine what it might say. We work hard at our jobs, and yet, we also regularly take time to rest, and we know that our worth isn't measured by professional accomplishment.

You know, we are politically engaged and thoughtful, and yet, we don't think that politics is going to save the world, right?

We love celebration, and we love good food, and we love good drink, and we love feasting. And yet, we know how to fast.

[3 : 54] We know how to do without. We recognize that life is about much more than pleasure. We have a high view of marriage and family, and yet, we recognize that it's equally, if not more important, for the church to be a family for all those people who don't have a family.

All right? We seek greater influence in our jobs. We seek greater influence in the culture. And yet, we recognize that the purpose of power is to see other people flourish, not necessarily ourselves.

All right? We promote and encourage and celebrate life in all of its forms, and yet, we recognize that death is inevitable, and we're not afraid of it.

We don't deny it. We have ambitions, and we have hopes, and we have dreams for ourselves and our careers and our lives, and yet, at the same time, we are radically content, and we're at peace with where God has us right now.

Right? We have strong convictions, clear beliefs, and we hold on to those, and we're not ashamed of them, and yet, we do everything we can to love and to embrace and to understand people who disagree with us.

[5 : 22] Right? We care about having enough money to meet our needs, to have a place to live, to make sure our kids have what they need. That's important to us. And yet, we care just as much, if not more, about the needs of people around us.

And we're more excited when we have enough that we can be generous. Right? In short, we are at home in this world, and yet, at the same time, we recognize that this world is not our home.

So the question that we have to ask as we think about our community and our own lives, is there an and-yet quality to our lives? Right? This is God's purpose for us in exile.

He wants us to be ambassadors of the kingdom of God. So are we? Is there an and-yet-ness? Right? If our lives, for those of us who are Christians, I recognize some of you aren't, and maybe I'd be interested in your thoughts on this, but I think that for Christians, if there's no and-yet-ness to our life, if there's nothing that doesn't make perfect sense, right, if everything about our lives makes perfect sense to people who don't share our faith, if there's no way that we're provoking questions that only the gospel can answer, then we have to wonder about that.

I think we should be concerned about that. Are we, as Jesus says in Matthew, are we salty? Or have we lost our saltiness? Right? So this is the purpose of exile.

[6 : 50] We're called to be kingdom ambassadors to seek the flourishing of the city. But then the other point that is equally important that we see in this passage is that ultimately, we are not the ones who will make flourishing happen.

We seek it, we begin to build toward it, we preview it, we anticipate it, we embody it. But ultimately, the kind of flourishing that we see here in Scripture, that can only be done by God.

And so that brings us to the promise of flourishing. And I say flourishing, the Scripture says welfare, but I think for most of us, we hear welfare, and it's a rather small word.

Also, the scriptural word is shalom, which we also translate, often translate peace. But peace and welfare, I think, we have underimagined ideas about what those mean.

Here's the definition of shalom as it's intended to be read in Jeremiah. This comes from Cornelius Plantinga. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing and wholeness and delight.

[7 : 56] A rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed. A state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its creator and savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.

Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be. That's a beautiful description of what shalom conveys, this holistic, universal flourishing.

And so God calls his people to seek that in the places where they live. So for us, that would be Washington, D.C., to seek that reality here. And that means, notice, not starting huge programs and sort of citywide, but it's simply, the focus in Jeremiah is simply living your life with an orientation toward the common good.

It's the way we think about choosing our home and it's the way we think about who lives in our house and it's the way we think about what kind of jobs we pursue, but also the way we go about the jobs that God gives us.

It's the ways that we interact with our neighbors. It's the way that we engage with the local government. It's the way that we engage with the people who disagree with us.

[9 : 10] It's in all of the little ways, the little aspects of life, the way we talk to the people at the grocery store where we go and the places where we hang out in our free time, all of that, but doing that with an eye toward the flourishing of the city, toward the common good, right?

And so all of that, we summarize with the word flourishing. And I want you to see that this definition of flourishing is way bigger than what we can do through what I just described. It requires God ultimately to come in and to finish what he started through us.

And this is what you see in the remaining verses, beginning in verse 10. It says, For thus says the Lord, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise to bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Now that may sound familiar, Jeremiah 29, 11, For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord.

And it sounds familiar because it's used very often in our society. It's often misused in our society. You often see it on graduation cards or coffee mugs or picture frames, things like that.

[10 : 23] And most of the time it's wrong, the way it's used. Or most of the time, it's being taken out of context. So don't call your grandma up and criticize the card she gave you for your graduation. But just so that we know, it's not talking about the fact that God's going to give you a good job and an income after you graduate college.

What it's talking about is the end of exile. It's talking about the ultimate homecoming. And it's talking about both the end of exile for Israel, but also the end of humanity's exile.

That one day we will be home. That one day we'll no longer be exiled. So it's a great promise. And in fact, what scripture says is not that we will one day go home, but rather one day home will come to us.

One day this will become home. It will be transformed. It will be changed. It will be renewed. It will become home. Our true home will be here.

And you read about this from the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. He says this in Revelation 21. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

[11 : 34] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.

For the former things have passed away, and he who is seated on the throne said, Behold, I'm making all things new. And this is the great promise of flourishing, that one day God's going to build this great city.

It's not going to be Washington, D.C. It's not going to be New York, Paris, bigger than all of those. One great city. And people from every nation, tribe, tongue, regardless of culture and background, are going to be drawn into that city.

And what makes that city home? The very presence of God is there. That we will be face to face with our maker and savior.

[12 : 42] And the Bible says the great proof that this will happen is the resurrection of Jesus. Paul looks at the resurrection and says, that's a preview of what's ultimately going to happen to all of us and to the world. So what are the implications for us as we think about this for Advent in Washington, D.C.?

Well, it means that through our homes and through our work and through our daily presence here, we desire for D.C. to be changed.

We desire for D.C. to become more and more a city that is marked by wholeness and people who are whole and delight. A city where people's spiritual and social and material needs are satisfied.

A city where people's gifts and talents and resources and time are used in ways that benefit the common good. That means everybody, both inside and outside the church.

That it becomes a city marked by joyful wonder at the saving power of Jesus Christ. That one day, it won't be known as the seed of power for the U.S., but rather it will be known for the name of God.

[13 : 59] Right? So as we pull all this together, we have on the one hand a purpose for exile. God has a purpose for us. And we also have a promise of flourishing.

One day, God's going to transform and renew this world. And so the question that we need to ask in closing is how do those things come together in our lives? In other words, as we look at this promise, what is the purpose that we play in achieving or moving toward that promise?

And I think that we need to ask that as a church. And also, I encourage you to ask this individually. What is the purpose that you are called to play? More to the point, what kind of relationship will you have with this city and with this church?

What kind of relationship will you have? So a lot of people come to D.C. And they may, you know, sign a long-term lease or buy a house. But in their mentality, they remain tourists.

They come to D.C. primarily to take, to enjoy, to have fun, to get what they need. And then they leave. Right? I talked to somebody, a long-time D.C. resident, and I said, well, how has the city changed?

[15 : 13] You know, what's your take on that? And he, without even skipping a beat, he said, well, it's become a playground for young white professionals. And he looked at me and he said, people like you, you're having a ball.

And it was very telling, right? You don't have to be a Christian or believe the Bible, you know, to notice that mentality, right? You can reject everything else I just said. But there's a sense that people are watching and they're noticing.

What is our relationship with the city? Many of us, I'm assuming, have moved here. If you're a long-time resident, then you probably have thoughts about this as well. You probably know better than I do. But what is our relationship going to be?

Right? Are we going to treat the city kind of like a prostitute? Where we get what we want and get out? Or are there ways that we can think about seeking the common good while we're here?

Now, some of you are just here for a couple of years and that's God's will for you. You're here and then God is going to call you elsewhere. I want to encourage everybody to at least consider making a longer-term commitment.

[16 : 14] But it's not necessarily about how long you live here. It's more about the kind of relationship you have while you're here. Whether or not you're investing. Whether or not you're investing. Right?

How are you thinking about your presence here? So we started this church alongside our sister churches with a vision to see this kind of flourishing. And we believe that our only hope of meaningfully pursuing that vision is if we have a community of people who are deeply invested in this church community and deeply invested in this vision to serve the greater community.

Even the people who disagree with us, even the people who would rather see churches like ours cease to exist. That we're here to seek their welfare. We're here to love all who God has put under our care.

We believe that extends to the edges of this great city of Washington, D.C. And so with that, let's come together in prayer., whatever. .