

Jeremiah 29:1-7
Psalm 66:1-12

2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

The good old days. We may have fond memories of the good old days. Maybe sometimes we wish we could go back to the good old days. Maybe back to school, or college, when you were dating your spouse, or when the kids were still at home. Perhaps back to the days when it seemed like life was so much simpler. The good old days is a sentimentality for the past, typically for a period of time or a place with happy personal associations. It may have something to do with personalities or events earlier in one's life. Perhaps you found an old picture or looking through a scrap book, which brought back pleasant memories. Sometimes even a smell can bring back memories. I had two uncles that smoked cigars. Whenever I smell cigar smoke it evokes memories of those two men. As someone said, "I wish there was a way to know you were IN the good old days before you left them." Someone else said, "I miss those days when I could just throw someone into the pool without having to worry whether they had their phone in their pocket."

Oh, the good old days. But were they really that good? We only remember them that way. For example, the decade of the seventies is when I came of age, as they say. I have fond memories of those good old days. But they really were not that good. We began that decade with the Viet Nam war, which came to an inglorious end. Then there was Watergate, the political scandal of President Richard Nixon. His administration tried to cover-up its involvement, and it ended with Nixon resigning from the presidency. As one reporter from the Des Moines Register wrote, "Watergate...dented American's faith in their government and tainted public servants with a distrust that stretches still from inside the Washington Beltway to town halls across the USA." Our trust in governmental

leaders has been decreasing. The current political climate of the upcoming presidential election, I believe, is due much to this lack of trust. We forget the trials, tribulations and troubles of the former times and remember them fondly. Could it be that when we believe that the good old days were better, that question does not arise from memory, but from amnesia. So why do we think of them so fondly. One person has suggested it is because we know how they turned out. We have anxiety about the present age, because we do not know how things will turn out.

Maybe the nostalgia for the good old days is due to the drastic changes we have seen in our culture. For many today it may seem like we have been transported to an alien culture. Who would have thought that there would be a smartphone that could make telephone calls, send and receive text messages, take pictures and videos, store thousands of addresses and phone numbers, and give you step-by-step instructions of how to get somewhere, keeping track of your current location? In the good old days, when you were on vacation, you were not tethered to work with laptops and smartphones as we are today. We may no longer recognize our home towns with all of the immigrants. Gone are the Norman Rockwell scenes of barber-pole streets and postmasters who know our names. Neighbors down the street are no longer Lutheran or Baptist or Roman Catholic. They are Hindu or Muslim or New Age. We pine for the good old days.

The Israelites were dreaming of the good old days. In this morning's Old Testament text, Jeremiah, we find the people of Israel in exile in a foreign land, Babylon. The people were demoralized, discouraged, and restless. The Babylonians had conquered Israel, destroyed much of their beloved city of Jerusalem, destroyed the

very center of their faith, the temple, and sent many of the Hebrews to live in exile in a foreign land. The Israelites were surrounded by many temples dedicated to all manner of deities. The Babylonians just do not do things the same way they were done in Jerusalem. Of course they fantasized about returning to Israel. If only they could go home again, they thought, then they would be happy. If only we could leave Babylon and return to Israel, then life would be good. They were yearning for the “good old days.”

In that context God sent them some advice through a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah: “Quit fantasizing about returning to Israel. Instead, make the best of what you have. Put down roots. Build homes. Plant crops. Have children and grandchildren. Enjoy life in Babylon and seek its welfare.” It is interesting advice. The people of Israel want to go somewhere else, but God says to live life fully where you are. In short, God is saying, “Redeem the circumstances you find yourself in.”

In Ecclesiastes we read, “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” Here the “preacher,” the name given to the author of Ecclesiastes, says that valuing the past over the present does not derive from wisdom. The saying is directed against nostalgia, which is essentially a repudiation of the possibility of present joy—and less obviously, a repudiation of present responsibilities. To dwell on the good old days prevents us from enjoying the present.

Martin Thielen, a United Methodist pastor and author says that God knows that external circumstances such as geographical location play a very small role in our overall contentment. Contentment isn’t about having a perfect job, a perfect spouse, belonging to a perfect church, living in the perfect house, or attending a perfect school.

Such things do not exist. They never have, and they never will. We tend to look at the good old ways with rose colored glasses. In one way or another, we always live in Babylon. External circumstances are never perfect. Therefore, one of the secrets of a good life is learning to make the best out of the circumstances we have. Remember the good old days? Yes, but don't relive them.

Rev. Thielen goes on to say We would do well to listen to God's advice to these restless exiles in Babylon. Perhaps a few of us need to make a change—get a new job, move to a new city. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But very few of us need those kinds of changes in order to be happy. Most of us need to follow God's advice and flourish in Babylon, to flourish in where we are now and what we are doing now. We need to make the best of our job, make the best of our marriage and family, make the best of our church, and make the best of our life, not just tolerating the imperfect but investing ourselves in it. In other words, most of us need to quit fantasizing about living a perfect life somewhere else and start living fully right where we are—in spite of the imperfections. Only then will we overcome our restlessness and find contentment.

Yes, we will miss much of the past, but whining and pining about it will not make it reappear. Instead, Jeremiah challenges the Jews in captivity, and us, to embrace the place where God has us and find ways to be faithful in our living so that others might inquire about our inspiration, our resolve, and our trust, and thereby be drawn into a relationship with God.

You may have seen the classic movie *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal and Jack Palance. It tells the story of a restless middle-aged man who is considering changing jobs. Near the end of the film his wife says to him, "Honey, if you really want to

change jobs, I'm OK with me." With great insight he replies, "I don't need a new job. I just need to do my current job better." Sometimes all that needs to change is your perspective. God has brought us to where we are now and God will be with us as we go into the future.

Blessed be the Lord our God. Amen.