Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sermon from
July 26, 2026
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Have you ever felt unsettled? Have you ever been away from home- where everything feels new and different? Do you know how it feels to live out of a suitcase far longer than you expected? Do you know that feeling- the one that sinks in after a while, that this situation is not as temporary as you originally thought? Have you ever longed for better days?

Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of people who have been displaced- people who have fled their homes out of necessity, out of fear. They live in places called "camps", which sound temporary, which sound as if life will move on quickly to better things. But many end up living in these refugee camps for years, even decades, waiting and hoping. When does a person decide to live in a place rather than survive a place? According to the World Relief Organization, "Some wait for the immediate assistance they need to live day to day in refugee camps, for basic materials like tarps for shelter and pots and pans for cooking. Others wait to move to more secure living conditions, where they

will be farther away from danger, and better protected from harsh weather conditions. And yet others wait for the proper paperwork to come through so they can move to a country that will allow them to begin a new life, in which they might have increased opportunities for work and education. Ultimately, many refugees wait for one thing—the opportunity to return home. It is uncertain whether this opportunity will ever avail itself. Until then, refugees wait and hope."

The Israelites were conquered by the Babylonians. The elite and the skilled were taken to the foreign land ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar, exiled from their homeland. They longed for home. They dreamed of Jerusalem, the temple, the dwelling place of their God. They wanted nothing more than to go back. But they were stuck in Babylon, a place and a people vastly different from them and their Jerusalem. They worshiped other gods, they ate different foods, they lived different lives. This would never be home. This was exile. Dreams for the future unraveled. Memories of home slowly disintegrated. Life stood still in the muck and the mire of circumstances they didn't choose, of a reality forced upon them. They were uprooted from everything they held dear. They simply existed, days and weeks ran together with no joy, no hope, no purpose. How long, O Lord?

God answered. 70 years. 70 years? That's a lifetime. That was too long. Fo most, that was forever. They would never see Jerusalem again. Some false prophets were giving them hope of return. God said don't listen to them. Dreams unraveled. The idea of return was lost.

But through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord gave instructions: build houses, plant gardens, have children, give your children in marriage, do not decrease. "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." God began weaving together a future with hope.

"The Democratic Republic of the Congo is home to one of the largest forced migration crises anywhere on earth. Decades of violent conflict, political upheaval, natural disasters and health crises have resulted in millions becoming displaced within the region, across Africa and beyond. In spite of the turmoil, however, the faith of the Congolese people shines through. Even after years of suffering and hardship, the Congo still holds one of the highest populations of Christians of any place on earth, with 80-95% of the country's 116 million people professing faith in Jesus Christ.

Families that have been forced to flee aren't leaving behind their faith. They carry it with them — through hardship, crises and disasters. Their belief in more carries them through to another day. And it's this hope in the gospel that prompts them to serve their communities, even when they live in exile." What an example for the rest of the world. World Relief, an international organization that partners with the Church, shares these statistics and this story of Desire.

"After he found himself in a refugee camp, Desiré knew: his circumstances may have changed, but his calling hadn't.

Immediately, he set to work in his new community, gathering other refugees and Burundian families living nearby for worship. By God's grace, Desiré's work found immediate success. In a few months' time, a church was born. Eventually, Desiré's rapport within the community grew, and soon he was able to construct a building for his newfound congregation." He built a church in a refugee camp-carrying faith with him through the hardship. He chose to build, to live, to plant and grow.

When life gets uprooted, God instructs us to plant roots. Most of us cannot relate to the plight of a refugee. Most of us will never experience physical exile. I get that. But I think we can relate to times of upheaval and uncertainty, when life takes a turn and we find ourselves stuck in a place we never wanted to be. When we find ourselves in a place of transition, a move, a change in employment, a drastic change in life's circumstances, God invites us to build a life, to plant a garden, to celebrate milestones and enjoy relationships. God reminds us that seeking the welfare of those around us, shapes and determines our own well-being. In other words, God gives us purpose when things feel meaningless. God gives hope when things feel hopeless. God gives promises when it feels like there's no future.

So, consider this: are you simply existing, marking the days, rather than living? Or are you building a home? Investing and devoting yourself to relationships, family, friends, community? God instructs us to live life right where we are, to build.

Planting a garden, literally or metaphorically, is something we don't walk away from- we wait for the seeds to take root, the sprouts to poke through the ground, the plants to grow and bear fruit. It takes time. What are you planting? What are we planting together in this community? I hope we are planting faith, connection, compassion, service and care for one another, and a posture of learning. We plant, we tend, we nurture, we give things time.

Then God says, Grow. "Do not decrease." That phrase caught my attention… I think it's really easy to shrink when we are out of our element, when we're in a place of change and discomfort. We shrink in our thinking. We shrink in how much we share of ourselves with others. We shrink in our courage, our motivation, our willingness to try. The challenge is to grow and keep growing. Growth involves stretching ourselves, learning new things, expanding our circle of affection and hospitality. Often this means stepping out of our comfort zones. We don't have to do this alone- we can do this together, as a community.

So we build. We plant. We grow. But most importantly, we make the place better- we seek the welfare of the city, pray on its behalf, and in doing so we will find our own well-being. The word welfare here is a variation on the Hebrew word Shalom, meaning wholeness, peace, safety- it is one of the key themes in scripture connected to salvation. As we seek the wholeness, peace, and safety of the city, of others, we will find our own wholeness, our own peace, our own safety. It will lead to salvation. Bethlehem is placed here in the St. Croix Valley, in Bayport. How are we seeking the welfare of the city? On Wednesday evening,

twenty women gathered at Meals From the Heart, a local meal packing non-profit in Oak Park Heights. We packed 3888 meals that go right to our communities. In fact, they let us take some of the boxes we packed so we could give them to people in Bayport. So, we loaded up the food pantry across the street at St. Croix United with meals. This is one way we were able to work for wholeness, peace, and safety within this community. I invite you to pray too- to commit to pray for the city, to pray for peace and wholeness, to ask God to work in us and through us to be a people of shalom in this place.

According to authors Beck and Kleeberger, "Each church planted is the continuation of the covenantal vision for God's garden… each body of Christ exists for the good of a larger body of neighbors in their geographic place. The common good is measured by the health, vitality, and future of their community. Each church is meant to be a [hedge of protection: a source of preservation to foster vitality] for the place it inhabits." We are called to make this place better.

My family likes to go camping, and when we do we bring a lot of stuff. We have our tents, sleeping bags, food, portable grill- all the things. We make ourselves at home. But we have a rule that when we are done, we leave the place better than when we found it. So, we pack up our stuff, clean up any trash on the site, wipe down the picnic table, and sometimes we even leave wood in the firepit for the next people to camp there. We leave the place better. And that's what God asks us to do wherever we are.

God encourages life even in the unstable, uncertain, chaotic places we find ourselves. God instructs us to build, to plant, to grow, and to make things better- leaving a community better than we found it. We don't leave our faith behind, we carry it with us into the unknown. This is how God provides roots when we feel uprooted. This is how God weaves together a future with hope.

Amen.