

Blizzard, Winter, Ice Age Jer. 29:1-11 10/18/20

I titled this sermon, “Blizzard, Winter, Ice Age.” I’ve got two questions for you about that. First, what do blizzard, winter, and ice age have in common? They are all cold and often unwelcome! Second, how are they different? Mostly a difference in the length of time. In a recent article, Andy Crouch uses these three images of blizzard, winter, and ice age to help us look at the current pandemic and how we respond to it. I found these images to be helpful, and I hope you will, too. Since we’re now 6-7 months into feeling the many profound effects of this pandemic, I thought this would be a good time to use these images to look at where we’ve been and where we’re going as a church during this period.

When a blizzard comes, people usually have a little bit of warning and can prepare (or not prepare!) for what is predicted to come. When it hits, there is a lot of energy and adrenaline to deal with the inconveniences and changes in plans that a blizzard brings, usually just for a few days- a week or two at most. When the pandemic hit, most people experienced it in the same way, dealing with the inconveniences fairly easily, believing that they would be short-lived. As with a blizzard, some were better prepared than others for the changes. And some people ended up with an awful lot of toilet paper!

However, after a while, it became clear that the pandemic would not be short-lived. So, we moved from a blizzard mentality to a winter mentality. We knew that the inconveniences and dangers of this pandemic were going to last a while, but many people still believed that it would be a relatively short season, and that we could simply “gut it out” until we got through on the other side when things would quickly return to normal. Well, it’s been 6 or 7 months now, and there’s no clear end in sight. So the winter image for the pandemic also seems inadequate.

That brings us to the image of a mini ice age. This thing is going to be a lot longer than many of us ever anticipated, which I believe requires a different approach than just toughing it out for a while. Dr. Robert Redfield, Dir. of the Centers for Disease Control, stated recently that we’re unlikely to have a return to anything approaching normal until the late 2nd or early 3rd quarter of 2021, about nine months from now. And that prediction assumes that everything goes well in the development and distribution of a vaccine, and that a large percentage of the population agrees to be vaccinated! Already we’re seeing signs of a new wave of infection all around the world, the country and here in PA, something that our public health professionals have predicted for some time.

So, if we’re looking at another nine months or more in this situation, what insights does the Christian faith have to help us? I’d like to suggest a

couple specific ideas for our church and for us as individuals based on insights from the prophet Jeremiah during the Babylonian exile. Like us, Israel was swept into an unexpected and unwanted crisis that forced major changes on them. Here's what was going on. After years of pleas and warnings from the prophets concerning Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord, God allowed the Babylonians to sweep through Israel around 600 B.C. They carried off thousands of the leaders of Israel- the king, princes, queens, priests, elders, artisans, and prophets- and took them to Babylon where they served the Babylonian empire. Many people, however, remained in Israel, under the rule of a puppet king set up by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

All of this prompted a spiritual crisis for Israel, because they had always believed that Jerusalem would never fall. After all, it was the place where God lived. They wondered, "Had God abandoned them? Or, do the gods of Babylon just have more power than the God of Israel?" You get the idea. In addition, there were continued questions about what the exiles should be doing. Some prophets, seeing unrest elsewhere in the empire, were predicting that the time of occupation and exile would be short-lived, that Babylon would soon weaken, and that the people should prepare to rebel soon against their captors.

In response to this perspective, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. We find the letter in the 29th chapter of the book of Jeremiah. Listen to what Jeremiah says to the exiles, and listen for how it may speak to us today.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon... It said: ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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.

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. ¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For 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. (Jer. 29:1-2, 4-11)

Jeremiah tells them not to be fooled by what they're hearing, that they're not leaving Babylon anytime soon. In fact, God is going to keep them there for a whole generation! It's going to be a mini ice age! And he tells them three things to do in their new, strange situation which have parallels to our own situation. First, he tells them to build houses, plant gardens, and establish families. In other words, do the normal things you need to do to sustain life and relationships. Don't be focused only on the day when you'll be released from these hardships, he says; Focus on the here and now.

I've challenged our GPC leaders- our staff and our elders- to do just that. To create a nine-month plan for our ministry. That would take us to the time the CDC says we may be able to return to somewhat normal lives. How can we do the things to which God has called during this time of exile? How can we effectively worship, educate ourselves and our children, participate in fellowship with one another, maintain our facilities, encourage one another in stewardship, and support God's work in our community and elsewhere? How can we most effectively do these normal things during this abnormal time? What is God asking us to do right now? That's first.

The second thing Jeremiah tells them is this: *“⁷But 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.”* How can we seek the welfare of our community during this time? What ongoing needs can we continue to support through ministries like Adams Rescue, Gettysburg CARES, and Ruth’s Harvest? What new needs can we help to address in our community- support for children’s learning, help for people being evicted from their apartments or homes, or whose gas or electricity is being turned off? How can we “seek the welfare of the city” where we live? That’s second.

Third, Jeremiah reminds the exiles that God has not forgotten them. Verse 11- *¹¹For 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.* (Jer. 29:11) Hope. And God has not forgotten his church either. God has sustained this church through almost 280 years of history- through a revolution(!), a Civil War, the Spanish flu pandemic, the Great Depression, two World Wars and several other wars, through the social upheaval of the civil rights movement and the Viet Nam war, and through the attacks of 9/11. And God will sustain us through this very challenging time, too. In Matt. 16, Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. I don’t think a pandemic will prevail either!

As I mentioned, I have challenged our leaders to come up with a 9-month plan for GPC's ministry. How effective have our efforts been so far? What new things would we like to try during this time? And, what new opportunities are emerging for ministry? Watch for these new initiatives, and share your thoughts and ideas with us as we think together about the next phase of our lives together!

Finally, I would also like to challenge us as individuals to do the same thing! What do you need to do to be a faithful follower of Jesus during this nine months? What do you need to do to maintain and grow your faith? What might God be calling you to do in your neighborhood or in the larger community? This is not the time to give up! It's the time for hopeful perseverance. Now, we're not hopeful because of a vaccine (which may or may not work), or public health efforts (which may or may not prove effective), but we're hopeful because God has promised to be with us through all things and help us not just survive, but to even flourish during hard times. How will you use the coming months to be God's person wherever you are- at home, school, work, or in the community? What will you do?