

UNRAVELED

SEEKING GOD WHEN OUR PLANS FALL APART

What happens when our world falls apart? How do we press onward when our tightly-knit plans unravel into loose ends? What do we become when our identity—or the path we’re on—comes undone? What if all this is not the end we fear it will be?

In our unraveling, sometimes life surprises us with unexpected joy, love, and hope—with a new beginning we couldn’t have imagined. Sometimes we need god to unravel us, for we long to be changed. Throughout this summer we will explore biblical stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling of our plans—and us—into something new.

July 28, 2019 (NRSV) – Jeremiah 29:1-7 **Jeremiah Encouraging the Israelites in Exile to Plant Gardens & Build Houses: When Dreams Unravel**

29 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. ²This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: 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 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.

Footnotes:

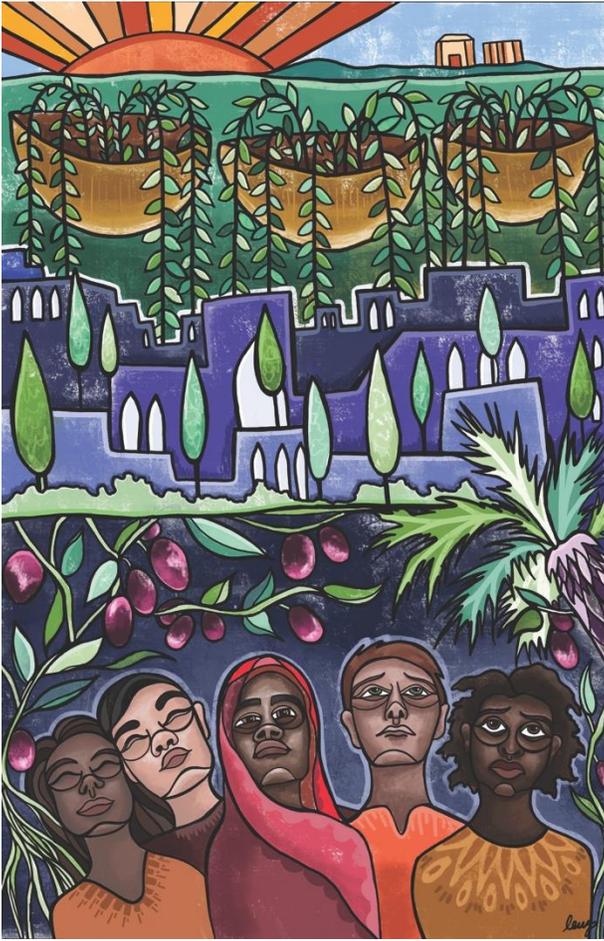
- a. Acts 9:12 Other ancient authorities lack *in a vision*
- b. Acts 9:17 Gk *him*

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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Theme Connections

The Israelites called Jerusalem home because they believed God lived in Jerusalem. Yet, the Babylonian exile robs them not just of their home, but their identity, their welfare, and their perceived proximity to God. The prophet Jeremiah delivers a startling message to those in Babylon—to settle in, build homes, and plant gardens in that foreign land. What does this mean for those in exile? Where does God dwell when we are uprooted? What does God—what does Love—say when our dreams unravel?



From the Artist – Lauren Wright Pittman reflects on her painting, “New Roots”

I moved to a new state. As I write, I’m living out of boxes, the trunk of my car, and a storage unit. It’s a jarring experience to move, even when it’s a conscious choice. I’ve found myself in a place that resembles almost nothing like what I’d envisioned for my life. I left a city burgeoning with opportunities and culture; now I’m in a small town where I’d be thrilled to find one decent, local coffee shop. I’m beginning to realize visions about the future I wasn’t even aware of. These unrealized dreams took root in my being in a way that feels defining to who I am.

Something happens deep in our core when we feel out of place. The day I moved my immune system failed and I became sick and disoriented. The Israelites were forced into exile, ripped from their homes, places of worship, and way of life. They find themselves in Babylon where they dream of the day they’d return to where they belong. Jeremiah’s words are comforting, yet painful. They are told to stay, plant gardens, and allow their families to flourish in this strange land. I’m sure this was disappointing, but when you hold onto the past, you miss the richness of the present. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.” (Jer. 29:7). Maybe when our lives unravel in transition, the loose ends of our dreams, the friends we leave behind, and the paths untraveled can become the roots that stabilize us in the new place where we find ourselves. These threads can create grounding that nourishes and transforms us into something new. This new place can be a gift—a place of flourishing and a conduit for deep, authentic connection with self and community.

Guiding Questions

- What has unraveled and/or is unraveling in this story?
- When have you or your community felt as if you were in exile? In what ways did you feel out of place? In what ways did you find connection?
- What kind of dreams need to die in order for your community to prosper?
- Where do you see social exile occurring your city? What communities have been uprooted, disempowered, and marginalized? What does it look like to garden—literally and metaphorically—in these places?
- What do you imagine God might say to you about setting roots in the place you currently call home (even if you have lived there a long time)? What might God say to you about fostering the welfare of your local community?

Prayer

O God, when my life unravels in transition, root me in a community of support and flourishing. Amen.