Book 9

Sunday September 7, 1980

"LIVING IN THE MEANTIME" Jeremiah 29:4-13

Most of us spend a lot of time in our lives waiting for something. When we're very young, we can hardly wait to become a teenager. When we're a teenager, wait eagerly for the time when we will be 19, 20, or 21, legally of age, so we can vote and buy a drink.

No matter what our age, we do a lot of waiting. Conditions are never just right to suit us. If we're un-married we wait for marriage and many who are married wait for divorce or hope to find the key that will make their marriage more satisfactory. We wait for the time when we will have children. Then we wait for the time when they will be more grown up so that we can enjoy them. We wait for a promotion or raise in pay in our job and wonder if it will ever come. We wait for the time when we can afford some of the things we've always wanted to have. And we wait for the time when we can retire and do all those things we've always wanted to do.

Some waiting is done under stress. If we've been ill, we wait anxiously for the time when we will be well again. If a loved one has died, we wait for the time when our grief will begin to subside and we can return to our usual pattern of living. If a divorce is imminent, we wait for the time when all the details will be settled and the healing of our hurts can be complete. Or if the outcome of a marriage break is uncertain, as to whether it will be separation, divorce, or reconciliation, the waiting in the meantime can be the most difficult.

An individual who loses his or her job often finds it difficult to live in the meantime.

If we're in trouble, people tell us, "You will get better; but we ask, what do we do in the meantime?

There are also those who fear the future and any waiting is done with apprehension. Such people often prefer to live in the past and try to avoid both the present and the future. Others hate the past, avoid the present and look forward only to the future.

In fact, some of our Christian brothers and sisters live not much in the present, but wait only for the end of this world when Christ will come again and take them to their reward.

Everywhere people ask, "How can I live in the present when my heart is somewhere else? How can I make it when my dreams have no prospect of coming true? How can I work when my hope is so distant from its consummation? How can I grow in this captivity of mine?"

The questions put another way, come down to this: "How can I live in the meantimes of ~~time~~ life?" What do I do now, this day and the next and the next?

It's not a new question. The prophet Jeremiah was dealing with these very questions in the Old Testament passage read earlier.

Jeremiah was speaking to his own people who were having difficulty living in the meantime. They had been deported from their own country to exile in Babylon. Their main hope was to someday return to their homeland and there were some false prophets who had been fueling their hopes with the idea that they would return to their homeland soon.

Jeremiah knew this wasn't true. They would be able to return someday, of this he was sure, but it wouldn't be in the near future. They therefore faced the question of what to do in the meantime. He gave them some astonishing advice: "Don't act like transients. Don't just camp out! Settle down. Build houses, plant gardens, plan marriages for your children; expand your families, and above all pray to the Lord for the welfare of Babylon, for your welfare will depend on her welfare."

In other words, while you are waiting, in the meantime, in the present, there are a lot of positive things you can do.

Now it is obvious to anyone that every prisoner of war in every prisoner-of-war camp dreams of release and returning home and little else. The idea of settling down where you are a prisoner and thinking of your future there, to say nothing of praying for the welfare of your captors, is a stunning notion. And not just praying for the individual soul of the local officer in charge--no, the word in Jeremiah means to pray for the well-being, the prosperity, the peace of Babylon, rather than her downfall.

Think of it! The Hebrews in captivity, according to Jeremiah are to build, to plant and to pray! Jeremiah did not tell his countrymen to give up all hope of ever returning to their homeland, in fact he promised them that one day they would return--but he stressed that in the meantime they were to go about their normal business of living. And most important of all, he assured them that as they went about building, planting and praying, God would be with them as much in Babylon as in their own homeland. God is not a God of place or nation. God's love and care are not tied down to any one location.

What do these words of Jeremiah have to say to us about living in the meantimes of our own lives?

1. First, our faith reminds us that the meantimes of life cannot be avoided. We all live in periods of waiting and hoping. We live in the present, but our main hope may be in the future. But, as we'll see later, these meantimes in life can be as important as the future. They can be times for building, planting and praying so that the future when it comes is even better than we had hoped.

2. Secondly Jeremiah reminded his countrymen and he reminds us that the meantimes of life often may be longer than we expected. Beware of false prophets who bring false hope. If we are led to believe that the time of waiting is going to be over very quickly, we do not think we have time to build, to plant and to pray, rather we sit and wait and do nothing.

3. Thirdly, Jeremiah told his countrymen and he tells us that the meantimes of life can be used for gaining new strength and direction--build, plant and pray.

The clue to redeeming the meantimes is therefore in taking hold where we are--doing the things that are required. If you want your life to have purpose and joy, it does not help to wallow in the thought of what might have been; rather we are to build on what is needed and possible where we are, here and now.

In other words, living the meantime as Christians, as God's people, means carrying on with our normal responsibilities, doing the work that needs to be done and doing

it faithfully and as best as possible. God's healing most often occurs as we faithfully do the prosaic, the routine, the mundane. God's healing comes to us as we are carrying out our responsibilites in faithfulness.

Living in the meantime as Christians means taking hold now, not making excuses, not rationalizing our failures, not requiring others to carry our burdens, not yielding to defeat or despair. It means to honor our covenants, to care for what has been entrusted to us and to be confident that God's grace can be known by us wherever we are.

The people of Israel in captivity had to learn that God's grace and love had not left them. God's grace is not dependent on our being in any particular place, or in any special set of circumstances. God is with us in the meantimes of life as well as in the past and in the future.

In all of his counsel to the Hebrews in captivity, Jeremiah was reminding them as he is reminding us that the present time, no matter what our circumstances, is as important and God-filled as the past or the future.

Use the present! Don't confine yourself to the past or the future. Will Rogers used to say, "Never let yesterday use up too much of today." We could add, "Never let tomorrow use up too much of today."

Although we have no control over the quantity of life still at our disposal, we do have considerable control over the quality of life at our disposal. The solution to living in the meantime is according to Jeremiah, to stop wasting the already precious moments griping about the passage of time, or griping because the future doesn't come soon enough.

In other words, don't wait for gifts tomorrow, recognize them today since they are all about us. Many times in waiting so anxiously for the gift to come in the future, we miss the gifts that are with us in the present.

I like the card that says, "I shall pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

4. Above all, Jeremiah was telling the Hebrews, and he's telling us that mere endurance in the meantime is not enough. To be sure, the quality of endurance can be a noble virtue. But itself, however, merely to say of the various crises we all face from time to time and the meantimes that go with them, "I will manage somehow stoically to live through it," is not enough, for as the months and years wear on it easily turns into dull, stolid, and then weary, self-pitying living.

Rather Jeremiah told his people, do more than merely live through your captivity, your meantime--build, plant, pray. Use the meantime to strengthen yourself, to strengthen your community and to strengthen your faith. Some of the most important lessons humanity has ever learned were learned in tragic times, in captivity. Thus the question confronts each one of us: Are we using the meantimes of life to build, to plant and to pray? Or are we letting the meantimes make us the more bitter-spirited, more prejudiced and more vindictive?

If we make good use of the meantime by building, planting and praying, God makes us an astonishing promise, according to Jeremiah. Listen to these words: You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

When we are faith-ful in the meantimes of life, the future takes care of itself. Amen.