

**“When is the End Not the End:
A Sermon for LGBTQ People and Others
Who Wonder about the State of our World”**

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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14: 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... ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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.

⁷But seek the welfare [the *shalom*] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare [its *shalom*] you will find your welfare [your *shalom*].

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name [when they say you will be in exile only 2 years]; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon’s *seventy* years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place [your beloved city, Jerusalem].

¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare [plans for *shalom*] and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Prayer of blessing: God, in these words, may we find your words for us – words of comfort, words of challenge, words of hope. Amen.

Let me start with a personal story. Though every word of it is true (cross my heart), I mean it as a metaphor – a metaphor for this fairly complex scripture passage I’ve just read to you. **I mean it as a metaphor that begins to answer the question I’ve posed in today’s sermon title: “When is the end not the end?”**

So, a true story: The year was 1987 – almost 20 years ago – and I was in the most remote mountains of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. For a couple years I’d been teaching high school math in the

wilds of Papua New Guinea and I'd flown over to Irian Jaya to spend the Christmas holidays with an Australian family whose children were in my classes. Their parents worked on the top of a mountain in the most remote place imaginable – several days' walk to the nearest road. And so we'd flown in – the 2 kids and I on our school break – and landed on this grassy landing strip, but what I want to tell you about is the return trip, leaving the village on that mountaintop. After a really wonderful visit, we said our goodbyes and put our 12-pound (no more!) duffle bags into the back cargo area of a little 4-person twin engine plane. The pilot helped us strap ourselves into our seats – not just a seat belt, but very secure belts coming down either side and holding us tight against the seat. And once we were strapped in, only then did the pilot explain that the grassy landing strip – while long enough for uphill landings – wasn't really long enough with its gentle slope for take-offs... at least not by most folks' standards.

You see, the top of the mountain was shaped like this: a gradual slope downward on the grassy knoll that then dropped off quickly and gave way to a precipitous plunge into the valley below. He explained that when our plane came to the end of the grassy knoll and the earth dropped away beneath us, we wouldn't yet have enough speed to take off. Our plane would lose elevation, while in theory the plane's engines continued to gather enough speed to lift us into the air and an upward trajectory. A sort of "free fall," as we catapulted toward the valley floor, a sheer rockface in front of us.

So what was one to do? There was no other alternative. The pilot started the engines, thank God there were two. It was all old news to the kids, but my hands were clenched around that belt and I don't think I breathed for the next several minutes. The plane pulled out and began its trip down the grassy runway [bumpy], picking up speed, but sure enough, we got to the end of the runway and the earth fell away beneath the wheels. Our plane began its free fall toward the valley floor... falling, falling, falling.... FLYING! Sure enough, the principles of gravity and aerodynamics worked just as the pilot had explained. The plane's hard working engines along with the lift of its wings took us soaring above the valley floor... clearing the cliff in front of us by, oh, a good hundred yards. 😊

So why this story, besides that it's fun to tell? It's a metaphor for life. So much that is happening at present makes it feel like we are on a collective plane that is going down.

It was that way for the people of Israel in our Scripture passage and it's that way for us too. The "earth had fallen away" for them too. You picked up from the scripture that they're in exile? They had been hauled away into captivity – torn away from their beloved Jerusalem – Zion. And there in exile, in Babylon, they lived as refugees – a place that was *not* their home.

And if we're honest, don't we identify with that? There's a feeling of "exile" in modern life. For so many of us, the Orlando shooting highlights this. As a friend and I walked to the rally on Christopher Street last week, we asked ourselves whether something had fundamentally changed, whether we felt unsafe in a way we'd never felt unsafe before. And in my own denomination, the Reformed Church in America, as the world grieved over the loss of LGBTQ

lives, my own denomination saw fit, not to grieve, but to pass yet another action that limits the lives of LGBTQ people to love as they've been created to love, saying that marriage is only between a man and a woman.

And this week's exit of Great Britain from the European Union seems to point to – as does the political climate here in the U.S. – that something fundamental is shifting globally. There's an anger and hostility at immigrants, refugees, globalization.

And as I talked this week with a friend whose wife was hit by a car, and he told me about their battles with the insurance companies, we concluded that the wellbeing of us humans has been "sold down the river" in service of the bottom line.

There's an alienation – a disorientation, a feeling of "exile." Down, down, down we go, all the while, the rock face coming closer.

For the Israelites, they'd been in free fall for quite some time. Though the "false prophets" were quick to say "No, everything's fine," Jeremiah had said, "Everything is *not* fine."

Dozens of times throughout the chapters leading up to this one, Jeremiah had prophesied "the end" for the people of Israel. Over and over he said it: the end, the end, Israel would be consumed, the end, the end, devoured, the end, the end, laid waste.

But finally here in chapter 29, Jeremiah proclaims that God has "plans" for them: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for your *shalom*, plans for a future with hope."

That verse is the theological pivot point – an inflection point, the moment when "free fall" stops, the "engines" overcome the pull of gravity, and the plane's wings lift it soaring... even though, as Jeremiah says, there will still be 70 long years in exile.

What's this thing called *shalom*, anyway? And when is the end not the end? I'll bet many of you know its basic meaning – peace – but *shalom* is so much more than what we think of when we think of peace. It's not just the absence of war or conflict. *Shalom* is life the way God would have it to be.

Shalom is holistic wellbeing – wellbeing of heart, soul, mind and strength. *Shalom* is "good news" for those of us who are wanting to be whole people, who want more than to be "religiously right" (which is what most churches offer) and more than "physically healthy" (which still seems to be the main thing we think of when we talk about health.)

Shalom is a word that captures this thing that so many of us are seeking – to be whole people, strong spiritually, physically, emotionally, relationally, mentally – loved and seen as our whole selves – and loving God, neighbor and world, as Jesus said, with heart, soul, mind and strength. *Shalom* is a pretty cool word, right?

But that's not all. *Shalom* is not just about individuals. *Shalom* offers a vision for society. A *shalom*-filled society is a society that recognizes that the wellbeing of *each* of us depends on the wellbeing of *all* of us.

At our best, we recognize this – that we are interconnected. It's what we mean, I think, when we say "*We are Orlando*," as many have in their Facebook profiles and their tweets. And it's what Jesus meant when he said, "Whatever you've done to the least of these, you've done to me." And it's what the Prophet Jeremiah meant when he wrote to the Israelites living in exile and said, "Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its *shalom*, you will find your *shalom*."

The end is not the end if we can recognize that we are all in it together. This impulse from our better selves – when we say, "We are all Orlando" – is an impulse that God's Spirit takes hold of. The word for "spirit," you may know, is also the word for breath or wind. And this impulse that we are all in it together is an impulse that Spirit can take hold of – blow into, like a mighty wind – and lift the plane that has been in free fall.

I was thinking about this during this week, and then Friday evening, I posted about this sermon on Facebook – including the title "When is the end NOT the end?" And a friend replied, "**The end is not the end when it's the beginning.**" I thought, "That's right!"

And I thought about Stonewall. Who would have guessed 47 years ago that today we would have a Stonewall National Monument? A national monument because Stonewall was the beginning of something!

I hope you won't hear me minimize the grief and loss and tragedy of 50 killed and 50 wounded and the reverberating shockwaves of trauma, in what I'm about to say. Perhaps Orlando and the Pulse Nightclub is the Stonewall of *this generation*... not an end but a beginning – of exactly what, we do not yet know:

- Perhaps the beginning of a movement that says, "*Enough is enough. We cannot continue the violence that happens when we allow semi-automatic weapons on our streets.*" We've seen the beginning of this.
- The beginning of a more profound consciousness of how *homophobic religion of all sorts undermines the wellbeing of our youth.*
- The beginning of really reckoning with the ways that *race colors everything in our society.* I don't believe that it is coincidental that the killings in Orlando happened on Latin Night at the Pulse. We as a society continue to devalue brown bodies and black bodies as less valuable than white bodies.

The end is not the end when we say, "Let's learn from and respond to this tragedy. Let's make it a new beginning."

Did you notice that Jeremiah told the people of Israel living in exile to "Seek the *shalom* of the city" by planting gardens, building houses, and getting married?" These are the things they

needed to do – practical things – to claim Babylon as their home, a place of interconnected wellbeing. The things that would pull their plane out of its nose dive– the things that God’s Spirit would blow through, becoming the wind beneath their wings.

What are the practical things that we as people of faith, of hope, of love – people of *shalom* living today – need to do to seek the *shalom* of our world? How can we stretch out our wings in ways that God’s Spirit can grab hold of, sending us soaring above the valley floor?

It’s a good question because, you see, the end is not the end when people of good will stand up in courage and love and work together with each other and with God’s Spirit to act their way toward *shalom* – toward a world that is as God intends it to be.

Prayer:

Everloving God, God of holistic wellbeing, God of *Shalom*, may this world – through us – become more as you intend it to be – “on EARTH as it is in heaven.” May we never lose heart. May we never lose hope. May our better selves triumph, recognizing that the wellbeing of each of us depends on the wellbeing of all of us. May we not be glib about the pain in our world – about the suffering of so many as they are pushed to the margins and treated as “less than.” May this suffering and pain and grief and loss drive us deeper – deeper into relationship with you, toward seeking deeper answers, and toward deepening our commitment to make this world a better place. Attune us to your Spirit, to the wind that can blow beneath our wings. Amen.

Benediction: May God bless you and keep you; may God’s face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May God lift her countenance upon you and give you *shalom*.