

Seek the Welfare of the City

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

In anticipation of the release of his memoir called “Born to Run,” journalist Caryn Rose produced an epic review, ranking all 314 of Bruce Springsteen’s songs. 314! Though I know a bunch, I must admit to not knowing a whole bunch of songs on the list. So I pored over the list for hours and hours, all in the name of sermon research. Like any list – greatest ball players ever or best episodes of Seinfeld, one could quibble with the rankings, and like any list of anything, best hymns or favorite pizza toppings, the whole thing is a little subjective. But Ms. Rose did pretty well.

Song number 35 has become one of my favorites, in my own personal Bruce top ten list. It has an uncharacteristic gospel-feel to it. And it has a great back-story. Bruce wrote “My City of Ruins” as a kind of homage to Asbury Park, New Jersey, his hometown. It has since transcended that original inspiration and meaning. I first heard it following the September 11 tragedy. I next heard it in reference to Hurricane Katrina, in Louisiana, where a Third Church team is going this week.

“There is a blood red circle/
On the cold dark ground/
And the rain is falling down/
The church door's thrown open/
I can hear the organ's song/
But the congregation's gone/
My city of ruins.../

Now the sweet bells of mercy/
Drift through the evening trees/
Young men on the corner/
Like scattered leaves,
The boarded up windows,
The empty streets/
While my brother's down on his knees/
My city of ruins.”

With these words Bruce sets the stage. Asbury Park. New York City. New Orleans. My parents’ city, Akron, Ohio. My former city, Chicago. This city. Are they cities of ruins? Or are they something else? Something more?

Bruce doesn’t stop there. Neither must we.

“With these hands,/I pray Lord/
With these hands,/I pray for the strength, Lord/
With these hands,/I pray for the faith, Lord/
We pray for your love, Lord/
We pray for the lost, Lord/
We pray for this world, Lord/
We pray for the strength, Lord/
With these hands...”

And then, repeated, a chorus, a prayer, an anthem: “Come on rise up, come on rise up.” I listened to it at least a dozen times yesterday as a kind of spiritual practice, tears streaming down my face.

As I said, it's a rare Bruce gospel-like song, but it's appropriate. A little autobiography. I was born in a Pennsylvania town so small that I had to go to another city to be delivered. Then it was small town, small town, suburban town. It was not until seminary that I found the city, or, rightly said, the city found me. I believe that to be no accident. It has been cities ever since. No accident.

Like you. Where you came from and wherever you live now, here you are. Here we are. A church. In a city.

We are here, in the city, where God is, where Jesus was. And it is glorious. And it is struggling. And it is beautiful. And it is dreadful. And God is here, and so are we.

So while we can accept the observation that the city is in ruins, now, we embrace ultimately the vision of "rise up" – and the invitation to use the hands God has given us, and the voice, and the strength, to rise up, on behalf of the city and all who live in it.

It is not a Bruce thing. It is a God thing. Jesus came to the city. Our reformer John Calvin fled to the city, the city of Geneva, a city of immigrants and commerce and a beautiful multi-cultural tapestry. The writer of Revelation envisioned a beautiful, beautiful city. Thomas Merton looked around the city of Louisville and realized he was connected to all of these people – strangers, saints and sinners. God is here – in the city. We believe it. As did the prophet Jeremiah.

The book of the prophet Jeremiah reflects events some 600 years before Jesus' life. Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. The Israelites were exiled. They longed to return home. It was the task of the prophet to provide theological interpretation for this political reality. Jeremiah, per Corrine Carvalho, believed that "the exile was punishment for the sins of that particular generation." That set up "the expectation that the exile would last, at most, the length of one generation..."

That didn't happen. Exiled children were now adults, having their own children, in exile, in political captivity. It will be the ethical conversation of another day to explore that immigrant experience, that refugee experience, and to overlay it on our present moment – the dots are easily connected. What does it mean that it was the "foreigner" who recognized Jesus? (Luke 17:11-19)

Today it's the issue of assimilation, another theme easily connected to 2016. If you come from one culture but are born in another, who are you? How do you live? Is home there, or here? And what do you believe? John Holbert asks the question pointedly: "how long was this humiliating exile to continue and what are we to do, trapped as we are in a heathenish city, characterized by customs and practices that are both repulsive to us and just as surely repulsive to (God?)"

Jeremiah, the prophet, speaks to that moment and he writes the unexpected. Rather than protesting, fighting back, acting out, the exiled Israelites should settle. They should marry where they are. They should have families.

Then this. “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.” Seek the welfare of the city. It is enough of an admonition to us without the historical context. But given all the ways that God through Jeremiah could have helped the exiled Israelites understand their worldly condition, they are told not only to persevere where they are, to have patience, but to seek the “completeness and soundness,” to pursue the “peace” of the city where you are.

You will return to your home, in God’s time. For now, this city is your home, so you will worship God here, you will live by God’s values here, you will seek the welfare of this city here. You are exiled from home, but you are not exiled from God, so live out the values God would have you live out in the city where you are.

Patrick Miller writes how “astonishing” and “strange” it is to be told to pray and work for the well-being of your captor’s home. (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VI, page 792)

Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon writes that “praying to God for the well-being of a foreign city as suggested by Jeremiah was both innovative and a great challenge to the exilic community. For the time being, they needed to accept that the places where they were settled within Babylon were home; they needed to ... work towards peace and community building in their own neighborhoods.”

Melancthon then pivots: “... (Jeremiah) calls for a movement away from the privateness of the church and into the world, into the public space to address issues affecting people, especially those on the margins, those that suffer from political, social and cultural insecurity and discrimination...”

That is to say, if we are called to seek the welfare of the city when we are in unwanted and unwelcome exile, to live a public faith, how much more should we embrace that vision now, in 2016, in this place, in this moment, in this city?

There is precedent in our tradition to ignore the question and therefore to ignore the city. Focus on God, on heaven, on what is to come, not the here and now, not the what is. Theologians even have a name for it – two kingdoms, or two cities, even.

It is certainly true that we are called to live in this world, but not of it, not to be conformed, but to transform. But there are choices we make every day. The strength of our tradition has been lodged in Jeremiah’s vision. We don’t accept what is, but we also don’t pretend we don’t see it.

A third way, rather, to work for change where change is needed, to transform, not blindly accept but not categorically reject either. Transform the city. Upbuild it. Seek its welfare. Not the city out there somewhere, but this city, where God has called us, where God has planted us.

It would be easy to live at arm's length, at heart and soul's length, as if we were strangers sojourning in a strange land. But Jeremiah says no. In terms of peace, and justice, and reconciliation, there are no artificial boundaries. There is only here. And there is only now. And there is only us. The city of humanity is the city of God; the city of God's future is the city of God's present. The city of ruins is the city of hope. Where all are citizens, and not just some. Where we wrap our arms around the whole city, and not just parts of it.

What does that look like? You won't be surprised when I say that the Confession of 1967, that Presbyterian statement of faith from 50 years ago, offers a provisional roadmap. With "reconciliation" as its framework, the confession raises up four ethical issues – race, violence, poverty, human sexuality.

How is the city doing some 50 years later? How will we respond as our neighbors in Pittsford and Brighton have racist messages delivered to their doorsteps? How will we respond as gun violence plagues the neighborhoods so close to where we are gathered for worship? How will we respond when in the face of concerted community-wide efforts poverty rates are actually growing? How will we respond as wives and sisters and mothers and girlfriends and daughters, especially our daughters, are exposed to language and behaviors that demean and defile? How will we respond, to seek the welfare of the city here and now?

"Come on, rise up," Bruce Springsteen sings, and better yet, the best of our prophetic tradition sings. Come on, rise up. With these hands. Rise up for the man who early every Sunday morning walks down East Avenue with a shopping cart of empty bottles and cans. Rise up for every teacher in school 3 and 35, and every student. Rise up for every lawyer working in the big office buildings just yards from here. Rise up for every police officer trying to do their job. Come on, rise up. For your soul, and theirs. Rise up for the welfare of the city, the city of God. Amen.