

Proper 23, Year C
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

It was decision day in Hooterville.
Six months earlier,
attorney Oliver Wendell Douglas had left his Manhattan law practice
and, over his Hungarian wife, Lisa's, horrified objections,
they'd moved into the rundown old Haney place in Hooterville,
so Oliver could follow his life's ambition of becoming a farmer.

And week after week, hilarity ensued
as these transplanted New Yorkers
attempted to make a life for themselves
in rural America.

Those of you of a certain age will no doubt remember
the story line and beloved characters
from the TV show *Green Acres*,
which aired from 1965 to 1971,
starring Eddie Albert and Eva Gabor.
It's among my Top Five favorite TV shows of all time
and I still watch the reruns on Hulu,
whenever I need a laugh,
a gentle boost to my spirits.

Those of you NOT of a certain age
who don't remember *Green Acres*
can still watch basically the same TV show now on ABC.
It's called *Bless this Mess*,
and it's about a couple of clueless New Yorkers
who move to a farm in Nebraska.
It's the same story just set 50 years later.

But the episode I want to talk about this morning
was the *Green Acres* episode called "The Day of Decision,"
which aired Feb. 23, 1966,
toward the end of the first season.

Lisa – even though New York was where she'd rather stay,
 even though she got allergic smelling hay –
 she had reluctantly agreed to give life on the farm six months,
 and Oliver had agreed that if she still wanted to leave
 after that amount of time,
 then they'd pack up and move back to New York.

Finally, the six months was up.
 Lisa spent the whole episode trying to make up her mind:
 Should they stay or should they go?
 At last she decides: She really does want to go back to New York.
 Oliver isn't happy, but he will abide by her decision.
 As they're packing up the car,
 Eb, the hired hand,
 and Mr. Kimball, the county extension agent,
 come to wish them farewell.

Eb brings Eleanor the cow with him for a last goodbye,
 and mentions that he'll take her to the slaughterhouse the next day.
 Lisa is horrified.
 Well, says Mr. Kimball, a cow like Eleanor
 really isn't good for anything but a good pot roast...
 well, it won't really be a *good* pot roast, he says.

“Vat’s going to happen to Alice and all her daughter chickens?” Lisa asks,
 pointing to the hen and baby chicks she’s grown so fond of.
 When she’s told they’ll end up as fricassees,
 Lisa runs inside in a panic.
 “Dahling!” she says to Oliver.
 “Do you know vat dey’re going to do as soon as ve leave here?
 Dey’re going to fricassee Alice and pots roast Eleanor!”
 She tells him to put down the suitcases.
 “Ve’re going to stay here and look after dem,” she says.
 And so they did for another five seasons.

As I said, this story of unwilling transplants
 growing to love their strange new surroundings
 despite their initial misgivings is an old one.
 It’s been told many times.

Green Acres told it fifty-some years ago.
The prophet Jeremiah told 2,600-some years ago.

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,”
God tells Jeremiah to say to the people of Jerusalem,
“and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Jeremiah wrote this letter
to the first wave of exiles who were taken into captivity,
by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar
who struck out at the little kingdom of Judah and its great city, Jerusalem,
in 597 B.C.E.

This first group, Jeremiah tells us,
included not only the king but the leaders of society,
thee priests and the prophets
and the artists and skilled tradesmen
who would have been sorely needed back home.
In other words, those who could be of use to the Empire.
Historians tell us that, ten years later, in 587,
Babylon would return to devastate Jerusalem a second time
and carry off even more of the population,
and then a third group would be taken in 581.

To those shell-shocked and beaten-down Israelites
Who had been carried off into exile,
This was no situation comedy, no laughing matter.
The world as they had always known it had come to an end.

Jeremiah’s words to them are not what they wanted to hear.
They were not words of comfort and encouragement,
telling them that all would be well,
And they’d be back home in six months,
or two years,
or after the next election,
or as soon as things settled down.

No. Just the opposite.
Jeremiah was not telling them how to escape their new reality,

he was giving them advice about
how to adjust to it,
because it was going to last for a long time.

Perplexed, the exiles must have wondered just what happened.
“This was not what we were promised!” they must have thought.
“Aren’t we God’s chosen people?
How could God let this happen to us?”

What could Jeremiah say to help a people so broken-hearted?
How could he offer hope in the worst of times?
He told them blessing would come, but not in the way they wanted.
Blessing meant coming to terms with the present.
Blessing meant praying for the captors they held in such disdain.
It meant staying, and taking care of them.
It meant letting go of what they thought they wanted
In order to receive a blessing
That would prove far more valuable to them in the long run.

Jeremiah knew that eventually, the exile would end.
But it would take 70 years.
Very few of the people taken into exile
would live to see the day they could return to their homeland.
For many, their children wouldn’t live that long,
Nor even their grandchildren.

But Jeremiah knew that
even though things weren’t going to go
the way the exiles wanted them to go,
a good life would still be possible.
A good life, with good homes and enough food,
and their families around them to bring them joy.

During that 70 years of exile,
the Jews would be forced to wrestle
with those questions they had about God.
They learned that they could worship God anywhere,
not just in the temple in Jerusalem.
That was a vital lesson for them to learn,
and it has shaped Jewish worship to this day.

Synagogues became a vital part of the community.
In retrospect, it was a rich, rewarding experience,
though at the time it was happening,
it was hard for them to see it that way.

Jeremiah's words are a reminder
that no circumstance is beyond God's purview.
It is a reminder of God's promise to remain with Israel,
and of Christ's promise to remain with us.
It is a reminder that whenever and wherever we seek God,
we will find God.

Praying for Babylon gave to the Jews a different understanding of God,
A more expansive, inclusive understanding
of a God who cares for ALL the people of the earth.

Sometimes, it takes something unexpected,
maybe even something unwelcome,
to open our eyes
to the blessings and wonders in our lives.

Sometimes we need to let go of what is gone,
let go of the past that won't be part of our lives anymore,
and embrace something new that is being born.

No matter what our circumstances,
no matter how bitter the exile we may feel ourselves in,
it is our faith that will make us well.
Amen.