

# Bloom Where You're Planted

A sermon delivered by Randy Hyde, Pastor , Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, Little Rock, Ark., on October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Why are you here? In Little Rock, I mean? What brings you to the capital city of Arkansas?

Some of you were born here and have never lived anywhere else. Oh, you may have gone away to college, but as soon as you could, you hightailed it right back here to the place where you were nurtured and had grown up. You couldn't possibly imagine living anywhere else.

Others may be here because this is where you found opportunity for employment. Or perhaps you fell in love with someone who was a native or whose job required residence here. You may feel you're here temporarily, if not reluctantly. Your heart is really somewhere else, but this is where you need to be, at least for the time being. You doubt you'll spend all of the rest of your life here, but for the time being you don't mind it.

Why are you here?

Janet and I are both from small towns. I am aware that is true of a number of you as well. But for those of you who are lifelong Little Rock folk, let me tell you something of what it is like not to have been raised in a city. You can read your hometown newspaper in about five minutes. Everybody knows everybody, and most everybody thinks he or she knows everybody else's business, especially of a personal nature. Your TV news is piped in from the largest city nearby. Local business folk get a bit resentful when they learn you've gone someplace else to shop, especially to the city, and they *will* hear of that eventually. It's a small town, remember.

In our cases, though we were both raised in Arkansas, the city we went to was Memphis because we're both from the east side of the state. Some of my earliest remembrances were of crossing the Delta and the Mississippi River into the Bluff City. About the only time I ever had reason to come down to Little Rock, and in

those days it was at least a tough three-hour trip, usually without air-conditioning and mostly on two-lane highways, was with a school group. The Paragould Bulldogs managed to make the state basketball tournament about every year back in those days, so I'd get down here occasionally.

Janet and I both went to Ouachita, so in our college days we became more familiar with Little Rock. By that time, my brother Hugh and his wife had moved here (both their children were born here), so we came to see them from time-to-time. But once we left in 1971 to go to seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and my brother and his family moved to Houston, whenever we came back home to see family there were few reasons for us to venture down this way.

We moved back, to Trumann, in 1993 after a twenty-two year sojourn on the other side of the big river. A few weeks later, I came to Little Rock with my friend David Thompson. David was driving, and when he turned off I-30 onto I-630, I said, "When did they put this highway here?" He looked at me strangely and said, "How long has it been since you've been to Little Rock?" "Well, let's see..." I began counting on my fingers... "1979."

After leaving Arkansas in 1971, we lived in several places: Louisville, which I mentioned, Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia (Bristol is like Texarkana; it occupies two states), Nashville, Tennessee, Baltimore, Maryland, Dunedin, Florida, and Marietta, Georgia. We came to Little Rock, and to Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, in 1996. If you were here, you may recall that this was the summer our son Tim graduated from high school. That fall he left for Georgia to attend college, but as soon as he graduated four years later he came back here to live... and brought his Georgia roommate with him. Tim had convinced Joe that Little Rock was such a great place, even though he had only one summer of living here under his belt, Joe decided to come with him!

I can tell you honestly that we enjoy living here as much, if not better, than any other place we have ever resided. And I tell that to newcomers in all honesty. If they give Little Rock a chance, they will love it like we do. In fact, I'm wearing my Little Rock lapel pin today. Appropriately, it is small, polished rock because, as the slogan goes, I'm "Big on Little Rock."

Two Sundays ago, Jim Moseley and his wife Paula were featured in the newspaper on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary. I didn't know that he was

originally from South Carolina. I had a conversation with Jim Tuesday and congratulated him on this great event, and the article. He told me their original plans, when he was transferred here, was to stay about three years and then move back east. But they just couldn't do it. They fell in love with Little Rock and decided to stay. This place can have that kind of hold on folks, if they give it a chance.

But what if you had to live in a place not of your own choosing? What if your hometown, the place you know and love, where you have established roots and where your loved ones are, was invaded by outsiders and you were taken away to a land you did not know and were made to live as servants and foreigners? How would you feel about that?

It has happened many times in the history of our world, and it happened to God's own people more than once. When the prophet Jeremiah records the words that were read earlier, his people find themselves in the land known as Babylon. The local language is not their way of speaking, the culture is foreign to their way of thinking and doing, and the gods that are worshiped are not the God to whom they have devoted themselves. In a situation like that, what do you do, how do you respond?

No doubt, you are resentful - if that's a strong enough word - toward your captors. You do anything you can to undermine their influence upon you. You do not adopt their language, their ways, their gods. You teach your children to rebel, and if there were a way to escape, you'd no doubt give that a try as well. And you pray. You pray hard. You pray like you've never prayed before.

One of the stated reasons for the Jews being taken into exile is that they have neglected their devotion to God. But not now. It's their equivalent of foxhole prayers. Now that they are captives of the Babylonians, every possible moment is spent in prayer, asking God to deliver them from this terrible fate. And while Jeremiah is referred to as "The Weeping Prophet," because he never seems to have a positive word to say, any time word comes down that the prophet has spoken, the people listen intently to his message, hoping against hope that this is the time he will tell them God has seen fit to bring them out of their terrible bondage.

Does the prophet have a word from the Lord? Yes, he does. And this is what the

prophet tells them... “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...

“Yes, yes, what does God say? Are we going back? Will we see our homeland again?”

“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...”

It is definitely not what the people want to hear. They’ve been praying and praying and praying for God to deliver them from this terrible bondage, and now the prophet is telling them it isn’t going to happen. “Oh yes, that’s another thing,” Jeremiah tells them. When you pray, “...pray to the LORD on its behalf” - he’s referring to the city in which they now find themselves - “for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

What?! Did we hear correctly? It’s one thing for him to tell us we won’t be going home. Even worse, Jeremiah is telling us to *like* where we are and seek the welfare of this God-forsaken place! You want us to pray for these hedonists? To actually set down roots and make a life here? Are you kidding me?!

It is hard for us to imagine the utter sense of despair that Jeremiah’s message must have brought the exiled people of Israel. After all, for the most part, we like where we are. Little Rock may not be a perfect town; not by a long shot. But it’s home. It’s a good place. We have established our roots here, raised our children here, made lives for ourselves here. It is here we live and work and move and have our being. We couldn’t imagine wanting to be anywhere else... for the most part.

But we are not here against our will. While our civic leadership may not always do things the way we think they ought to be done, we do believe they have the city’s best interest at heart... for the most part. It isn’t hard for us to pray for them. They’re not the enemy. Life is good. It may not be great, but it is good. It’s easy for us to bloom where we’ve been planted.

But when the news is not good - and from their perspective, Jeremiah’s message

is definitely not good - what do you do if you are an Israelite taken into Babylonian bondage? Well, around these parts, if you don't like the preacher, you look for another church. Or, if you can't bring yourself to do that, you look and listen to see what the TV gospelists have to say. They're usually good for an alternative view. The Israelites essentially do the same thing. They seek a second opinion. You see, Jeremiah is not the only prophet in town.

There's a fellow named Hananiah, for example. He doesn't cry nearly as much as Jeremiah does, and his message is certainly filled with more hope. What does Hananiah have to say? He tells the exiled people of Israel not to worry, that they'll be going home in a couple of years or so (28:1-4). He's gotten that word straight from the Lord, he says.

Now that's what we want to hear! "Daughter, exercise a little patience and you can start planning that wedding pretty soon. Son, start saving your money and soon you will be able to go to college. We'll rent for awhile. No sense in taking out a mortgage when we're just going to be here a short time. Soon we'll be going home and life will be good again, just as it used to be! Let's start packing!"

But Jeremiah's message is the one that wins out, and for good reason. His message is the one that comes from the Lord. Hananiah is a pretender. There will be no going home, not any time soon anyway. It is in Babylon that they will need to set down their roots. It is in Babylon they will need to have their weddings and give birth to their babies, and make a life for themselves, for it is in Babylon that they are planted... and they will be there for a long, long while.

So Jeremiah tells them to bloom where they're planted. And it sounds good. But they're tough words, bitter even. Tell that to the employees of Dillard's who were let go this week. Say that to the wife whose husband has walked out, to the children who have been placed in yet another foster home. Some words go down like ice cream, others have the texture of marbles.

Jeremiah knows that his words will not be heard with anything approaching gladness. But in his own way, the prophet is offering his people a tiny shred of hope. And sometimes, that's about all the hope we can get. But with God, a tiny shred is enough.

So the Israelites did what Jeremiah encouraged them to do. It was in Babylon that synagogue worship - the equivalent of house worship - began. It was in Babylon

that the people realized they had failed to write down their sacred stories, that they had depended too long on simply telling them from one generation to the next. So much of the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, emerged from the exile. It was in Babylon that the people re-embraced, in a whole new way, their faith in God. If it hadn't been for Babylon who knows what would have happened to the Jews.

You may have lived here all your life, but there are those occasions when you, like the Israelites, are uprooted... emotionally, physically, spiritually. You need a place where you can settle, where you can know that the ground beneath you is solid and firm. You need to be able to reach out your hands and know that Someone is there to take hold of them and walk with you through the shadowy valleys of your deepest despair. You need to know there is something good and worthy waiting for you on the other side.

My guess is that there is not one person in this place today for whom life has worked out exactly the way you wanted or planned. So what have you done? You've made adjustments, you've adapted, in some cases you've built defenses against your difficulties, and in others you've allowed those troubles to shape the kind of person you've become. If you have the courage to look back and trace the journey of your life, I think that for the most part your testimony would be that your life is not only good but it is better for the way you've done it. In fact, had your life turned out the way you planned it, chances are it wouldn't be nearly as good as it really is.

If you're looking for a word to describe it, you can do no better than to call it *grace*. And if you're looking for a word of response to God's grace, why not consider *gratitude*? Gratitude is the soil in which you are planted, and when that gratitude is directed toward God, you can grow in his purpose and will. I encourage you to give it a try. Bloom where you're planted.

*Lord, when life is not what we planned it to be, walk with us. Help us to flourish and grow right where we are, because you are the Author of life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*