

I want to take a few moments and offer some thoughts from the Scriptures about what you've heard this morning from our elders regarding our vision (cpc.org/vision). What makes our vision so compelling is the **why**? The **why** isn't just that we live in a post-Christian nation, but we live in an area that's arguably more like that than any other in this country. This area is defined by the idea of building a kingdom apart from a true King.

For example, our local tech moguls are trying to solve the problem of mortality. Startups are trying to prolong life, indefinitely, if possible. Larry Ellison told his biographer, "Death has never made any sense to me." So he's poured more than \$430 million into research on how to do away with death.

Our tech companies seem to believe they can perfect the world. Just listen to their goals: Facebook wants, "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." Microsoft wants to, "empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more."

There's a strong current of faith in this area, but not in God. In fact, the Bay Area is among the least religious regions of the US with only 42% of adults saying they believe in God with any certainty, and only about 3% to 5% attending church. Traditional religion in the Bay Area is being replaced with faith in the power of technology and science. It's a creed that says poverty, disease, and racism is solvable without God. Again, it's a kingdom without a King.

So what does it mean for us to be followers of Jesus in this culture? What does it mean for us as a church to be God's people in this place? Do we do what we've always done, or do we somehow need to adapt to this new reality around us?

Historically, churches have taken one of three approaches to living in a post-Christian culture. One approach is to **fight** against it. It's the mindset of this area being evil and the church being good. So we fight. It's the us versus them idea. Another option isn't to fight but to **flee**. Since we're surrounded with so much evil, we create our little Christian ghetto and insulate ourselves from the evil around us. It's the classic escapist mentality.

Finally, a third option is to just kind of **assimilate**. Instead of fighting the culture or fleeing from it, we become like the culture. There are a lot of churches that think if they can just sort of blend in, they'll eventually be able to have an impact. But most often they end up looking so much like the culture; they quit seeking to

change it. Notice in the first two approaches, we don't change at all, but in the third approach, we may change too much.

Today I want to propose another way. It comes from a chapter out of the history of Israel. Their situation was much like ours. The people of Israel, after years of God warning them through the prophets, were taken into exile by the Babylonians. The Babylonians had an interesting policy with nations they conquered. They'd bring all the so-called significant people back to Babylon and leave those who were poor and uneducated. The idea was in bringing them to Babylon they'd eventually assimilate into Babylonian culture, and so they'd no longer pose a threat.

The prophet Jeremiah was one of those left in Jerusalem. But God was still speaking through Jeremiah, and God instructed him to write a letter to the Jewish exiles living 1,200 miles away in Babylon. In this letter, he tells them how to live as exiles. He tells them how to be God's people in a foreign land.

As we'll see, there were some things that would stay the same—they had the same God and the same Torah; but there were also some things, which needed to change—they were in a foreign land; they weren't citizens; they were exiles surrounded by people who spoke a different language, had different customs, and worshipped different gods.

And, really, this is our situation today. In fact, several times in the New Testament we're called exiles (1 Peter 1:1). This is really not our home. In one of Paul's letters, he said, "**Our citizenship is in heaven**" (Phil. 3:20). So how do we live in this place that's **not** our home? How do we live in this place that isn't the same as when we started out 50 years ago? Do we fight? Do we flee? Do we just blend in? For sure, some things will always stay the same, but some things will need to change.

In this letter to the exiles, God says through Jeremiah several things to help us answer these questions.

Settle Down and Stay Awhile

The first thing he says is found in Jeremiah 29:4–6.

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.

What he says here is settle down and stay awhile. Unpack your suitcases because you'll be a long time. You don't take the time to build houses, plant gardens, and invest in long-term relationships like marriage if you're going to be gone soon.

In the same way, as followers of Jesus, we're exiles here. We don't really belong here; this isn't our home. But that doesn't mean we don't settle down and make a life here.

It's interesting there were other prophets unlike Jeremiah who did get carried off to Babylon, but many of them were false prophets. And they were saying the exact opposite—things like, they shouldn't settle down because any day God would defeat the Babylonians, and they'd all get to return home to Jerusalem. Down in verses 8–9 God says, *“Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you... They're prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them.”* There'll always be people who offer a feel-good message; a quick fix, an easy escape from reality.

Notice how God addresses this letter to *“all those I carried into exile”* (verse 4). God says, “You're here because I brought you here.” Some of you are here in the Bay Area, and you don't really want to be here. Maybe you came here because of a job, and this is the last place you want to be. But what if God brought you here? What if he wants you to make a difference here?

Seek the Welfare of the City

You see, not only are we to settle down and stay awhile, but we're to seek the welfare of this place. Look at verse 7.

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.”

That's quite different from fighting this culture or even fleeing from it. Instead, we're to do what we can to build it up and bless it. When God says to seek the peace and prosperity of this place he uses the word *shalom*. Seek its *shalom*—that's talking about the flourishing of a place. Do everything you can to help this place flourish economically, socially, and spiritually.

If that isn't enough, pray for it. Those exiles knew all about praying. In Psalm 122 they were taught to *“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.”* That made sense to them. They loved Jerusalem. But now they're told to pray for the peace of Babylon, and that didn't make sense at all. They didn't love Babylon! But do you see what God is doing? God is calling them to love Babylon and the people in it. You can't pray for people unless you care about them, love them, and want God's best for them.

As you've heard, a big part of this new vision has to do with transforming the culture around us. We love this place. We want this place to flourish. We want it to continue to thrive economically. We want it to be a place where not just the wealthy can live, but where all can live. We want it to be a place of beautiful diversity. We want it to be a place with great schools, great parks,

great art, and a great baseball team. We'll not be a church that's against this place. We'll not be a church that flees this place. We'll be a church that seeks the welfare of this place and prays for it.

Trust in God's Promise

But that doesn't mean we assimilate and just blend in, either. So in the latter half of this letter, God addresses what our relationship with Him ought to look like, and the first thing we need to do is trust in God's promise.

You see, for the Jews living in Babylon, the question still remained—what does our future look like? Imagine being a Jew living in Babylon. Will we ever see the Promised Land again? Will we ever worship in Jerusalem's temple? Look what God says about that.

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good 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. (verse 10–11)

These words are the John 3:16 of American cultural Christianity. They show up on plaques sold at Cracker-Barrel, Facebook walls, and even tattoos. Many understand these verses to say everything will turn out good for me. If I just follow my heart, God will bless me. But that's not the prophet Jeremiah; that's Deepak Chopra.

The truth is this isn't a promise made primarily to individuals but to the nation Israel. And this promise isn't primarily about a wonderful future just around the corner of your life, but for 70 years from now.

In some ways, this would be both discouraging and encouraging for the exiles. It would be discouraging because nothing would change for 70 years. So if you were anywhere over ten years old, you're not going home. You'll spend the rest of your life in exile. There's hope for your children or maybe your grandchildren to get back home, but you'll never get back.

However, there is also a wonderful promise here. God said, “I have great plans for you. You have a bright future; you have something to hope in and look forward to. My intention isn't to harm you but to prosper you.” Although for most of the people who heard this it didn't mean they were going home, it did mean they could live in hope. God is at work, even in exile. God has a plan for his people, and it's good. Though the present is hard, his plan is to prosper them and not to harm them. To really appreciate this promise the people in exile had to take the long view.

God has a long view plan for us, in Christ. That plan isn't for our destruction but our well-being, and it won't be totally fulfilled until we arrive at our final home in heaven. Meanwhile, we're being conformed into the image of Christ as we live in exile.

It's important we as a church take the long view. CPC is 51 years old. We've enjoyed lots of success. We've grown. We've built

buildings. We've planted a church on the North Peninsula. We've sent teams and supported Mission Partners all over the world. But what will CPC look like 50 years from now? I believe God has great plans for this church. Most of us here won't get to see it. But what we do now will lay the groundwork for what we'll become. Some things I hope will never change—our Mission, Core Values, and commitment to teaching God's Word. But some things must change. Our strategies must change.

Here's an illustration: Beginning in May 1804, Lewis and Clark set off with the Corps of Discovery to find a Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean. After months of paddling canoes up the Missouri River, they finally came to the headwaters. As they looked over a nearby bluff, they expected to see the Columbia River flowing down to the Pacific. But instead, they looked up at the daunting beauty of the Rocky Mountains. Up until that point, they traveled on water by canoe. But those skills wouldn't be much use moving forward. To continue in their quest, they'd need different skills for the terrain ahead.

In many ways, this is where we are today as a church. We can't just preach more, sing louder and start more groups. The landscape has changed. We can either mourn the changing times, or we can adapt and learn new ways of being Christ's church. That's what our new vision is all about. So what if a year from now our worship services, our small groups, or the expectations we had to look different? Will we adapt or will we insist we can canoe on dry land through mountain passes?

Again, we're not throwing out what we believe, our Mission and Core values. But how we express those things and our strategies will need to change—much like Lewis and Clark had to put down their canoes and learn to climb mountains. If we as a church are going to be an agent for God's redemptive work in the Bay Area, we're going to have to open ourselves up to change.

Seek the Lord With All Your Heart

But there's one more thing I want you to see here about our relationship with God, and this is crucial. The people of Israel, who were living in exile, were called to continue to seek the Lord with all their hearts. Look how this letter ends.

Then you will call on 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.
(verses 12–13)

You see, before we can transform this place, we have to be transformed. We have to seek the Lord with all our hearts—right here in Babylon. We have to resist the lure of false gods around us—money, power, sex, beauty, and fame.

Do you know who was a great example of that? It was a young man named Daniel. Daniel was an exiled Jew who grew up in Babylon, and he even worked for the King, but Daniel had a white-hot faith, and he brought change. He didn't fight. He didn't flee. He didn't assimilate. But he did adapt, and he made a huge difference.

That's why we need a spiritual formation strategy to lead each of us on a pathway toward being Daniel-like men and women. That's why we need to be more deeply rooted in public and private spiritual practices like prayer, the study and practice of God's word, connectedness to a small group, regular vitalized corporate worship, and being equipped to use our gifts.

Only when we're transformed into people with a white-hot faith will we be able to spark transformation in our culture. Only when that happens will more and more people know the good life is a vibrant, personal relationship with Jesus resulting in love, generosity, service, and a true sense of belonging and contentment.

So what we are doing as elders is asking you join us in fulfilling this new vision. Join us in a spiritual formation process, which will transform us so we can thoughtfully and graciously engage with our culture, and contribute to its flourishing. Settle down here and stay awhile. Seek the welfare of this place. Pray for it. Take the long view and trust God has a bright future for you and your children. And most of all, don't cave into our culture, but seek the Lord with all your hearts!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No.1439-1

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, August 26, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church.

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