



Study Guide 1: **LIVING IN STORIES**

We live by stories. In the middle of God's story, which includes all of creation and the life of Jesus, we live and tell our life stories. What story are you living?

Introduction

- What have your parents, grandparents, siblings said about your arrival to the planet? What stories are told again and again about waiting for you, welcoming you and wondering about your first actions and words?
- What is the story of the family you live with? What was their life like before you arrived?
- What is the history of your people? What happened before you?
- What gifts do you have to contribute to your story?

You arrive in the middle of a story. You depend on others to fill you in on what has gone on before and you will depend on others to carry forward what you think most important.

Know the Story

Read Jeremiah 29:1-11

- Who is this written to? What is their story?

Verse 11 is often used in graduation cards: "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." What is often forgotten, though, is that these words were directed to a people in **exile**. God's people had been taken from their land and plopped down in the land of their neighbors.

- Have you ever felt like you are in a place of exile, living in a place that feels foreign to you? (*Maybe it's dealing with the illness of someone you love. Maybe it's not knowing what to do after high school. Maybe it's a bully who won't leave you alone?*) When? Why?

Be the Story

Where is the plan? Where is the hope? Leaving Israel was definitely not part of the plan for these exiles. Israel was home for them—where they were born and raised, where their families had jobs and histories. It was the place they worshipped God—in the temple and all through the land. It was practically impossible for them to see God in this strange place of exile called Babylon.

- Are there situations in your life and community right now where it is hard to see God?

Jeremiah's advice to these exiles living in a foreign land was to "build houses... plant gardens...marry..."(v. 5-6). In other words, to live your lives and invest in the future! These are not activities with short term results – they take time. And this is what the exiles are encouraged to do. Invest their lives in this foreign place, even though things had not gone according to plan.

- How are you investing in the future with your neighbors - as individuals and as a group?

But why should we invest ourselves in places that are foreign to us, are unfamiliar or may not be where we want to be? Read verse 7. Some translations say “welfare” while others say “peace.” Both words in English are attempts to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is a whole package kind of well-being: health, livelihood, just relationships, good neighbors. The advice in verse 7 is to seek shalom – the well-being, the wholeness, the best - for the city and the neighbors where the exiles find themselves...because in its shalom you will find *your* shalom.

- Think about those places where you feel like you are in exile or living in a foreign land. How can you seek *shalom* (well-being) in those places? How might seeking *shalom* in those places bring you *shalom*?

Tell the Story

Verse 9 reminds us that exile can last a long time. God rarely gives us an easy way out of the foreign places in our lives. But God does give us a future with hope...and it comes by investing in the places we find ourselves and people who surround us.

God uses YOU - your story, to bring hope to the world and to others who feel like they are in exile!

- How can the gifts and contributions you listed at the beginning give a sign of hope, and offer shalom to those around you?

Closing Prayer

God, you call us in every circumstance, confident in our abilities to turn to you. Grant us grace to express our confidence in you and our neighbors by daily actions for shalom in the world you love. Amen.

(Adapted from the PD2015 Session, “Living in Stories” by Colleen Windham-Hughes, California Lutheran University. For complete curriculum, visit www.elcaymnet.org/PD2015.)

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