

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost - October 10, 2004**  
**Anne G. Cohen**

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

**For Our Reflection:**

The famous conductor, Arturo Toscanini once received a letter from a gentleman living in the mountains of Montana.

"Dear Mr. Toscanini, I listen to your broadcasts every Sunday night on the radio. I am an old man and I live alone with only my flock of sheep and my violin in a cabin high above Thompson Falls. It's been a long winter. The batteries to my radio are dying and my violin is out of tune. I wonder if you would be kind enough to strike the note of A next week so that when I won't be able to hear you any longer, I can play my violin until the Spring thaw when I can get to town again."

During the following week's broadcast, Toscanini interrupted his program to say, "I'd like to address the gentleman who wrote me from Montana recently. Here sir is the note of A." That night millions of people heard the note sounded in New York City vibrate across America to a small cabin in Montana where the old shepherd, sitting by his radio, reached for the violin next to him.  
--- Charles Wing Krafft

**A Letter from Home**

If you saw the words "Dear John" at the beginning of a letter – what kind of letter would you expect to follow? An "I'm leaving you" note? A love letter to my husband? A fan letter to Johnny Depp?

How about "To Whom It May Concern" – what kind of letter is that? A business inquiry? A complaint letter? A recommendation letter?

"To Our Neighbors" – might be junk mail from a local business, a political ad, a call to a neighborhood watch meeting or an invitation to a block party.

"Dear Abby" might be an easier genre to nail down – unless we saw it somewhere other than the newspaper.

How about a letter that begins "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ... to Timothy, my beloved child..." ? Another advice column? Yes – but not from the local newspaper.

And then there's the letter we just hears that starts "Thus says the Lord..." What are your expectations for what follows "Thus says the Lord..." ??  
Judgment? Blessing? Instructions? A lot of joking around?

"Thus says the Lord..." This kind of letter says: GOD IS STILL SPEAKING. GOD IS STILL SPEAKING THROUGH ME – SO LISTEN UP – THIS MIGHT BE SOMETHING YOU NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO.

In this particular case, our tedious and tenacious friend Jeremiah – from the ruins of Jerusalem – writes to his vanished colleagues and fellow citizens in Babylon.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem (home) to the remaining elders among the exiles (far away), and to the priests, the prophets and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem (home) to Babylon (far away).

Thus says the Lord...

And the letter from home begins: I sent you there. Nebuchadnezzar may have taken you there, but I SENT YOU THERE. And in spite of what the false prophets are promising you, you're going to be there awhile. So.....

Build houses – and live in them.

Plant gardens – and eat the vegetables.

Get married – and have kids.

Marry your kids off – and have grandkids.

You're going to be there awhile.

So.....

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.

Pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find yours.

This letter from home – from God – makes it clear that:

1. Yes, the exile was a huge exploding package from me – God - delivered by Nebuchadnezzar's troops.
2. Yes, I – God – sent you into exile for a reason. You were being naughty and not nice, unjust, unclean, perverse and stubborn. You couldn't live by my rules – so you were no longer welcome in my house.
3. And, in case you still don't get it, here is a p.s. via Jeremiah - you are going to be out there in Babylon for a generation or two. So it will behoove you to remember that what goes around comes around. Seek the best for the city where you are and you will benefit. Be a petulant, unprosperous, refugee and you will be nothing but petulant and poor. So buck up and invest yourselves. If you prove yourselves, then MAYBE you can come home.

Jews in Diaspora all over time, all over the world, have taken these words to heart. Wherever they have lived, they have set up thriving businesses, contributed to the educational system and cultural institutions. They have planted gardens and orchards, taken on the languages and customs and names and citizenship of the countries where they reside.

There are 36 known spellings of the name Cohen – collected from countries all over the world. The Cohen blessing even made it into Star Trek – going intergalactic. “Live long and prosper – whatever planet you are on!” This was all in response to God's letter instructing them to “seek the welfare of the city where you are.”

Why did Jeremiah believe God had exiled the Hebrew people? He believed it was a corrective measure – not to destroy them – but to redirect them. God did not abandon

them, just gave them a context in which they might become better people – and, therefore, better Jews. (This makes me think of a camp in Utah for young people who need to reshape their attitudes and gain some influence over their own behaviors and lives. It also reminds me of Cuba where all 12 year olds are sent out to live in barracks, work in the fields and factories, contribute to the g.n.p., and come home to their families two years later better people for it.)

As with Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness, correctives take time – a generation or two. Quick fixes don't last. As with a long marriage, in order to renew their covenant with God and each other, the citizens of Jerusalem needed to pay close attention to their relationships and reshape those relationships over time.

Apparently, the people of Jerusalem – on a regular basis – needed to hear God in new ways with new ears, see God in new situations with new eyes, experience God at work in and through themselves and their neighbors within a new context.

Like with parents and children, the parent's voice eventually becomes too familiar and the children stop hearing it. So the parent must change how they communicate – or even WHO is communicating - to get their attention.

And so, years later, we have landed within shouting distance of East Ventura County. And in many ways we are still struggling to prosper and do the right thing in a foreign land.

And 2500 years later we get this letter from home – and the voice in the letter is still the same voice. It is God – Still Speaking – in whatever language, whatever format of letter or package, whatever tone of voice it takes to get us to hear and understand the message - the timeless message:

Thus says the Lord:  
Thrive where you are.

Pray for the city where you live – it is an extension of your self – a collective manifestation of YOUR values, YOUR gifts, YOUR investments.

Seek its welfare – it is in your best interests, not just mine.

Live long and prosper – and eventually you'll get another letter from home – because I'm not done with you yet.

I am still speaking.

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**NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**World Wide Communion Sunday Celebrated**  
**Access Sunday**

**October 10, 2004**

**10:00 a.m.**

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

**The New Century Hymnal** or “Hymnal” has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

**The Chapel Songbook** or “CSB” is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

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*When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.*

**FOR OUR REFLECTION**

My maternal grandfather was a farmer who had a particular radiance and aliveness and I believe it stemmed from how he approached farming. He asked, always, not only what was necessary for him to do in order that he might reap the best benefits *from* his land and his animals, but what he must do *for* the land and the animals. His decisions were made, not only in relation to the needs of his own family but also in relation to the needs of the families of sheep and cows and horses for which he had responsibility. It was not altogether efficient. He was never poor, but he might have been much wealthier. But his kindly attitude gave him a dimension of aliveness that his more exploitative neighbors did not enjoy.

– Douglas Hall, Lighten Our Darkness, Westminster (1976)

**WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

**Musical Call to Worship**

*Gavotte in G Major*  
Duo-Pianists

by J. S. Bach

**Welcome and Perspective on the Day**

*Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.*

**Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering**

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

**O Source of light and truth, Creator of the eternal law of goodness, and of the impulse within us for justice and mercy, we pray that this hour of worship may be one of vision and inspiration. Help us to find Knowledge by which to live; lead us to take the words we shall speak into our hearts and our lives.**

**Bless all who enter this sanctuary in search and in need, all who bring to this place the offering of their hearts. May our worship here lead us to fulfill our words and our hopes with acts of kindness, peace, and love. Amen.**

+ **Opening Hymn**

*Draw the Circle Wide*

CSB # 42

+ **Opening Prayer** (unison)

**Source of all being, we turn to You as did our people in ancient days. They beheld You in the heavens; they felt You in their hearts; they sought You in their lives. Now their quest is ours. Help us, O God, to see the wonder of being. Give us the courage to search for truth. Teach us the path to a better life. So shall we, by our lives and our labors, bring nearer to realization the great hope inherited from ages past, for a world transformed by liberty, justice and peace. Amen.**

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

**Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.**

**Time for Silent Reflection** (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: **God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.**

**Silent Reflection**

**The Assurance of Good News** (unison)

**God is present in all places, in all ways, in all hearts.**

**Sung Response** "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

**Reception of ----- into Church Membership**

**Invitation**

**Affirmation of Covenant**

**Right Hand of Fellowship**

**Response of the Congregation**

**We welcome you with joy into the common life of this church.  
We promise you our continuing friendship and prayers  
as we share the hopes and labors of the Church.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue  
to grow together in God's knowledge and love  
and be witnesses to the power of God in the healing of our world.  
Amen - Hallelujah -Hooray!**

**We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer**

**Offertory**

*Sicilienne*

by J. S. Bach

Duo-Pianists

**Prayer of Dedication** (unison)

**O God of All, may our worship on this day help us to grow in loyalty to our Covenant with  
You and to the way of life it demands: the way of gentleness and justice, the path of truth  
and of peace. Amen.**

## **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

**Just Peace Reflection**

**Conversation with Our Children** Children's Letters to God

**Reading from the Hebrew Prophets** Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

**Sermon**

A Letter from Home

## **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

**Celebration of Holy Communion**

+ **Communion Hymn**

*I Come With Joy*

Hymnal #349 (vv.1,3,5)

**Invitation**

**Sharing the Bread and the Cup**

