

A Parable of Peacebuilding

Long ago, a small nation was conquered by a much larger and more powerful nation. Many of the leaders and citizens of the small nation were deported to the capital of the conquering nation, where they lived as a minority group for many years.

In this alien capital, those deported sat down by the local river and wept. Though they were known for their music, they no longer sang. Their favorite instrument, the harp, they hung up in trees and no longer played. Though the locals mocked them and challenged them to sing a song of their country, they refused.

While sad, some of them were also angry. Some were so angry they expressed it with a vengeance. "Happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us!" they shouted to their oppressors. "Happy shall be he who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock."

A spiritual leader back in the home country, however, had a different view. He wrote his countrymen in this far-away country a letter. Being a prophet, he spoke for God. He wrote that God was telling them, in effect, to quit being sad and crying for vengeance. Begin again to sing; take those harps down from the trees and begin again to make music. Furthermore, "build houses and live in them," he wrote; "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 simple words, live life fully where you are.

And then he used a word that these people treasured; a word, in fact, which they used everyday when they greeted each other. It was the word *shalom*. For them this word meant many things. It conveyed good wishes, well being, wholeness, the hope that things were right and just, and peace. And so at the climax of his letter, this spiritual leader wrote that God was telling them to pray for and seek the *shalom*, or peace, of this foreign city in which they were living as aliens. "Seek the *shalom* [or peace] of the city where I have sent you into exile," he wrote, "and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*."

And so these ancient people, who suffered so much as they were forcibly deported from their homeland, were instructed to move from anger and vengeance to prayer and peacebuilding. And, they were promised, in seeking the peace of the city in which they now lived, they would find their own peace. (See Psalm 137 and Jeremiah 29:1-7)

For further reading: Duane K. Friesen, Artists, Citizens, Philosophers - Seeking the Peace of the City. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2000.