

“Hope And a Future”

I John 4:1-6 and Jeremiah 29:4-14

Market Square Presbyterian Church

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As I wind down my last few sermons here, it should come as no surprise that I choose another Hebrew Bible passage before I go. I am aware that I have most likely preached more from the Hebrew Scriptures than this congregation has experienced with previous pastors. I love the Bible that Jesus used. I particularly find prophetic passages having to do with resistance to abuse of authority as well as addressing social injustices are as relevant today as they were in Bible times.

So let's talk about Jeremiah. Most of us find Jeremiah hard to read. This “weeping prophet” makes us want to turn quickly to a favorite psalm or parable of Jesus. Jeremiah will never win a popularity contest. Yet, Jeremiah's words take on fresh value and meaning, whenever God's people feel alienated, anxious, having to make do in times of persecution.

Last month, our new pastor, Stan, asked for a show of hands how many of us feel our Christian values are under attack during this administration. Nearly everyone raised their hand. When we feel our beliefs and values are under attack, we are feeling what Jeremiah's generation felt as they experienced the collapse of their Hebrew nation and their leaders were carried off to exile in Babylon. Jeremiah became the prophet to God's people during their exile.

If there is any favorite verse people might recognize in Jeremiah, it most likely Jeremiah 29:11. Maybe the whole rest of the book is worth it just to have this marvelous promise of God. Listen to this passage of Jeremiah.

⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” ⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

*¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ **For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you,***

plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:4-14)

Have you heard about when Will Rogers met President Calvin Coolidge? Rogers was the most popular comedian of that generation. He had a reputation for being able to make anyone laugh. Coolidge was considered the most somber President in our history. He never cracked a smile. People wondered what would happen. In the White House reception line, the formalities of introductions occurred that day. “Mr. President, this is Mr. Will Rogers. Mr. Rogers, this is Mr. Calvin Coolidge President of the United States.” Rogers leaned in to shake the president’s hand and said, “Sorry, didn’t catch the name.” President Coolidge laughed.

We admire people with quick wit. In our fast-paced world of sound bites and scripted television dialogues, it feels like there is little room for us to pause and think deeply. I agree with the critique of our modern society that suggests we are being bombarded with so much information so quickly that we are losing the ability to sit quietly and follow a single train of thought for an extended period of time. Some have suggested we have the attention span of a goldfish. The rewards of our fast-paced society go to those who react quickly.

It is natural to admire people who are decisive, quick on their feet, confident. How do they do it? Do we ever find ourselves wishing we were faster on our feet, able to come back with quick wit? Have we ever thought a couple days later, “What I should have said was...”? If so, we can relate to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was not a person of quick wit. He moved at a slower pace than others around him. Before we get to chapter 29, we see an ongoing debate between Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah. Chapters 27 and 28 describe how Hananiah had the advantage of quick wit. Jeremiah puts on an oxen yoke and announces that the people would be taken into exile. Hananiah breaks the yoke and announces God’s people will return soon from Babylon. “Get ready for fireworks and miracles, God will turn it all around” is Hannah’s confident message. Jeremiah’s yoke lies broken on the ground. He is speechless and confused. Jeremiah leaves quietly. Then a few days later Jeremiah comes back and says, “Hananiah, you broke a wooden yoke, but God will give the people a yoke of iron!”

Jeremiah stood by his prophecy that God’s people would not only be captured and taken into exile, but they would need to learn to flourish in the midst of their exile. It would be a couple of generations before they would return to their homeland and re-establish their faith back in Jerusalem.

It is in the context of learning to settle into their new circumstances, remain faithful without cultural support, teach their children the ways of God while in exile, that we find this wonderful promise of hope and future. When times get anxious and uncomfortable, we need to practice resilience, slow persistence, and deep prayer. We need to become wary of quick solutions that

sound easy. It is hard work to stay quiet, slow down, and think deeply rather than react with quick knee-jerk reactions.

Jeremiah's prophecies keep coming back to a common refrain. In the midst of their anxious times, they will need to settle into their new circumstances and think deeply about how to remain faithful in exile. They are exiled but not lost. God promised them a future and a hope. God still has plans for their future generations. There are no short-cuts. Take your time. Settle in and trust God. In Jeremiah's case his prophecy speaks of 70 years before they will see answers to their prayers. Are we willing to pray for small steps into a more just, more loving, more kind, more compassionate future, even if it takes 70 years to get there? Can we faithfully trust God when our calling for this time is to plant seeds for a future harvest?

I love a story of John Ortberg calling his mentor Dallas Willard before John moved to Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. He asked Dr. Willard what advice he would give him in order to be faithful pastoring that mega-church. Dallas responded over the phone, "Ruthlessly eliminate busyness and hurry." John wrote it down on his notepad and then said, "Okay, got it. What else?" Dallas responded, "Ruthlessly eliminate busyness and hurry." John repeated, "I got that. What else?" Dallas repeated, "Ruthlessly eliminate busyness and hurry."

Here is the truth: It is harder work to calm down and get quiet in highly anxious times. It is not easy to think and pray slowly and deeply when we have the option to simply remain busy, offended, and reactive. When we are not maintaining our daily spiritual practices, busyness feels like we are staying ahead of the anxiety. When our daily connection with God becomes weaker, we will tend to substitute moral righteousness and social media posts in order to feel we are doing something important. Waiting on God is uncomfortable, hard work.

I am recalling the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his leadership of the Civil Rights movement. We often focus on the marches he led because they were flashy and newsworthy. But the truth is the hard work was happening in the churches before Dr. King arrived. He insisted that before he helped lead a march, the local churches must first come together to sponsor prayer meetings, practice non-violence, sing hymns and worship together. He would not come to a city for a march until those spiritual practices were happening. It was no coincidence that the singing of hymns and quoting of scripture were an important part of Dr. King's marches. They had done the spiritual work in preparation for their acts of resistance.

Ten years ago, before I retired the first time, I preached a series of six sermons on Jeremiah and asked the question if we are giving in the season of Jeremiah. Someone commented after those sermons, that in one sense it was easier for the Hebrew people to understand Jeremiah. They knew they were in exile. Their families had been physically removed from the homeland and taken away to a foreign place. They knew they were refugees, surrounded by people of other religions who did not support their faith. It is harder to accept as we live in our familiar neighborhoods and shop in the same grocery stores that our society has shifted around us. How do we handle our American exile as people of faith? How do we remain faithful to God in our empire that trusts power and dominance more than trusting God?

A couple months ago a few of us attended the Jewish interfaith Seder at Temple Beth El. The theme of the evening was how the traditional Jewish Passover meal ties into addressing injustices of today. At one point during the meal, we were encouraged to discuss around our tables how our various faith traditions help us remain vigilant for truth and righteousness when it feels like our nation is becoming more and more uncivil, losing our sense of compassion, even inhumane.

After table discussions, we were invited to share highlights with the whole group. Most of the tables were giving similar responses about speaking truth to power, participating in resistance marches to speak up for the vulnerable and disenfranchised victims of injustice. Then a table of younger people reported. Their average age was at least 30 years younger than the rest of the tables. They reminded the rest of the room that we are people of faith traditions with spiritual practices. We need to remember to let God be God. We need to believe that God will do what only God can do and not try to solve our social problems without God. Their wisdom was to keep our actions connected with our spiritual practices.

Profound! Let God be God. Trust the Lord. Stop trying to jump to quick answers without God. Quit assuming we are right, and God is in our hip pockets. To quote another Hebrew prophet, “Do justice, Love mercy, and (most importantly) *Walk humbly with God.*”

As Pastor Allison reminded us last week, when we read difficult passages of scripture, “God is still speaking.”