

When Living in a Volatile Time,
Don't Just Wait for Things to Get Better

Jeremiah 29: 1-9

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A life well lived can be understood as one that risks not being trapped or governed by its fears, one that follows the pulse of what matters as it presents itself. This is not to say that we will ever be free of fear, but that, in spite of our fear, we can be drawn by what matters down the unplanned path of time, where we are often called to choose what is actually there over what we thought we'd find.

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A word that comes to mind when I read from the book of Jeremiah is volatile. There's a lot in the book of Jeremiah that's volatile.

The regional political situation that sets the stage for Jeremiah's vocation as a prophet is volatile. For years, Assyria dominates Babylon, while Babylon resists and revolts against Assyria. During this period, Assyria invades the northern kingdom of Israel and places the southern kingdom of Judah under its thumb. Eventually, Babylon defeats Assyria and becomes the dominant power. Taking advantage of this shift in power, Egypt asserts itself and it places Judah under its thumb.

Babylon responds by attacking Jerusalem to wrestle control of Judah away from Egypt. Judah is now under Babylon's thumb. Judah revolts against Babylon, so Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem and places Judah more firmly under its thumb. A few years later, Judah enters into an alliance with Egypt, provoking Babylon to attack Jerusalem one more time, this time destroying the Temple.

Each time Babylon attacks Jerusalem, the Babylonians cart off part of Jerusalem's population back to Babylon. That's what's called The Exile. The Exile occurs within this larger geo-political conflict that's highly volatile and quite violent.

But that's not the only volatility that we find in Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's relationship with his fellow citizens is volatile. Jeremiah is eminently faithful and obedient to God, whereas the people of Judah are portrayed as eminently unfaithful and disobedient to God. This causes extreme friction between Jeremiah and the people of Judah, especially the political leaders, the court prophets who advise the political leaders, and the priests.

Jeremiah feels compelled to say what he believes God is telling him to say. And what he believes God is telling him to say infuriates the leaders, the court prophets, the priests, and the people. So much so they consider him to be a traitor. How the right-wing in this country treated the radical UCC pastor, Jeremiah Wright, a few years ago doesn't come close to how the folks in

Judah treat the prophet Jeremiah. They do more than angrily ridicule him on Fox news, they beat him up, throw him in a pit, put him in stocks and nearly kill him.

Not only does Jeremiah have a volatile relationship with his fellow citizens because he says what he believes God is telling him to say, Jeremiah has a volatile relationship with God because of the suffering he endures for saying what God is telling him to say.

Even though Jeremiah is eminently faithful and obedient to God, Jeremiah's relationship to God is highly volatile. The prophet lets loose with a barrage of long, convulsive, emotionally-charged laments, complaints really, against God because of all that he suffers because of his faithfulness and obedience. Jeremiah's laments convey gut-wrenching heartache and anguish. His laments are a volatile mix of anger, grief and love.

Then there's the relationship between God and the people of Judah. That too is a volatile relationship because the people are so unfaithful and disobedient. In my reading of the book, Jeremiah's laments against God serve a dual purpose. They also reflect God's laments, or complaints, against the people of Judah. What Jeremiah feels towards God, God feels towards the people of Judah. These laments express God's own gut-wrenching heartache and anguish—a volatile mix of divine anger, grief and love that God feels towards the people of Judah.

And then there's the reality of the folks from Jerusalem who're forced into exile in Babylon. They're situation is volatile. The Exile creates a multi-faceted crisis for them, a crisis with different dimensions. It's a political crisis, an economic crisis, a social crisis, a cultural crisis, a religious crisis, an existential crisis. Among the questions they're likely asking themselves are, why are we here in Babylon, what's our relationship to God now, what's our relationship to all these pagan gentiles in whose land we now live, how shall we live here, how long will we live here, will we ever go home? There's a tremendous amount of uncertainty for those torn up from Jerusalem and transplanted in Babylon.

And finally, though a segment of Jerusalem's population is exiled to Babylon, Jeremiah himself is still back in Jerusalem, where he continues to have a volatile relationship with the remaining court prophets. One of them tells the exiles that they'll be returning home to Jerusalem very soon. Jeremiah contradicts him by saying, no, the exiles are going to remain in Babylon for a while. The prophets who say the exiles are coming home soon are liars. They don't speak on behalf of God. Don't listen to them. Naturally, this creates friction.

As I said, there's a lot in the book of Jeremiah that's volatile. A lot of instability and uncertainty. A lot of tension, friction and conflict. People with opposing visions, who claim to speak on behalf of God, call each other liar. A lot of things are up in the air. Anything might happen. It's a volatile world.

Sound familiar?

Or is the world in which you live smooth sailing all the time? Is the world in which you live stable and conflict free? In the world in which you live, does everyone always agree on everything, and are all future outcomes certain?

No, the world in which we all live is volatile.

One of the questions we might ponder when reading Jeremiah is, how shall we live in a volatile world? In the midst of instability and uncertainty? In the midst of tension, friction and conflict? In the midst of opposing visions? In a world in which so much is up in the air, and anything might happen? How shall we live in a volatile world?

Perhaps the counsel the prophet Jeremiah offers those living in Babylon might be helpful.

Don't live *in exile*. *Live* in Babylon.

That's basically what he says. Don't live *in exile*. *Live* in Babylon.

Do you see the difference?

Don't live *in exile*. Don't exile yourself from life. No. *Live* your lives! *Live* your lives as fully as you possibly can *in Babylon*.

Don't separate yourself from life. Don't separate yourself from Babylon. Don't hunker down, build walls around yourself, and become some little self-protected, self-enclosed, inward looking enclave of victims. Don't waste the years of your life in Babylon stewing in anger and resentment. Don't waste the years of your life in Babylon sitting on the sidelines, letting life pass you by, waiting for things to get better, waiting to go home.

Don't live *in exile*. Live your lives to the fullest *in Babylon*. Embrace Babylon. Become responsible citizens of Babylon. Work for the welfare of Babylon. Do your part to make Babylon the best city you possibly can for you and your families, and for everyone else who lives there. Let people see that when you live in a city, that city is a better place because you live there.

For me, one of the takeaways from this lesson is that we're to make the very best of life within the volatile situations in which we find ourselves.

Life didn't suddenly become volatile-free once the folks from Jerusalem settled in Babylon. Life in Babylon continued to be volatile. People in Babylon, Jews and gentiles, faced instability and uncertainty. There was friction and conflict. Opposing visions. So what! Don't bury your head in the sand. Make the best of it, Jeremiah says. Don't shrink from life, be fully present to it, engaged with it. Even if it's not the life you thought you'd have, or the life you wanted to have, it's the life you've got right now. Don't waste it waiting for it to get better.

The world in which we live is a volatile place.

Babylon didn't last forever. A stronger nation rose up, defeated Babylon, and took its place as top dog. Then another nation rose up and it became dominant. And then another one rose to the top. Then another one. And so it goes to this day. It hasn't stopped. The world is volatile. Filled with contending forces, friction and conflict.

The city in which we live is volatile. There are a lot of contending forces, a lot of opposing views, a lot of powerful interests, a lot of friction. There are different directions this city can go, different trajectories it can take, different possible future outcomes.

Our church is volatile right now. Lifeworks may leave soon, which could have a profound effect on our finances and a profound effect on our future. We live in the midst of shifting circumstances. Everything is subject to change. Life is volatile.

Face it. Deal with it. Don't live in exile.

Don't hunker down, build walls around yourself, put your head in the sand, and become a little self-protected, self-enclosed, inward looking enclave. A victim of changing circumstances. Don't waste the years of your life stewing in anger and resentment because things are changing in ways you don't like. Don't waste the years of your life sitting on the sidelines, letting life pass you by, waiting for things to get better.

In the midst of volatility, do the best you possibly can to make a good life for yourself, and for your community, within the shifting circumstances you face, within the new realities that emerge, even if these circumstances are difficult, even if the new reality is not the one you wanted. Especially if they're difficult and unwanted.

Yes, feel angry if you're angry. Feel sad if you're sad. Feel grief if you've lost someone or something. Experience the whole spectrum of volatile emotions that come with living volatile lives in this volatile world. Complain to God. God just might complain back.

But do not exile yourself from life just because life is volatile. Learn how to be at home, learn how to sustain community, within your constantly shifting circumstances.

And keep this in mind. Volatility is not bad in and of itself. Bad things can emerge from volatility. But so can good things. Volatility simply means the game is on and the ball is still in play. Things are up in the air. The outcome is not certain. History is still in the making. Your life is not over.

So get in the game to play, don't sit on the sidelines and watch. Get in there and exert some influence on that volatile mix we call reality. Roll up your sleeves and work for a positive outcome for your life. Work for the welfare of your church, your city, your country, your planet in this constantly shifting, volatile life we share.