

As we begin this first Sunday in looking at mission into the world that God has called us to, we are looking together this morning at Jeremiah chapter twenty-nine where we see and learn of God's plan for mission. But it is not lost on me at all that God's design that our middle hour speaker Pastor Richard brought to us the mission that he is on to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ as a missionary the very people under whom God sent his people in this passage into exile, as Babylon. And it is not lost on me that God is telling us about what he is doing in the world and he wants us to see his plan for mission that is far greater than we could imagine or design ourselves. So this morning we're going to look at together in terms of God's plan for mission is Jeremiah chapter twenty-nine verses one to fourteen and then after that I'm going to begin us with a little bit of brief history as to what leads up to this chapter twenty-nine.

Hear now God's word. "This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me. Heavenly Father, we pray that now you would open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. That you would equip us with a vision and an understanding of your method and your plan for mission. Help us, we pray, to see what you're doing through this, your word, even for us today. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name, amen

God's plan for mission is incredibly upside down when we think about how shocking it is that what is said here in this passage is actually said. Because what we have written for us here is Nebuchadnezzar's first going into Jerusalem in 598 and bringing a group of exiles, we learn in the first opening verses three and four, that God in fact allows and sends into exile through the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the leaders, the artisans, the intellectuals into exile in Babylon and taking them out of Jerusalem where God was worshiped, where Israel found its place of hope, its place of peace—literally, Jerusalem, the city of peace. And so here God is taking them from a place where he alone is worshiped into a nation and under whose finger there is polytheism and rampant pluralism. And it is in this place, in those conditions that God unfolds his plan for mission. How ironic. And yet how applicable to our own day where the Church of Jesus Christ around the world finds itself not in a monotheistic situation where God of the Bible, Jesus Christ, is worshiped and praised but rather in a polytheistic and pluralistic world where Christianity is not the dominant narrative, Christians do not run the highest places, intellectual pursuit, Christians are not in power. But how then is the Christian church and how are Christians to live in a pluralistic, polytheistic world. Some would have us believe that in fact the answer would be if we can just return Christians and Christianity to the controlling place. What we find here is that God had a different plan for Judah and perhaps he has a different plan for us. It's being able to see what God's plan is for mission, not only here but also in our own day. So to be able to do this we need to see the prophetic drama, the drama that was playing out between two prophets, Jeremiah and Hananiah. Secondly we're going to look at the meaning of Jeremiah's message, and then finally the motivation for this mission. The prophetic drama, the meaning of Jeremiah's message, and the motivation for the mission.

First, the prophetic drama. Without an understanding of the background of what precedes chapter twenty-nine little of what Jeremiah says is going to be very shocking. So we need to appreciate that. So we need to see this drama that was happening between Jeremiah and another prophet, Hananiah. So to do that we need to see that they had dueling visions, dueling theologies that ultimately would yield a true prophecy. So let's look at this dueling visions, you see this prophetic drama play out. This section of Jeremiah covers chapter twenty-six through chapter twenty-nine, but it was principally in chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight that we see the dueling visions of these two prophets. These two prophets were prophesying their visions in Jerusalem, and the country of Judah had just been taken into exile. We know just by the message that Jeremiah gives that they had not really yet begun to build families and really gotten involved in exile because they were now being instructed to build houses. We know this is early on in the exile after 598. And then ten years later, in 587--nearly ten years later in 587 Jerusalem is completely sacked by Nebuchadnezzar. So here they've just been exiled and so you have a new king on the throne in Judah, Zedekiah. And up comes Hananiah who says here's what is going to happen in the name of the Lord. In two years the exile will be over. God will defeat Nebuchadnezzar, he will throw down Babylon as our oppressors. I encourage you to pray toward that end and to even participate in rebellion against this horrific nation. In two years the exile will be over. Well imagine the encouragement and positive nature that found in the King's courts--two years and we'll be back, we will be restored. But then there's Jeremiah. And Jeremiah is a, if I can say this, a hard man when it comes to prophecy; he has no fear. In fact he's cheeky. He knows what he's doing. Here's what he does: he hears the prophecy of Hananiah, he then comes in the presence of God's people wearing a wooden yoke and that yoke symbolized the fact that the nation of Judah was in exile and that they would remain there. And his prophecy was that the nation of Judah would stay in exile for seventy years. Aha. Now we've got a problem. One prophet says two years, the other says seventy. They've just gone into exile under a foreign enemy any nation. Who do you think they were tempted to believe? I know who I would've been tempted to believe. Two years sounds a whole lot better than seventy. Here's the problem, however: at the time in which those prophecies were being given to the people the people had no ability to determine which one is actually speaking for the Lord. They didn't know yet. What they did know was that in Deuteronomy 18 God says that if a prophet prophesies in my name and that prophecy does not come true, then it will be his life. He will die. At the point of these prophecies, they don't know yet. So between chapter twenty-seven and just before the beginning of chapter twenty-nine, two years transpire and in that transpiring time these dueling visions also ramped up the drama. Hananiah, to bring out the drama of his vision, to ramp up the hope of the people, he took the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's neck in public and he broke it in two as a symbol of what was getting ready to happen to Babylon and the return the people. Jeremiah would not be had. Jeremiah left and came back. This time instead of a wooden yoke, he put around his neck an iron yoke. And he says, you can't break this. And the iron doesn't represent the power of Babylon, it represents the will of God. And he then calls Hananiah out and says, you're a false prophet. You're lying to the people of God, you're not prophesying peace, you're prophesying war, and I say to you, what you say will not come true. In fact, you will die as a result. The two years ends. Hananiah's prophecy that he had given in the name of the Lord was found wanting, it didn't come true. And we learned just before chapter twenty-nine these words: "Therefore, this is what the Lord says: [Jeremiah says,] I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you're going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord." And then verse seventeen: "In the seventh month of that same year Hananiah the prophet died." The people of God now have seen whose prophecy was true, and who was speaking for the Lord.

Because embedded in their dueling prophecies are dueling theologies. Hananiah says, this is not what the Lord would want, this cannot be good. He was looking at the geopolitical situation and is essentially saying, are you kidding me? This is the people of God under this foreign enemy nation. That can't be good. We cannot flourish. But he was dead wrong. Because he had interpreted in his theology of God that God's will is contingent on who was on man's throne, who has the power on earth. Instead, Jeremiah comes and says no, God's will is not thwarted by who is on the throne. In fact, just the opposite. God will even use the one on the throne to achieve my will. In other words, the theology is, who's in control? Man's vision or God's? And only time would tell, wouldn't it? And that's the reality of true prophecy. Only time will tell. And as we look back at this passage and as we see the progressive revelation that in fact what is prophesied does come true according to Jeremiah. But at this point, as one commentator, Walter Brueggeman, said this in regard to true prophecy, he says this: True prophecy is the capacity to say the right thing at the right time. A capacity not exercised by prophets of optimism nor voices of despair. You see, Jeremiah was not a prophet of optimism nor

was he a voice of despair. He was speaking for the Lord who said this: that that which you see is bad. I tell you, you will flourish if you seek me. I have a future for you, but not by your design, but my mine. He's also one who lays out here for the nation of Judah this bold implication because of this drama, and it's this: not only is the Lord more in control, because we learn from verse four, I'm one who carried you into exile--so it's God's determination of what he's doing in the nation of Judah—but the other implication is this: there is power in weakness. Judah had already been in power. Israel once, the united nation, had been the most powerful nation by God under King David, Solomon--its glory days. But what happened when it was in power? Did it seek the Lord? No. Inevitably over and over again throughout the Old Testament is the cycle of God bringing Israel restoration, but it would use God's restoration as an opportunity to worship false gods and false idols. When they were in power their influence went to pot. They didn't worship the only wise God, they worshiped something else. But here we learn that maybe being in power according to man is not the place of strength. Maybe being in exile is, because maybe there the people of Judah can be arrested from their thinking. That, in fact, maybe what the Lord is doing is not about trying to make us a strong nation, but about making his name and restoration known. And maybe it will take our humiliation for us to learn dependence on this God who is in control, who is sovereign over kings and presidents, Supreme Courts and representatives, governors and state houses. Maybe we can learn that the most influential that the people of God and the church of Jesus Christ can be, is not when we are in cultural power, but maybe when we're out of cultural power. Because maybe like the people of Judah we can be arrested from thinking that our dependence on the Lord is determined by who is in power, humanly speaking. But maybe the Lord has a different plan and that plan is to restore the church of Jesus Christ and those who belong to him, but by his design, not by the plan of man. It is a powerful implication, but one that we must wrestle with, and it comes out of this incredible prophetic drama. I encourage you go back and read it. It's a great read. And you want to hear a personal testimony? Go and read Daniel, because at the very same time that this was being prophesied, guess who was hearing the prophecy? Daniel. And where would Daniel end up? Daniel would end up as one of the most powerful men in Babylon, who had the ear of King Nebuchadnezzar, and he, Daniel, would make the name of the Lord great.

It's a powerful thing, but then back to Jeremiah. He has a message. What is the meaning of the message? We see the meaning of the message in verses five through nine. Two things: the task of shalom and openness to God. The task of shalom and openness to God. The task of shalom, you'll see here, he says, verse five again, build houses, settle down, plant gardens, and eat the produce. So far so good. Marry, multiply--always a good message--have children, make sure they're married--also a good message--and then he says this, and here's where he tells us about the task of shalom. It isn't just about building our own personal households, our own personal economies, our micro-economy in the midst of exile. He means that our micro-economies of these exiles are meant for the purpose. He says it here. Verse six, "Increase in number there, do not decrease. Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile." When he says to seek the peace and prosperity, peace and prosperity are actually two words that are part of a whole word the Hebrew uses with one word, and that is 'shalom.' Shalom has within it more than the concept of the absence of conflict which is typically how we understand the idea of peace. But a biblical understanding of peace, shalom itself, has a much deeper, richer meaning and that is emotional, relational, economic well-being, spiritual well-being. And so he says to these exiles, the task of shalom means to increase. Yes, literally increase in number. But as you do, you're to do so for the purpose of serving me by serving and seeking the shalom of Babylon. And then he uses this interesting word. He says, seek the peace. That word 'seek'--it has an aggressive connotation. It's not passive. It's not as though the exiles are to increase in number and seek the shalom of Babylon because they're waiting for Babylon to come to them. No, to seek the peace and prosperity means they were to ask questions, if you will, of the city into which they were in exile. What are the needs? Where's the brokenness? Where is sin-caused brokenness? Where are the challenges? And the people of God are called to increase--to do so for the purpose of representing God, faithful to him, by seeking the shalom and bringing the love and the peace and the grace and the mercy of the biblical God to their neighbors, to the inhabitants of the cities where God had put them into exile. That is that is a profound message to a people who've just been told you're going to be in exile for seventy years. And the task of shalom has within it the idea of increasing for God's glory, to see the shalom, the well-being, representing God of this nation.

But it also means—notice--avoiding decreasing. How could they decrease? Many writers have written about this particular text as they've written about the biblical gospel and the idea of mission for the church of Christ, and they've often talked about this reality, the temptation for the people of God when they hear the message to seek the peace and prosperity of the city for the sake of Christ, that there is the temptation to decrease, and

that decrease looks like two things. Either accommodation to the culture around them or separation from the culture around them. Those are often seen as the only two options. But the reality is that they were tempted to that possibility. That it's very easy just to wall off from the nation of Babylon who don't worship God, who do not acknowledge him and worship him. And to say we're going to do it here in our own biblical God enclave. That's the one temptation to separate. But accommodation is the other thing. That is what Judah had done in the past just to become like the people around them. But we know that God says here they're to seek him. And that they are to do so in a biblical way and to do so at the same time as they're to seek the peace and the shalom of the nation. But what does that look like? What does not falling into accommodation look like? It means we would begin to ask what is our purpose for being here, Lord, and let me apply that now. What is our purpose? What is your purpose for living in the neighborhoods where you live? Do we live in the neighborhoods and pick our county and pick our city because that's where the good schools are? Is that our motivation only? Do we build big edifices and call them churches so that we can have really cool programs, so we can invite people in and say see what we're doing? Do we start ministries only to feed ourselves, to serve ourselves? Oh, how tempting that is, but when we do, we're accommodating to the culture. We're simply saying, well, we're going to do that which feeds our consumption, not asking the question, how can every one of the ministries of Columbia Presbyterian Church--how can every single one of our ministries begin to seek the well-being of Columbia in Howard County. How can our ministries meet the brokenness and address it? How can we escape the mirror that is always so tempting to look in when we think about our careers? Why do we work at APL or why we do we work in Washington or Baltimore, why do we work in these places? Simply to so that we can prop up our middle-class lives and then sprinkle a little bit of Christianity on the side with a couple of Christian books or Christian music or good Christian seminars? In other words, is our Christian faith merely an accessory to an already well-lived, middle-class life? Or has God called us here for a purpose, to avoid both accommodation where we simply become like everybody else meeting our own ends, but also avoiding separation where we build high walls and we don't engage. It's not easy. Don't get me wrong. But it's oh, so very easy to fall into both of these. But the Lord says there is the task of shalom through the lips of Jeremiah that he's calling Judah to.

But how, by what means? It's right here in verse seven, at the end of it, and then again in verses thirteen to fourteen, what has he said, he says, "Pray to the Lord for it." Meaning, pray to the Lord for Babylon. Pray to the Lord, if you're a Christian, for Howard County, Baltimore, DC, Anne Arundel County, Carroll County. Pray to the Lord for its brokenness. Pray to the Lord that it would be restored by the grace and the gospel of Jesus Christ. He then says in verse [twelve], "Then you will call upon me and come pray to me, and I will listen to you." By what means, then, is the meaning of Jeremiah's message laid out? It begins with prayer. Jeremiah knew that. We need to know that. Because in prayer a wrestling happens. Am I simply asking God to simply meet what I want, but in prayer I begin to find out that what I want needs to be opened with open hands and maybe the Lord needs to show me what he wants. It begins through prayer. Prayer for this community just as he was calling Judah to pray for the community where they were in exile. It's an openness to God because in prayer we make ourselves open to God's story, his plan for mission and not ours. But again, you might say, yes, okay, but what does it look like? Give me some rules. There aren't any rules. Yes, there are ten Commandments. There's the law of Christ, of love, yes, there are those. But you're not going to find a book in the Bible that says what does it look like to be a Christian engineer. Or what does it look like to be a Christian who's working for the United States government at Fort Meade. We're not going to find that book. But what we will find are principles and the heart that wants to seek after the Lord and say, Lord, you show me what it means to pray for my cubicle partner, for my next door neighbor who doesn't know you, who doesn't worship you. How can I share my life, my shalom that you have given to me with them? You see, in the middle of the fall, this year there was this whole debate about the traditional definition of marriage. You remember, right? Regardless of where you stand, you remember the debate? Okay. You remember how also people wanted to tell us how we need to be politicized. It's Chick-fil-A. Support Chick-fil-A if you support traditional definition of marriage. Don't support Chick-fil-A if you don't. And through all of that, through all of the voices, and I might say all the false prophets who want us to believe the lie of what God might be doing, little did we know, right the center of that Chick-fil-A debacle and craziness was the president and the beginner of Chick-fil-A, Dan Cathy. Dan Cathy looked for the cell number of the president of the number one protest group against him and his restaurant. He found the man's number, he called him them up, and he said can we get together. And throughout the fall they had a series of meetings. This series of conversations, the end of which would end up with a photograph on the sidelines of the Chick-fil-A Bowl where everybody was focused on two football teams going head-to-head. But little did they know on the sidelines something else was meeting together, but not

head-to-head, but arms around each other in a picture that went viral on Twitter. It was a picture of Dan Cathy with the man who the president of the group that had most vociferously protested against him. And then that man, after all was said and done, wrote an article about the conversation that happened between him and Dan Cathy. There are many things he said, but this is one. He says throughout these conversations, Dan expressed a sincere interest in my life, wanting to get to know me on a personal level. He wanted to know where I grew up, my faith background, my family, even my partner. In return I learned about his wife, his kids, and gained an appreciation for his devout belief in Jesus Christ and his commitment to being a follower of Christ more than a Christian. Dan expressed deep regret and genuine sadness when he heard about people being treated unkindly in the name of Chick-fil-A, but he offered no apologies for his genuine beliefs about marriage. Do you see what happened? Dan Cathy moved into this man's life and never once changed his views about the biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman, but neither did the other man make any apologies for his definition of marriage that is not just between a man and a woman, but they sat down together and they shared their life and Dan Cathy did so through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then he put his money where his mouth is. He then went into all of their generous 501(c)(3) giving and then they stopped giving to any organizations who were vociferously protesting groups, even the ones represented by this man that he had gotten to know. He didn't change his definition. He didn't change his beliefs. He didn't stop talking about Jesus Christ. Nobody gave him a book of the Bible and said here's what you do in the conversations. He simply sat down, if you will, and said, tell me about your life and I will tell you about mine. Principally, I will tell you about my Savior. That is the picture, but it's going to look a whole lot different with those who call Jesus Christ, Savior as you lead your lives, but nonetheless I'm guaranteed that he has a story to tell through you and it's not one of accommodation and it's not one of separation. It's one that is open to God in prayer, praying for those around you.

I have to hurry. Here it is. What's the motivation, then? Why? Why should we hear this message of Jeremiah? Why should the people of Judah hear the message? It's given to us in verses ten through fourteen, and it's this: There's the hope of restoration. God says, "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to you and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper y'all, [by the way, it's 'you plural'], plans to prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" Yes, God cares about you individually, but I will tell you he cares about individuals in the community of God's people. He has a plan for y'all, a plan for us, and that plan is restoration, that's what he was saying to Judah. In other words, what he said verses earlier, which was the task of shalom, he's now giving them the promise of shalom. What motivated, what animated their task of shalom was to recognize it's built on God's promise. God's promise to bring peace to them through his gracious covenant promise of love. And I say this: the motivation was because what Jeremiah knew that it would only be through the Lord that that yoke of iron, that burden of oppression could be removed. You remember member what I said, how that the yoke of wood was broken by Hananiah and then Jeremiah replaced it with the yoke of iron, not because it represented the power of Babylon, but because it represented that God's will is what it is and God will do what God will do. Only he can remove that yoke, because he's the one who has brought us into it. What is so amazing is you begin to see this pattern in chapter twenty-nine, you begin to see it's a great biblical theological thing that we see ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When Jesus came from the Father, what did he say to us in Matthew eleven, Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light, You see, here's the reality. That promise of a hope and a future would find its ultimate fulfillment not in the return to Jerusalem, but with the coming of Christ. And instead of sending us into exile because of our sin, Jesus Christ would go into exile on the cross-- exiled from fellowship with the Father. And on that cross he would take from us the yoke of iron which is sin--take it upon himself though he was without sin. And he would give himself. As we are getting ready to celebrate the Lord's Supper, this body, this blood, for you---but now watch this: why did Jesus do that? Because he knew that in going into exile the Lord had a promise and a future for him, that he would be raised on the third day, over death and conquering sin. And then he would rise at the right hand of the Father, and he says to us, I have a promise, I have a future and a hope for you, for I will return and make you my own. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we will be returned to the great city--a new heavens and a new earth and at its middle, the true Jerusalem, the City of Peace. You see when we come to celebrate the Supper we are celebrating in active participation in symbol what God was telling Judah. I will send my son into exile for you so that I can free you. I can forgive you. If that doesn't wow you, if that doesn't electrify you, maybe it's because you're not convinced of your most central problem, and that's the reality of sin. And maybe it's been thinly veiled by the pursuit of a middle-class life. But

my message to you this morning is one of shalom. That you will never find well-being in any economic class. You will never find true well-being in any neighborhood or any city. You only find well-being when it begins and it ends in Jesus Christ. Come to know him today. Renew. Let us renew together our faith that God's plan for mission may be radically different than ours, because he's writing a much bigger story than we could ever imagine. Let us pray that he will make us open to it.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray you'd make us open to what you are doing. Help us to see that in fact you have a purpose for your people, to make you known, to seek the shalom, prosperity, the peace of this community around us. Lord, help us to seek and to know sin and its brokenness in this community, Baltimore and Washington, and how you might be calling us to seek its well-being in your name, for your glory, for the power of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen