

God In THIS City

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[0 : 00] So, about 10 years ago, I began a journey that would absolutely change my life.

At the time, as some of y'all know, I was a teacher, literature and writing out in McLean. I liked my work. It was deeply satisfying, even as it was not easy.

Some of y'all who teach, can I get an amen? Satisfying, but not easy. I was in this comfortable routine. It was a place where, you know, you've gotten out of that first phase of being a novice. That phase where you're like making a lot of mistakes and you're moving into that place where you can kind of own your profession. It's starting to feel like there's plenty of room and time to grow. So, I was about to start dating a certain girl named Bukola, who would turn out to be wonderful. And things in my life were pretty good.

[1 : 03] And yet, in the beauty of that unfolding life, one day I had this sense of deep interruption. It was a quiet kind of interruption.

It was a kind of whisper. But it settled deep within me and it never quite left. Now, it's probably not surprising that for somebody like me, this interruption came in the form of a poem.

And that poem was by T.S. Eliot. And the lines awakened in me a sense that I was called again. And it was something that I had buried deep within.

Thank you. A lot of y'all know my story. I did not think that a black queer woman could preach. I had buried all that. They didn't lead churches. And you can go through this.

The categories of people that we were taught were left out and excluded. Some of those people might look like you all or be like you all. And yet, I was interrupted by God.

[2 : 16] But it was what came after that interruption that was really completely disruptive. And this opened up this kind of spiritual feast for me. I started to slowly consider what it might be like to attend seminary.

I was about to say cemetery. It's a joke. It's a joke. Seminary. Seminary. It's a joke. Sorry. People in seminary say.

And I wondered how I could know this was real. So I started talking to other pastors and leaders and mentors about what I should do to figure out the sense of call. And somebody told me, Tonetta, you should join a church plant team to get a sense of your gifts as a leader, to get a sense of how the sausage is made and whether you can kind of deal with that.

And that's how I found out about this church called Converge DC that I ironically met right here in this building 10 years ago. And I started volunteering for their team.

I learned a bunch of stuff. I learned how worship can invite hospitality or celebrity. I learned how to interact in a small group of people who are interested in, at the time, emerging church ideas.

[3 : 35] We don't really use that term anymore, but I learned a lot of things. And I did ultimately decide to go to seminary. But maybe the most enduring thing that I learned in that period has to do with what we've been talking about these past few weeks around place.

I was introduced to the view for the first time that the city was the perfect mission field.

Now, nobody explicitly told me this. It was one of those things that was kind of called more than taught. And as someone who had previously spent years training to be a missionary, I was really ripe and ready for this kind of language.

In the world of missions, I was used to hearing cities considered dark places and strongholds and fortresses. And when I started to study church planning, I encountered language that was a little bit less sinister, but was still really deeply about this idea that people basically need to be rescued, particularly souls needed to be rescued from the city.

There was a sense that people and institutions in the city needed to be transformed. But the city itself was never really valued.

[5 : 00] And I mean the city, like the physical form of the city, the neighborhoods and the sidewalks, those things we never talked about. How those things could lead us toward or move us away from flourishing.

We didn't talk about the actual architecture and physical plan of a city. We didn't talk about the beauty we can receive from cities or our responsibility to them as works of good creation. We just talked about what was hard about cities. And we looked at them through a framework of mostly redemption and never creation. We looked at them very differently from the way that we think about the natural environment.

Cities were places for transformation. And people needed rescue from their essence rather than conversion into their essence.

Now, last week, I continued the series we've been doing on place by going through and talking about some of the biblical, the Bible verses that talk about cities specifically.

[6 : 12] We talked about how the city is often portrayed as a place of disconnection and escapism and anonymity. That's Genesis 4, a place of self-assertion, a place of exclusivity, a place of accumulation that's based on coercion.

And then we also talked about how the view of the city shifts. And by the time you get in Leviticus, what is outside of the city is what becomes unclean. And then Israel ultimately ties its hope, even eternally, to the city of Jerusalem.

And then at the very end of the Bible in Revelation, it's John's vision of a city coming down from heaven. That forms his vision, an actual city with sidewalks and walls.

And that suggests the possibility that there is something about the city that we are to be converted into, regardless of whether we live in the city or live in the suburbs or live in rural areas.

I also said at the end of last week's sermon that when I came to D.C., I did not love it. It did not accord with my notion of the good life.

[7 : 36] And I had this vision that I brought to the city that was based in self-sufficiency and autonomy and independence. And that's what the good life is, which really, if you notice, are American values and not necessarily priorities that a disciple of Jesus needs to center.

I had those desires for really understandable reasons. I come from a family of black farmers who consistently faced the threat of removal from their land by kind of the machinery of white supremacy.

So land and place was about survival. This kind of rural life of self-sufficiency was about survival. And maybe this past week, you know, I asked you to spend some time about thinking about your own vision of the good life.

And maybe you realize like, oh, there are some values that my family carried, maybe justifiable, but that also inconveniently are very similar to some problematic American values.

I found, as I've reflected on this, that too often, the values that we carry when thinking about the good life and place are deeply affected more by the American dream than by the kingdom of God.

[8 : 57] Eric Jacobs, whose work has really influenced me in thinking about the city, here's what he says. Eden, whether explicitly referenced or hovering in the background, often provides the model setting for home and family, against which all other forms of human community are unfavorably compared.

This point of view recognizes the tragic circumstances that got us removed from the garden and takes for granted that getting back to the garden is the implicit goal for all rational humans.

And then he quotes the author of Home from Nowhere, James Howard Kunstler, The idea of a modest dwelling, all our own, isolated from the problems of other people, has been our reigning metaphor of the good life for a long time.

I don't believe that we can afford to keep pretending that life is a never-ending episode of Little House on the Prairie. We are going to have to develop a different notion of the good life and create a physical form that accommodates it.

Now next week, we're going to keep exploring place. We'll actually conclude our series on place. But this week, I want to tie up what we've been talking about regarding the city.

[10 : 22] And I want to end this with a reflection on the passage of Scripture, at least, that in my past was the most lifted up when it came to talking about the city.

And that's Jeremiah 29, 1 through 11. So if you have a Bible or a device, can you turn to that? Jeremiah 29, 1 through 11.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the court officials, and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans and the smiths, had departed from Jerusalem.

The letter was sent by the hand of Alasath of Shaphan and Gamariah, son of Hilkiyah, from whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

[11 : 33] That was a mouthful, y'all, I've got to say. It said, and I think this part is on the screen. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams that they dream.

For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord, only when Babylon's 70 years are completed will I visit you.

[12 : 44] And I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.

Plans for your welfare and not for your harm. To give you a future with hope. Now, definitely the two parts of this passage that have gotten the most attention are the phrases, seek the welfare of the city and for I know the plans that I have for you.

The latter, in my childhood, I used to go to the Christian bookstore. It always showed up on like posters and book cards or bookmarks and t-shirts. And it was often pretty much taken completely out of context.

The kind of pain of exile never seemed to come up. This is a prophetic pastoral letter. Jeremiah is in Jerusalem. He's sending it to these people who've been exiled into Babylon.

They've been forcefully transported there. This is part of three historic invasions in the 500s that Babylon invaded three times.

[14 : 05] And then Jeremiah, along with these other prophets, is really dealing with these circumstances in which the Jerusalem temple has been completely razed.

The leadership has been taken into captivity. People have been murdered. And really, the people's whole religious identity and national identity has been utterly destroyed and upended.

It's a time of real crisis and extreme theological implications that come with this kind of national and spiritual crisis. And prophets like Jeremiah are thinking about, is this God's punishment?

What do we do in light of that? What is God asking of us in terms of our identity? Well, Jeremiah sends this letter to the people who are captured.

And he says that essentially, God's hope rests with you. But you must settle in Babylon. Like settle down. You're not going to return home in your lifetime.

[15 : 06] And yet God will give you a future. They're to take up these ordinary domestic routines like planting and building and marrying.

They're supposed to grow in population just like their ancestors did who were slaves in Egypt. And then Jeremiah says, don't get caught in the deceptive lie that your lives are somewhere else.

Somewhere out there, over there, in a different place. Their lives in these really practical ways are now bound up with their captors. Now, in terms of direct translation, nobody told me this when I was like looking at those t-shirts back in the day.

But this piece of scripture really, again, in terms of direct translation, applies to people who are living in diaspora, in nation states. Either not of their choosing or to which they've arrived out of deep necessity.

It's people who have been captured and enslaved or people who have immigrated because they felt they needed to. That this most directly and immediately applies to.

[16 : 19] And it's a hard passage because essentially it's saying, love your enemies. Like it's asking about enemy love in this context, which, you know, I don't always want to talk about.

It's asking what it means to grow land on, to grow roots on land and in a place and among people who will never seek your welfare.

What do you do? So it's a hard passage. It's a hard passage for me because I'm a part of the African diaspora. And it's a hard passage for me because of the views I was given about what it means to be a part of a city.

It's a passage that's been used to support the idea that the city is this mission field awaiting the right and unfortunately, usually white saviors.

The sermons that come from this passage talk about, essentially talk through like this division of soul and body from the city. And they ignore the city itself. No one talks about.

[17 : 26] And I'm going to be honest, y'all. I have this practice where before I preach on a passage, I write my feelings about it. And I realized I had a lot of feelings because I feel like when we talk about this, no one talks about these historical cycles of people coming into the city and then leaving the city, coming in, particularly white folks coming in.

And when the city is no longer feels like safe or hemp, leaving. When it seems like the city is a place where people of color can be removed, leaving, but then coming back when it becomes more suitable to their tastes.

And I don't want to imply the only white people who do this. But I want to name people who don't ever talk about that. I didn't grow up ever talking about that in church. The ways in which this passage is linked to this kind of self-serving, opportunistic engagement with the city that's rooted really in a history of American settler colonialism.

So I have feelings. I have feelings about the passage. But Jeremiah 29 has these couple of things that I do think are deeply worthy for our consideration as we think about the city and our place in the city.

And it contains these two small words that I want to point us to. And that I think can replace some harmful notions of the city. So first, the word is build.

[18 : 52] It's a super simple, small word, build. The first thing the exiles are to do is to build, to grow roots. They are to create instead of consuming.

They're to participate in what is already created by other people who have resided on the land. They're to create alongside them. They're to build and create and make.

Because those things are a logical part of human environment that the city reflects back to us. It's an inescapable part of being in a place, building, creating, making.

The capacity to build is woven into the fabric, says Jacobs, of our being. And is an important part of the dynamic of imaging God in his good creation.

Now we know from history that building can be either life-giving or death-dealing. It can either be about mastery or it can be about cultivation and relationship.

[19 : 56] By living in a city or around a city, we are inevitably changing it. Just by inhabiting it, we are affecting it. And the question is whether we can embrace that call to build, to make, to create in ways that affect the physical form of the city for the good of everybody living in it.

And you might say that, you know, I'm not a builder. I can't see myself impacting the city this much. Well, the second word that's important here is welfare.

And this word is repeated three times in this passage, and behind it is the Hebrew word shalom. I love the word.

It has this range of meanings that mean everything from completeness and safety and peace to prosperity and wholeness and harmony. It's less about the perfection or the perfection of a thing, and it's more about what is between things.

Shout out to Lisa Sharon Harper for that insight. Shalom is about the quality of relationships between things. It's something that we create as a result of our building and our making.

[21 : 11] And yet, for the people of Israel, shalom never happened without intention. It was always structured. It was always in systems.

It was in things like the gleaning laws that said, you know, if you own a field and you harvest it, you've got to leave a little bit behind for those who have fallen on hard times.

It was in things like the Sabbath laws that made sure that land would always return to its original owner, so nobody was ultimately always landless. It made sure slavery was not a condition that was a condition of perpetuity.

It made sure that you couldn't lend an interest. This idea of structured shalom prohibited interest, essentially making it impossible for people to benefit from other people's desperate need. And in our building and our planting and our making and creating, that's an inevitable part of settling into a place because we are embodied creatures. We can consider the capacity that the city has to structure shalom, and we can extend that capacity.

[22 : 20] For example, cities structure shalom through things like careful preservation of public spaces, through sidewalks and parks that everybody has access to, regardless of class.

Those public spaces ensure that we encounter people that are different from us, that we encounter strangers, which actually is a Christian call.

We're required to encounter people as strangers and to know them. Cities can structure shalom, and there's so many things in terms of the ways that you can see this.

But another one is mixed-use zoning that allows for multiple classes to interact with each other and ultimately create situations of mutual aid and help.

That's a way to structure shalom. So many more examples of that. But my point is just that you don't have to be a builder or developer to participate in this. You can just pay attention to your neighborhood and get involved locally.

[23 : 31] All right, so I've talked for a little bit. I only, I'm going to wrap this up in just a second, but you know I like to have y'all talk to each other. So I'm going to ask you to take five minutes, find a group of two or three people, and I have a couple of questions for you.

One is just about the neighborhoods you've lived in, what makes the city and the neighborhoods in it more or less likely to nourish flourishing. And in your current neighborhood, where do you see shalom being structured?

Where do you see building and creating being about mastery? So five minutes, and then I'll wrap us up. All right, so I hope that you all can continue to ponder these questions.

Oh, this is good. So I hope that you all can continue to ponder these questions through the week. You go out tonight, keep talking about these things.

I really hope that these questions can kind of shape your thinking and contemplation. I just want to say as we close kind of some of this reflection on the city, at least for now, that there is good news for us who live and reside in the city.

[24 : 48] And it's that the Lord is here. We can receive this city as a gift, even as we participate in its building, both directly and indirectly through structuring shalom and away from self-serving practices.

Just as many of us have habits of walking around in nature and thinking about how it points us to the divine, we can walk around these streets and receive this city in its built environment and notice how God might be at work.

Our stewardship mandate for creation doesn't only extend to what is untouched in nature. It extends also to what has been built across generations and what we receive as a gracious gift of God.

The last thing I'll say is the book of Revelations ends with this picture of the city coming down from heaven. It has streets and walls. It has a physical form that we think of as a city.

That vision can shape our seeing of the city. But I don't want us to forget that in the next chapter, Revelation 22, there is this vision, this dimension added.

[26 : 06] Inside of the city is a garden. And that garden is very much like Eden and is for the healing of all people.

May this city become for us, through our attentiveness and our stewardship, a garden that is more and more the embodiment of God's vision of the good life.

Amen. Amen.