

## “Control in Uncontrollable Situations”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

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And now, I'm probably at this time of chapter 29 in this book, (I'm probably between the ages of 17-19 years old), still not considered a man in many circles. I am sitting down at a table in Jerusalem looking out over a Temple that has been destroyed, with few people of my people, the people of Israel – the Jewish people – almost entirely wiped out. Many cast away, either murdered or sent to Babylon, what we considered the most heathen place in the entire world. So far away, that they had to cross deserts in order to get there, and the word of the Lord kept coming: write them a letter and tell them that they were not coming back to their home anytime soon. And, include in that letter, that they are going to have to make do where they are: to build their homes, to plant their gardens, to raise their families and make the best of it.

Just once I would really love it if God gave me good news to give to somebody. But, no, I sent the letter, and you can imagine the response: a.) I'm too young; b.) they didn't believe it for one minute; and. c.) they kept listening to these false prophets. Oh, there were always the charlatans who wanted to make a few bucks, by telling the people that anytime soon God was going to return. God doesn't make mistakes, so God is going to bring the people back. God is more powerful than the mythological Babylonian gods, and, God will show it by bringing you home in the next year or two.

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It was so infuriating and, yet, I think you can feel the same way – you here in 21st century – or should feel like exiles in this world. There is hatred all around you. There are people who are out for their own self-interest. There are people who think that Christianity is just a joke; people who need a crutch and don't have the emotional strength to take care of themselves, need an afterlife that they can shoot for, just to get through the day; and, don't realize that when life ends there is nothing.

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And, in this article, the person worried about humanity in and outside the LGBTQ community, saying that when everything is public, you are going to be hurt so much fast; because, when there is no privacy, everyone can hurt you – and they know how to hurt you – because all your secrets, all of your worries, all your vulnerability are out there for the world. And, not just right now, but they can take like we saw in the news here in Iowa, they can take what you did at 16 and use it against you when you are in your 20s or 30s, 40s or 90s.

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allow us to be relevant into the 21st century, because so much has been taken away from us in the last 10 years.

There is an interesting book by two authors named Smith and Sellon. (I need to be careful and not say Smith and Wesson.[Laughter.] I practiced all morning. [Laughter.] Smith and Sellon.) They wrote a book called “Pathway to Renewal.” And, they said there are there are four Ps you need to remember on the pathway to personal and Church renewal: The first P is Paczkowski. [Laughter.] (No, someone else wrote that one in.)

The first P is Purpose. You have to know what your purpose is as an individual in your life – and your purpose always needs to start with God. Your purpose should not be happiness. Your purpose should not be joy. Your purpose – like mine – often was the opposite of happiness; but, it was doing God’s will, speaking God’s voice and trying to heal God’s world. And, once I had purpose, I drew my joy from knowing that – even if I was hated by all of my family – with my people of faith around me, that all I needed was God; and, that helped me, even when all around me looked at me, horrified.

The next P in that process was Picture. You have to picture who you want to be – not who you are – but who you want to be, and who you think God wants you to be. So, for the people of Israel, in exile, I told them, “Don’t picture the old way – don’t picture the Temple. God has a new vision for you: to build where you are, to raise your family, to plant gardens, to make roots in Babylon. You, in the same way, shouldn’t just be waiting to go to Heaven, when everything is going to be perfect. Build where you are. Even amidst imperfection, plant God’s message in your hearts and that of your family, and in this community, and raise your family in this place.

Then, the most stunning words I was forced to write: “Care for your city.” In other words, you are one with the Babylonians, in the same way you are one with everyone else in this city – in the larger Des Moines metro – and their wellbeing is your wellbeing; their happiness is your happiness; their dysfunction is your dysfunction. So, it is in your best interest to help them.

I said that to the Babylonians. I say it to you. That is why we are supposed to care; and, not just focus on ourselves; because focusing on ourselves won’t make us happy; it won’t bring us joy. Only when we care in God’s name and we lay down our roots here in this community, in this congregation, and in our hearts, will we feel meaning – and meaning is a heck of a lot better than happiness.

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The last P of those four is Place. Find your place here. Every one of you in this place, I’m willing to bet, feels a little dispossessed. I’m especially speaking to younger people right now. Most of you do not have much in the way of family here in Des Moines. For many of you, your family is

elsewhere, but we have so many grandmas and grandpas, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters in this congregation who *also* are looking for family.

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In a world that is so in exile, in a world that is so lost and alone, and yet so vulnerable to be picked on, this is the place, this is the faith where we can be ourselves and be accepted. That is why we worship. That is why we care. That is why we are loved and love others.

I thank you that you remember that the exile lasted 70 years – one whole generation – and God brought them home; and, there will be a day in which you will be brought home, whether it's to God's Heavenly Kingdom, or to a better place here; but, in this moment of exile in the 21st century, build your homes, plant your gardens, nurture your families, care for your city and let God heal and restore you in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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Amen.

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