

Sermon: Build Houses, Plant Gardens

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 12, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For those who have been following the news on tariffs, that is the United States imposing a whole whack of tariffs on Canadian goods entering into that country, the latest news can't be good.

Our Prime Minister Mark Carney was recently summoned by the President of the United States Donald Trump, for a brief visit to Washington a few days ago. The visit has generated speculation among pundits and populace: Could this be it? Could we finally land a trade deal that would see the removal of all tariffs, once and for all? Could this be the 'victory' that our prime minister has been promising us, ever since the federal election earlier this year?

Ever since that election, the Trump administration has imposed first a 25% tariffs then increasing to 35% on non-CUSMA compliant goods, and a 10% tariffs on energy products, based on a dubious fentanyl crisis that is all but non-existent on their northern border. Then Trump went on to impose additional Section 232 tariffs on aluminum and steel to the tune of 50%. He then announced 35% tariffs on Canadian lumber, timber, kitchen cabinets, vanities, furniture and other upholstered products, arguing these products are somehow a "national security" threat. (Is this a joke?) Just this past Monday, Trump promised new tariffs on medium and heavy-duty truck imports, potentially adding more woes to the Canadian auto sector. It's becoming really hard to keep track.

Meanwhile, the Canadian economy is sputtering. Our GDP growth has stalled, perhaps would soon be shrinking. The unemployment rate is climbing, young people are having an awfully hard time finding jobs, consumer confidence is shaken, and mortgage delinquencies are projected to skyrocket. It is in such a backdrop, the Carney team left Washington empty handed—no trade deal, just a lot of hot air and insincere complements from both sides. Well, I guess that's better than exchanging insults.

Meanwhile, our prime minister is facing pointed questions from the Opposition about what he accomplished in that Oval Office sit-down. Here

is how Carney responded during question period, with unbridled optimism that, “Canada already has the best deal with the Americans, and we will get an even better deal”. The ‘best deal’ that our prime minister alluded to is the existing CUSMA/USMCA deal that was negotiated between Canada, U.S. and Mexico in 2018-19. Of course, that deal is up for a review in 2026, and the negotiations between the three countries are expected to be hard, with no guarantee that the current deal in its current form will even survive.

There appears to be quite a wide gap between the reality on the ground, our prime minister’s characterization of the present, and the future he is projecting, perhaps wishing and hoping. And this wide gap, as more and more Canadians are coming to realize, does not appear to be narrowing any time soon. This chasm between living in the present and hoping for a future is what I want to explore today in our Scripture reading of Jeremiah 29.

The context of this chapter is a few years after the exile of 597 B.C. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jehoiachin, the king of Judah then, along with a number of priests, prophets, elders, productive and elite members of the Judean society, numbering three thousand strong, were captured by Nebuchadnezzar and sent to Babylon. This was to ensure that Judah will never rise again never rebuilt to stand against the Babylonians. The exiled Jews weren’t slaves back then; they were permitted to move about, to work, and were expected to contribute to the building and flourishing of their host city. The story of Daniel and his three friends was a prime example of that.

However, Jeremiah, who for one reason or another, was left behind in Jerusalem. He came to reliable information that some exiled prophets, false prophets really, were predicting an early demise of Babylon, and an early return of the exiles. So Jeremiah sent words, through an official diplomatic channel, to warn the exiles against this deception and urged them to wait patiently for God’s time. His exact words were: “*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.*” Note the use of the prophetic formula “Thus says the Lord God”, removing any doubt of the origin of these words. Note also the theological claim that it was in fact God of Israel who sent the Judean into exile, all the while Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was merely an instrument of God’s wrath.

Jeremiah went on to counsel his fellow countrymen, in verse 5-6, to “*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.*”

Take 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.” In essence, stop looking at your crystal ball, stop pinning for a future of your own daydreaming, get to work and settle in for the present. As much as one may find the present unpalatable, as much as one may find singing a song of Zion intolerable, as much as one wishes for a brighter tomorrow in near future, of a second exodus and a miraculous return by the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the Lord, one should get ready to settle in for the long haul.

What even more remarkable is the rational Jeremiah offered for settling in for the present, as the prophet counselled in verse 7, *“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.”*

The word ‘welfare’ in Hebrew is shalom. Three times it is used here, and an additional time in verse 11. It is often translated in the Scripture as peace, but with a notion of justice and righteousness. The message here is unmistakable—God is deeply concerned about the welfare of Israel’s enemies, indeed, a thoroughly pagan city and the population within. By praying on behalf of their captors, by tying one’s welfare to the welfare of one’s former adversary and current host, by focusing on the present, and not on a fanciful future, the people of God would find shalom.

What an unusual advice Jeremiah had given to his exiled countrymen! History has shown that in many of the centuries of their worldwide dispersion, the Jews have pretty much followed this counsel of Jeremiah. They have identified themselves with the country of their residence, sought the welfare of their host, and prayed for the eventual restoration to their native land.

What a stark reminder of the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism being don’t worry, this nightmare will soon be over and we will soon get to go home. And hope as we will seek God’s shalom in the present, however long it may last.

I am reminded also by the words of the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in the book *To Heal a Fractured World*, that “Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope.”

This counsel to build houses, plant gardens, and seek welfare of wherever one finds oneself has a New Testament equivalent. The Apostle Peter also addresses believers, much like those Judean in Babylon, as “aliens and exiles” in wherever they live. And he gives a similar counsel, in 1 Peter 2:12: “*Conduct yourselves honourably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*” From Peter’s point of view, God is not slow in fulfilling his promise, but is patiently waiting for all of us, “*not wanting anyone to perish but all to come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9).

Indeed, the day of judgement will come. Meanwhile, we are all living in the time of God’s patience. How we as the community of faith conduct ourselves during this time, says a lot about the love of Christ, in us, with us and through us. We may face unchangeable circumstances or intolerable situations. We may have chronic diseases or irreparable relationships. We may experience unexpected setbacks, or find ourselves sputtering in face of uncertainty. The message Jeremiah has for us is to live as people of shalom, even in the most horrible exile, while accepting the unacceptable in courageous hope, trusting that God remains a God of shalom—for individuals, communities, and the world.

Allow me to leave with you the words of Jeremiah just a few verses later in chapter 29, verse 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.*” Even the President of the United States, the most powerful man on earth, couldn’t scuttle that.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**