

## **Blooming in the Desert** **Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14**

The people of Israel are in the desert. Not physically in the desert. Physically they were in Babylon. History records that Babylon was a city of gardens, one of the most beautiful in the ancient world. It was located in modern day Iraq, about 50 miles south of Baghdad, and when we think of that place, the images we have seen throughout the long war there, we see dust and desert. But 2500 years ago it was a garden spot, the kingdom of the Chaldeans and then Persians. Nebuchadnezzar's "hanging gardens" are remembered to history as one of the ancient wonders of the world. But there, in that garden spot, the people of God found themselves in an emotional, psychological, spiritual, and cultural desert.

Their nation was defeated in battle, and the leaders and upper echelon of society were dragged off to live as second class citizens in the foreign land of Babylon. They left their homes, lovingly built and handed from generation to generation; they left their land, cultivated and tended by one generation after another; they left their temple, the cultural and religious center of their national life. They left everything they had known, taken to a foreign land. They had to adopt a new culture, a new language, new clothes and new customs; they could practice their religion sometimes, but only with restrictions. They were displaced; refugees, captives, in a vast desert. The Psalmist record their agony in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*

*<sup>2</sup>On the willows there we hung up our harps.*

*<sup>3</sup>For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*<sup>4</sup>How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*

They were in the desert, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The desert is a metaphor, and if you can picture yourself standing in a desert you can evoke the feelings of that place. Last Spring, Caitlin and I went on a week-long "get away before the baby is born" trip to Tucson, Arizona. In the heart of the southwest desert. The sun was bright and it was warm --- but it was desolate. In Phoenix, they have planted trees and gardens and you can easily forget that you are in a dry and desolate place. But in Tucson, it is much more natural. The first day we were excited to get out into the sunshine, and we went on a hike into a canyon. We planned for it to be more of a walk – we brought no food, only one bottle of water. About two miles and still climbing into the canyon, we realized this is a hike!

Hiking there in that canyon, and then later driving across the open desert, brings a profound sense of being isolated and dislocated. In a canyon, you are in a sense trapped; you can see nothing to either side, very little ahead and very little behind. There is little beauty; there is not much sustenance. A canyon feels like a place to travel through, to hike and out; not to settle down. Out in the open desert, it was more a sense of isolation and dislocation. It was flat in every direction until the ground rose up to mountains in the distance; but you had no idea how far away mountain that was; it was always farther than you thought, and the landscape was the same. Dry, dusty earth and hot sun; no water, no shade.

You had no idea where you were, no sense of direction. There is the sun, but which way is it going; only time will tell – in the moment, every direction looks the same.

The emotional, psychological, and spiritual desert shares some of these features. It feels like a place where you are trapped. There is little if any beauty there. It is a place to go and go out; to travel through, not a place to stay. It seems that there is very little to live on, and if you stay too long you might wither away. It's hard to get your bearings in the desert; you can't tell how far away the horizon is, it all looks the same. And if someone asks you, which way is out – which way back home, you would be hard pressed to say.

We find ourselves in these deserts for all sorts of reasons, some that have nothing to do with us and some that everything to do with us. Sometimes it is sheer tragedy, with no rhyme or reason, no fault or blame, it simply is. A dreaded diagnosis that will cut life short in its prime; a devastating storm that takes away what you've built over a lifetime; an accident that in a moment changes everything. Suddenly, like being transported in a Star Trek beam, you are in the desert. Sometimes our deserts involve others: the abuse of a parent, the betrayal of a spouse, can lead us into a vast wilderness. Sometimes our deserts are simply our own making, and often these are the hardest to bear. It is not just an accident, and there is no one else to blame – it is our stuff. We entered the desert through our own uncontrollable desires, through our compulsions, through our anger or bitterness, our greed, our inability to be present in the moment; our wasted years. It is a desert of our own making.

Whatever the reasons for the desert, the great temptation is to try to get out. To get out as fast you can; to head back for a sweeter spot, when all is well. To go back or forward or sideways; any way to avoid being in this desert. That is the great temptation that God addresses in this letter to his people in Jeremiah. The Lord says, "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams they encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup>They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord". "Do not listen to the dreams they encourage you to have." These are the folks telling you what you want to hear. These are what we call, "enablers." They are the ones that tell us – just move on, it'll get better soon, everything will be alright, don't worry, I'm sure it will all work out, it's not you it's them -- I could go on. There are thousand ways that people give us easy answers, or tell us what we want to hear. When you're in the desert, says the Lord, do not listen to those who give easy answers. Do not listen to those who simply tell you what you want to hear. "I did not send them," says the Lord.

Instead, God instructs his people to, in effect, "bloom in the desert." "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce." Do not plan to get out any time soon; build houses and plant gardens! "Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease." Do not huddle in a corner waiting to be rescued; marry your children and have grandchildren! "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Do not fight against this place, but seek to be a blessing in it! **Bloom in the desert.**

To put this another way, accept where you are and that you are there, and live into it. As long as we fight against the desert, as long as we look for an easy way out, we cannot learn what need to learn there; God cannot do with us what God can do in the desert. So much energy is wasted fighting against being in the desert, trying to find shortcuts out of the desert. There are times in the desert when you think, I can't take it anymore, I've got to get out; this has to end. But God is doing soul-work in the desert; God makes and remakes hearts in the desert; God heals wounds in the desert; God brings clarity in the desert; God grows us in the desert; God does the work that only God can do in the desert.

And it takes time; it often takes a long time. There are no shortcuts to changing the heart, no easy way to grow the soul. If you know your own heart, you know it can take years to change. That's the why God's instructions are to bloom there, to settle there, to accept being there. The sooner we stop fighting against the desert, the sooner surrender all our efforts to find a short-cut, the sooner God can begin to work in us and on us. Soul-work happens when we are at our wits end, when we give up our struggle for an easy way out and let God do God's work in God's time. The sooner we stop fighting, the sooner we will find his peace and his healing. Once we stop fighting, we will begin to bloom and grow, and we will one day we will say my life was forever changed, and forever the better, because I spent time in that desert. Because I went there, and allowed myself to be there, God healed me there.

When God tells us in this letter, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future," this is what it means. The desert is not a destination, but a place to be for healing and growth, on the way to future God has for you. The desert is not for our destruction but for our healing; the work of God does not move toward despair, but toward hope.

The longest desert experience of my life began when I moved to California – I moved into the desert literally, and then discovered I was in the desert personally. And I stayed in that desert for at least eight years, fought against it for at least two, and tried to live into it for six. I finally came out of it, and I know now that God was doing soul work, heart changing work on me there. I began to bloom there, once I quit struggling and let God's grace reach me there.

When we were in Tucson, I was amazed at the blooming desert. It was dry and dusty, and mostly lifeless. But in the cracks and crevices of the hard ground, there was life. Plants were blooming in rich colors of red and purple and yellow; a blooming desert. That is a metaphor of God's grace – God's work in the desert. And it is an image of what God will do with us in the desert, too, if we let go and let his grace reach us there.