Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
5 May 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

"Seek Shalom"

Sixth sermon in the Easter series, *"The World Made Well…"*

Psalm 137:1-8; Jeremiah 29:1-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

We're in the last two weeks of our series, *The World Made Well*, which is the final part of our yearlong theme, *"It is Well…"* And if it's not been apparent at other points this year, today especially, we see just how complex and connected healing can be.

At various points we've discussed the perspective that the world's wellness depends upon our own wellness. Meaning, if *I* am not well, I'm not gonna have a whole lot in me to help others get well. It's like the airplane oxygen mask thing. If the plane is going down, make sure you put on *your* oxygen mask first, *then* you help others get their masks on. There's not a whole lot of help you can give if you're passed out or stopped breathing.

And this is not like the second half of the greatest commandment—to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have to love ourselves in order to be able to love our neighbor well. We have to be well ourselves in order to help the world be made well.

Yes. And. What if *we ourselves* are actually not that well, and yet the world still needs to be made well with our help? What if, as the world is crashing and burning around us (as it seems to be doing), *our own* circumstances and situation are less than ideal right now too? What if we are ourselves are suffering? What if we are the one who has been displaced, oppressed, marginalized, and harmed? What if we are the one living with the diagnosis that has completely upended our lives and future? What if we are the one who has found ourselves a caregiver without anyone asking us if we wanted to be? What if we are the one who can't find a job or lacks inspiration and purpose? What if we are the one who feel alienated at work, alone in our

own home, the odd one out in our friend group?

What if we are the one who has seemingly tried to do everything right, like we've really, really earnestly tried, and yet all has gone so very, very wrong? What if we are the one who is heartbroken about our child's decisions? Shattered after our partner's betrayal? Lost and disoriented after our loved one's death? What if we are the one who's been laid off? Who is living with anxiety or depression, or with an aging, aching body, or with a fading memory, with a condition for which there is no cure?

What if WE are the ones who look around at our lives right now and wonder—where the heck am I? And how did I get *here*?

I don't actually think there is any "what if" about any of that. We ARE the ones. You are the ones. I am the one. All of us, in some way, have circumstances in our lives right now that, by all intents and purposes, would have us be classified as 'unwell' or at least no 100%. And if you are here today operating at 100% just give it a day or two and *something* will happen.

Something always happens. There is always *something.*

How many of us can testify to the fact that at pretty much *all* times and seasons and ages and stages in our lives—even if the spring sun is shining and we have food on our tables and a roof over our head and clothes on our back and a church that shows up for us and a family who loves us—even still, with all the GOOD in our lives, there is just always some circumstance going on that is less than blissful, some situation-ship that is less than ideal, some reality that we are caught up in that we did not ask for and do not want?

This is life. We're in good company with all of humanity.

Lest we end this *"It is Well…"* series with all of us thinking that we should have achieved some enlightened state of wellness where ALL IS WELL ALL THE TIME, I'm here today just to remind us that it is not. All is not well in our lives. Wellness is not a goal we achieve, it's a state that we practice – over and over again. And sometimes, we're called to practice it and cultivate it in the most unideal, unforgiving, and unfair circumstances we can imagine.

And not only that, if we listen our text today, we are called to work on our OWN wellness in the midst of our challenging circumstances, *while at the same time* work for the wellbeing of the world, even, maybe, the welfare of the ones who might be causing the very pain or struggle we are in. *Lord, have mercy.* Or as Sis, my grandmother from Mississippi, would say, *"Well, ain't that a pity?"* It sure seems like a pity, or a pain, but maybe it's the plan that will make us all well, after all.

Maybe "wellness" as God intends it for us, is not always about putting on our own oxygen masks first before we start to help others get theirs on. Maybe it looks like using one hand to put on our own mask while using the other hand to put on someone else's mask at the same time. Or maybe, it's putting a mask on my neighbor while they—at the same time—are putting a mask on me. In other words, instead of concerning ourselves with whose mask is whose and thinking about wellness individual by individual, and we need to start thinking *communally* and realize for us all to survive we just need to get all the masks on everyone however it happens. And maybe NEXT time, we ensure before the plane even takes off that everyone already has a mask, that it's on and working even before the plane takes off. Communal care and preventative wellness for all versus reactionary treatment person by person. Imagine that?!

Take the people of God, for example. The people of Judah during the exile. The people to whom Jeremiah is writing. The prophet Jeremiah was writing in a time of political and social upheaval. It's a few years before 587 BCE. We're past the time of the judges and the twelve tribes. We're past the glory days of King David and King Solomon and the building of the Temple and a united monarchy. We're beyond the days of a split kingdom – the ten tribes in the North (Israel) and the two tribes in the South (Judah). Although that split still existed, the Assyrian empire, the huge dominating force in the region, had all but destroyed the Northern Kingdom. But finally now even their military control and dominance had ended.

The Southern Kingdom, Judah was being ruled as a vassal state of Egypt. As we discussed last

week, there was a brief period of hope under a new king during Jeremiah's time, but it was short lived because a new empire and occupying force rose into power: Babylon.

In 605 BCE the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, defeated the Egyptians and gained political power and control over Judah. Judah includes the city of Jerusalem, where the Temple is, and the Temple is believed to be the literally dwelling place of God, the divine, the center of community and spirituality and any sense of home or rootedness that the people have.

Through a number of different actions, Judah rebells, unsuccessfully, against the Babylonians. They were way out of their league, but I guess they wanted to give it the old college try. But it didn't work, it just made King Nebuchadnezzar even angrier.

So it's now seven years later, 598 BCE[1] and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon overruns Jerusalem and carries King Jehoiachin and many of the elite religious and political leaders into exile. This first wave of exiles is violent, people are taken out of their homes and physical harmed, and they're in a country where they've never been before to live under an oppressive power. One leader had to watch his two sons be executed in front of him, and they gouged his eyes out. It was horrific. And now, having suffered so much already, they were captives living in a foreign land. This first wave of exiles is sometimes called the first deportation. There is a second deportation, a second wave of exiles, who are taken to Egypt. Right before the second deportation, the Temple in Jerusalem is completely destroyed, this is 587-ish BCE.

"With this devastation, two diaspora groups were formed: the elite who were exiled to Babylon, and the poorer people who became refugees in places like Egypt. Jeremiah 29 is addressed to the first group [of exiles], those who suffered violent forced migration, and who had become cheap labor for

[1] Someone asked me last week about dates in the Old Testament, and I'm happy to remind us all that when we are reading Old Testament/Hebrew Bible history, the years progress forward by going backward (or getting smaller). BCE stands for Before the Common Era, CE, or as Christians might say, the Birth of Christ. Call that year 0. When we mark time before the Common Era begins, it feels a bit odd because the number is getting smaller, not bigger. But just think of it like time moving forward by counting backwards, or anticipating the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve by counting backwards like 10, 9, 8, 7, 6…

their overlords. But much of what [he writes] could apply to both diaspora groups."[2]

Okay, we're going to pause here a second and turn to Psalm 137. A heart-wrenching psalm of lament, anger, and revenge. I refrained from having us read the final verse because of its violent imagery, I figured we have enough of that right now in our world and didn't want to put yet another traumatic image in your head, but if you want you can turn to your Bible and read it.

Psalm 137 is one of the only psalms that scholars say we can date reliably without question.[3] The language is clear and contextual.

First, it is a communal psalm, written in the first person plural "we." This lament is the expression of what an entire group of people is going through, not the personal pain of one person.

Second, we are told they are by the rivers of Babylon, which means they are IN Babylon, not Judah.

Third, we are told they are weeping and remembering Zion. Weeping indicates pain and sadness, Zion is another name for Jerusalem, and indicates a longing for their homeland, their spiritual and religious center.

Fourth, we learn that they are hanging their harps on poplar trees, and that their captors are taunting them asking them to sing the songs they used to sing in Temple worship in Jerusalem. This is an indication that the psalm is probably written by one of the Levitical guilds (that is, a priestly group of people), because they were the ones responsible for music and singing in the Temple. And the Levitical line of priests were the ones that were really close to the monarchy and kings of Israel, so they would've been part of the "elite" group, and therefore the ones sent to Babylon in the first wave of exiles, NOT to Egypt with the poorer folks in the second wave. (I'll remind you that Jeremiah would soon be exile in Egypt, so that tells you a bit about the status of prophets versus priests!)

Back to Psalm 137. In verse 4 we have the final clue we need:

[2] Corrine Carvalho, "Commentary on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14," *Working Preacher* (November 24, 2013), accessed on May 5, 2024 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jeremiah-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-291-4-14-2.

[3] H.J. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. H.C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), pg 501.

"How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" These folks are grieving and lamenting and weeping somewhere far from home.

Verses 5-6 show us that while they are too grieved to sing or to worship, they refuse to forget what has happened to them or to be in denial about it. They speak of not forgetting Jerusalem, lest their right hand wither (remember, these are harp players, so the right hand is crucial for playing the harp and therefore, leading in worship). They speak of remembering Jerusalem as their highest joy, even if their tongue just clings to the roof of their mouth, not able to be let loose in song.

They are claiming the act of remembering as an act of resistance and hope. They know that as long as they *remember*, there is a hope they may return. As long as they can long to return, they might have the chance to. But the minute they forget from where they have come, well, that is the minute that they have resigned themselves to be captives forever.

And then, we get to the end of the psalm, verses 7-9. If lament and grief have turned to remembering, here, remembering turns to *revenge.* They call on God to remember the day of Jerusalem's fall, and how Babylon tore down not only their Temple to its foundations, but their very souls. They call out Babylon as their oppressor, their "Devastator" and wish revenge on them, payback. And in the verse we didn't read today, they essentially say that they hope their people are utterly wiped out, because to wish death upon their children is to name that they want them to have no chance at any future generations.

Psalm 137 is a very human response to the terrifying and traumatic experience of exile. *And*, this psalm gives us a model for how to pray when we are really in pain and pissed off. If you are suffering through a situation or circumstance right now that has turned your whole world upside down, it might be helpful for you to write your own version of Psalm 139. To name your grief and lament…the cause of your tears and sadness. To name what has been taken from you and what you refuse to forget about that because it is your hope that one day things might change, that some kind of healing or

restoration might be possible. And then to name what you really feel like doing to whatever or whoever caused your pain. Name your anger. Get it out. Don't censor yourself. Don't rationalize why you shouldn't be angry at whoever or whatever caused the situation you are in (even if it is yourself or even if you believe it to be God or the universe somehow). Don't feel the need to tie up your prayer in a pretty bow. Let it exist as its own expression of real, human experience and emotion held vulnerably before God.

And breathe.

And then, when you feel like you need to move to a different space, turn back to Jeremiah 29.

Because the key question that Jeremiah writes to the people of God in exile is about how they should respond to their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. How they should deal with this situation. Jeremiah is sending this letter from Jerusalem, which means something of the city is still standing and he has not yet been carted off to Egypt. He is still in his 'homeland' so to speak, writing to those who are not still there. And it's almost as if Jeremiah can hear Psalm 137 being sung from across the river and the desert and knows that while his people are grieving and angry and despairing, they also needed a wake-up call. They need words of hope, not false words of comfort. He tells them, "Look, you are going to be there a long, long time. Get used to it. Become comfortable in the uncomfortable. This is going to be a long wait, so don't wait for it to be over, figure out how to be in it. It is your new normal. Live in the present, not in the past or future.

Jeremiah counsels the people to buy houses and adapt to life in this foreign land. In the last place that these people would ever want to call home Jeremiah says, "Start making yourself at home. Because this is it. Don't just find food for survival, but plant gardens to create sustainable food sources that will flourish and provide for you for many years. Build houses not just as structures to protect you from the elements. But LIVE in them. Meaning, make these houses into homes. Make them yours. Decorate them, personalize them. Create families within them. Go ahead and get married, have children, raise those children, then marry them off so they can have

children. Do not stop creating life just because it feels like your life is over. It is not. It is *here.*"

This message is made even more urgent because, as we read in the chapter before this one (Jeremiah 28), the people had just heard from a false prophet, Hananiah. Hananiah had just announced to these same people that the exile would last only a short time, after which the Lord would "break the yoke Babylon had put on the Judeans." Short time like say 2 years. Not the 70 years that Jeremiah said was more likely, but 2 years! This is like when I'm getting ready in the bathroom and Damon asks me how long until I'm ready and I say "2 minutes" when the reality is it's probably more like "20 minutes"…but I just tell him what he wants to hear, and really, what I wish were true…I wish I'd be ready in 2 minutes, but it's just probably not gonna happen right?

Well, this is like what Hananiah was doing. He was telling the people what they *wanted* to hear, but not what was true. He's like the popular politician who tells the people what they want to hear (or what they THINK they want to hear) to get votes, but has no substance to back it up and no plan to make it happen. We can relate to Hananiah. We all wish there easy answers to the hard stuff in our lives. But easy answers, when they are proven untrue, are just cruel. Platitudes cause more pain. Because they prevent people from having the information they need to deal realistically and well with the situation at hand.

Unlike Hananiah's platitude of "it'll all be okay in 2 years so just hang tight," Jeremiah proclaims the unpopular message that the exile would last a long time. Like 70 years long. So the hope Jeremiah gives is not "hang tight" but "make yourselves at home."

Jeremiah counsels the exiles to create a new normal where they are. To try to thrive, not just survive. This is hard for us to imagine in a world where we see people exiled every day on the news. Are we just supposed to say, it's okay? "Everything happens for a reason," so if you're being oppressed, just buck up and deal with it? That's just the hand you've been dealt?

No, of course not. And that is not what Jeremiah is saying. Jeremiah IS working with a worldview that God knows the

fuller picture. Jeremiah is working with the reality that he's in Jerusalem and he's witnessing what Babylon is capable of and he's just speaking the truth…this behemoth is not going away quickly or easily. Jeremiah does know the mentality of the people who are just so sad and grieving that he knows if he doesn't say something they'll end up just dying by the rivers of Babylon, with no descendants to speak of, no one to ever return to Jerusalem, no one left alive who knows the songs of their faith to teach to the next generation.

So what Jeremiah is doing is saying, "It's not fair that you are in exile, but you are. This IS happening. You cannot control when you leave exile or when this hell ends, but what you can control is how you endure in the meantime. You can just survive, counting the days for something to change, or you can take charge of your own thriving, and start doing what you CAN instead of focusing on what you CAN'T."

And then, to shock them out of their own myopic misery about the "woe is me" of their situation, after telling them what they can do for their own wellbeing he says, oh and one other thing: *"Seek the welfare of the city where you are, pray to the Lord on its behalf, and remember, in its welfare you will find your welfare."*

It's almost as if Jeremiah's words then, and now, are a reminder that maybe the balm that we need for our own pain and suffering, is to realize that our wellness can come at the same time as other people's wellness. That it is not always sequential; it's not always "I get well first, then help you get well," but "maybe the path to my wellness is actually focusing on the wellness of the whole, the collective, because when a whole system or city is well, then what follows is that the people WITHIN that system or city are well too. If you just focus on individuals it'll always be a game of running around trying to put wellness bandaids on people, quick fixes. But if you focus on the whole system being well, then that catches everyone and no one is excluded.

There is really something complicated, yet compelling, that Jeremiah is saying here: that even in the places we never want to be, we have opportunities to both accept our

circumstances, while also working for the wellness of all, rather than just for the wellness of self. And that maybe our own healing, our own liberation, will only come when the 'other' is well too.

Think about it. Babylon is not going to stop being Babylon as long as it keeps functioning as it is. But if the people of faith, the people of God, who are in exile there, starting sharing and expressing God's love to them and with them and working for their wholeness and thriving, then maybe just maybe, they themselves will be healed and begin to change and maybe they'll stop inflicting pain on others.

If the people of Judah who are in Babylon just double down and keep themselves separate from those in the cities of their captivity, they just continue a divide, and 'us versus them' mentally. But if they seek the welfare of the city in which they are in, the welfare of the people who, by the way, may or may not be in agreement or in alliance with how their leaders are acting (just think about the everyday people of Russia who are horrified at what Putin is doing in Ukraine; or the faithful Jews in Israel who are deeply grieved about the actions of the IDF, or the people of Palestine who are enraged at the actions of Hamas).

When the system and the world is made well, we too are made well—along with, everyone else! When the city in which the exiles find themselves is well, the exiles will be well. When we can, even in our own difficult circumstances, work for the welfare of others, healing may come to us in ways surprising and unexpected.

Perhaps this is a good time to tell you that the word 'welfare' in verse 7 is the Hebrew word, *shalom.*

Rabbi David Zaslow writes, "Contrary to popular opinion the Hebrew word shalom does not mean "peace," at least not in the English sense of the word. It comes from a Hebrew root-word that means "wholeness." And what is wholeness? In the Hebraic way of thinking, wholeness is the joining together of opposites. That's why we say "shalom" when we greet friends *and* when we are wish them farewell. In the most opposite of situations (coming and going) we use the same word, "shalom." There is a hidden connection to all our

comings and goings; they are wondrously linked together. When I come from somewhere, I am going to someplace else. When I realize this, I feel "wholeness," and that is the source of peace – the knowledge that all my opposing energies are somehow linked and part of a single whole. True peace must have wholeness as its foundation."[4] And wholeness always includes everybody.

He continues with this example, "If I am a political left-winger I am only flying with one wing. If I am a political right-winger I am only flying with one wing; yet it takes two wings for an eagle to fly. It takes the integration of two opposing positions for there to be real "shalom." The word dialogue comes from the Greek "dia + logos" meaning "across words," or "across reason," or "speech that goes back and forth." It's easy to have a left wing or a right wing "peace rally" with people who already agree with us. But this is not the wholeness that is implied in the word "shalom" [or talked about in scripture. It's often mentioned in deep areas of tension between groups that are enemies or in opposition to each other.]"[5]

"In the Hebraic view, *shalom* brings the binary mind together, integrating the left brain modality of thinking (linear) and the right brain modality (creative and intuitive). When I say hello to someone I say "shalom." When I say goodbye to someone I say "shalom." What is more opposite than coming and going? Hello and goodbye?" [6]

"Shalom is the most radical union of opposites imaginable...[Shalome happens when we] recognize that the "other" is none "other" than a reflection of our own selves, [and the very image of God]."[7]

Or, as Professor at Candler School of Theology, Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio, states, "Often translated "peace," the biblical word shalom entails far more than just the absence of war and conflict. Shalom describes God's grand and beautiful dream for a world in which wholeness and healing are cultivated at the level of just societies and flourishing

[4] Rabbi David Zaslow, "The Deeper Meaning of Shalom," *RabbiDavidZaslow.com* (January 2024), accessed on May 5, 2024 at https://rabbidavidzaslow.com/the-deeper-meaning-of-shalom/.

[5] Zaslow, ibid.
[6] Zaslow, ibid.
[7] Zaslow, ibid.

communities." In terms of communities, he speaks of the circles of social wellness, economic wellness, spiritual wellness, political wellness, and ecological wellness all being equally aligned and tended to in order to create shalom.

For example, if someone is seeking shalom such statements would be true for them:

- poverty is as deeply a spiritual matter as is prayer
- standing for social justice is as much an expression of piety as is taking communion
- global warming matters as much to God as the decline of the institutional church."[8]

Do you see how such statements, bringing together personal or spiritual concerns of wellness with the societal and systemic and global ones?

Anna Howard furthers this thought: "Shalom banishes the idea that just not causing intentional harm is somehow enough to live our lives on. The truth is far more complex anyway. We live in a broken world full of broken systems that are actively causing harm and thereby implicating each of us in that harm. Shalom calls each of us to look to the total well-being of others as if it were our own. And while total shalom is not achievable in our lifetime, like the great trees of the forest, we must do our work in our part of the cycle and do it so that even our death provides life to the community to continue the work towards what will one day be God's shalom kingdom."[9]

In your own life situations that feel like exile, or in the circumstances where there seems to be more suffering than hope, what does it look like to authentically engage in a Psalm 137 practice, not denying your pain but bringing your pain fully before God (and yourself), and then what does it look like to move toward an acceptance of your circumstances – not as right or just or okay – but a place where drinking from the deep well of acceptance might be a spiritual practice of healing? Instead of trying to wish your circumstance or suffering away, what does it look like to live more deeply into it? And to notice how in

[8] Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio, "Seeking Shalom: Session 1," *Seeking Shalom: Justice, Community, and the Church's Mission* (August 17, 2022), accessed on May 5, 2024 at https://prezi.com/sgzkbyaarijy/seeking-shalom-session-1/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy.

[9] Anna Howard, "Seeking Shalom: Moving From Entropy To Equity," *Earth and Alter Magazine* (April 2022), accessed on May 5, 2024 at https://earthandaltarmag.com/posts/ujah647erwirmcyoqkfenhlmzxqg4s.

living more deeply in community, you can't help but seek shalom for ALL?

We cannot experience healing or peace within ourselves while living or making our homes within sick systems or unhealthy places. So even as we root down in the circumstances we cannot control, we also work to change what we can, and trust that God is at work in it all as well.

We do not create the perfectness or completeness of shalom, God does. But we do practice it. We practice helping others, loving others, ensuring others have the same rights and opportunities that we do. We forgove others. We seek the healing of others. We root down where we are not because "all is well," but because to *be well*, we need to acknowledge the full reality of where we are. Denial does not save or heal. And when we root into where we are, we'll automatically want to make *where* we are well too.

Seek Shalom for the sake of a world made well. And, for our own sakes too. (We are part of the world, after all.)

Amen.