

Sermon 06-14-2026
 Are you a Trailblazer for God? – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 Jeremiah 29:10-14

For 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. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

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1)

Tonight we begin our 2026 "Trailblazers for God" Vacation Bible School. For 4 nights our church will be transformed into a place where kids, youth and grownups will grow in their faith as they become trailblazers for God. I have always felt that hosting a VBS is such an enormous privilege in our day and age. Some churches have moved away from their tradition to host a VBS and some churches don't have the resources and people to pull one off. I am beaming for joy that we are a church that is still going strong in using this vacation time to invite kids to church and discover Jesus all anew.

All of this is happening after we had an extremely powerful homecoming event and concert last Sunday. 20 youths and their adult leaders returned from their choir tour to Boston. Wasn't it amazing last Sunday night? *(Transition from restaurant quality BBQ with fun, food and fellowship to a sacred concert where our youth shined...)*

I feel like COS is bursting at the seams: A church packed for a powerful youth homecoming event last week..., a church that is gearing up for its greatest kids ministry of the year with VBS tonight... all of this is really a perfect set up for us to be trailblazers for God.

Trailblazers - what does that mean? I have to admit, when Michelle Shiparski told me about this year's VBS theme I needed her explain to me what a trailblazer is. I guess they forgot to teach us that word in high school English class in Germany. In case you didn't catch it either, here is a neat definition:

"A person who does something new and opens the way for others to follow!"

Isn't that a beautiful definition for what a disciple of Jesus is supposed to do? Aren't we called by our Lord to find ever new ways to let our light shine and invite others to see and follow Jesus?

2)

Sometimes it's hard to see the Lord. Sometimes we need a little help from friends to keep the faith or to find faith in the first place.

This was exactly the situation for the people of Israel (only the kingdom of Judah was left) during the time of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet in one of the worst times of God's people.



Ah, Jeremiah. He did not have a lot of fun in his ministry. He is sometimes called the prophet of tears because the time period in which he was active was so sad.

What was left of Israel by the time he was a prophet had no chance to stand against the newly rising empire from the East: Babylonia. I mean, they could have, had they listened to former prophets, but they didn't. And so the Babylonians came and besieged Jerusalem the holy city. The first time they took many captives and deported them to Babylonia. The second time, a couple of years later, they completely sacked Jerusalem and took a much greater part of the population back to Babylonia into exile. During this turbulent time Jeremiah had to keep it together and be a prophet to his people and this is the fascinating thing about Jeremiah. Because you may wonder:

“What does Jeremiah have to do with being a trailblazer for God?”

His story shows us that with God even in the most desperate situations there is still hope! God can work good things in the midst of absolute chaos and darkness. Can I say that again? *(repeat)*

Do you believe that? Is that how you have experienced God in your life.

This is the trailblazing message that Jeremiah wants to shout into all ages, the people of his days but also to people throughout history all the way to us! He does the seemingly impossible and un-logical:

He delivers a message of hope in the midst of chaos. He was not naïve, he did not say: “Oh guys, don't be so discouraged, things will soon get better.” No, he told his people that things are going to get bad and worse but bad and worse is not the end. And that's why we find in the midst of the tearful prophecies of Jeremiah a statement like this:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. - Jeremiah 29:11

What we need to understand is that these words were spoken right after some terrible things had happened. This is the message that Jeremiah has for the people that were deported after the first besiegement of Jerusalem.

Just try to imagine that for a moment: You have just lived through a terrible war, your home is in shambles, and your family was forced to leave your hometown and gets relocated in a foreign culture 100s & 100s of miles away – and along comes a prophet who brings you good news!

Here is the irony about it: Last Sunday I showed you a map where Abraham the father of the Israelites came from. The Area where Abraham was from 1700 years ago turns out to become the heart of the Babylonian empire was.

So the people of Israel were taken back to where their story started! It must have felt like a terrible reversal of the great promise that God made to Abraham. But in the midst of this terrible reversal trailblazer prophet Jeremiah tells them:

Make the best out of your situation!

“Don’t get stuck in your grief and your treas. Settle in, reach out to the strangers around you, be a blessing to them (Jeremiah 29;7). Your deportation will not go away any time soon – you have to suffer through it. But that’s no reason to quit - make the best of it.”

Wow that’s an unusual message. But here is the thing: it worked. The time of the Babylonian Exile as it is called was actually one of the most prosperous times for what was left of Israel.

They lived in relative peace there as they followed Jeremiah’s instruction and that allowed them to dedicate themselves to recording their history. Actually, most scholars believe that the biggest part of the Old Testament was formally written down in this time period! Why? Because they had people like Jeremiah, and...

Jeremiah was a trailblazer!

“A person who does something new and opens the way for others to follow!”

He had the message from God that encouraged the people to seek the best in the midst of their chaos and grief. ‘Don’t cave, just don’t cave into negativity.’

3)

What can you learn from this? What can we learn from this?

This is what God wanted the people to learn from this:

“...when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me...” –

Jeremiah 29:12-14a

There is no situation in life no matter how dark or chaotic in which God would not let you find him and walk with you and bring you to the light of his salvation. Is this something you can accept and claim in your heart? Is this something you can believe? What holds you captive?

We all have to deal with our very own captivities. The Israelites of the 6th century BC were literal captives of the Babylonian empire. But when they bought into God's message through Jeremiah they were able to prosper even in captivity. Isn't that amazing?

So, I want to wholeheartedly ask you:

How can you trailblaze for God, make the best out of your situations, and invites others along?

4)

Friends, we have a big VBS coming up tonight – it's so exciting. I don't want to make this sermon any longer or any more complex than it needs to be. So I want to answer this question here as briefly, as easily and as powerfully as possible. Ok?

Pray!

Prayer is the amazing and powerful tool that God has given us to beat all the odds and we can be trailblazers for God in the most chaotic and depressing of circumstances.

I know it sounds like a cliché, I know we often use the words "I'll pray for you" or "you're in our thoughts and prayers" as a stock phrase rather than a serious statement. But an honest prayer is making a difference.

For a VBS kick off Sunday it was important to me this sermon doesn't end theoretical but with something practical. Prayer is about as practical as it can get.

A while ago we talked about the Jesus prayer (...) today I would like to step it up a notch. I don't know if you will like the practical challenge I have for you, but I feel if Jeremiah was daring & honest as a prophet then I need to be daring & honest with you too. Here it comes:

Increase your prayer time!

Seriously, that is my practical advice for you today as we talk about being trailblazers for God. We all have different standards and customs when it comes to personal prayer. Some of us pray daily and deeply and some of us may feel good if we just manage to get ourselves to church and pray there.

Today I want to encourage all of us: Assess your personal prayer life and see what it would take for you to step it up.

I once listened to a podcast where a pastor said: “Pray for 15 minutes in one sitting every day if you can – and see what happens.”

How does this strike you? For those of you who already do this or longer than 15 minutes in one sitting every day: God bless you!

I suspect that the majority of us, though, perceives this as a challenge. Please embrace it! Embrace it even if you feel it is not realistic yet.

Maybe you have no idea what you should pray about for that long, let alone for 15 minutes. Here are some suggestions:

Give thanks

Pray for others

Praise God

Pray for yourself

“Rest in God!”

Confession

Healing

Guidance

Personal needs

Protection

Etc.

Many people who have taken on this challenge tell me that once you get into it time flies! I know some people that pray for over an hour at a time but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The important thing is that you start doing something new – like a trailblazer.

Start slow, start praying for 4 minutes in one sitting (set a timer!) – it’s a wonderful start. Maybe the next day you do 6, on then you try 8 and by the weekend you’re at 15!

Use help! Set a timer on your phone to remind you to pray every day. Set another timer for 4 minutes and then start increasing it each day. You may find that’s a bit silly and unspiritual but I believe God will love any attempt you make to do something new in your faith-life that brings you closer to him.

Getting closer and deeper with God makes us trailblazers. Not only will we see that with God’s help we can prosper even in the most taxing situations, we can also invite others along that experience. Our world needs that...

I talked enough. Let’s pray...