

Jeremiah 29:10-14

A Future with Hope

Series: "A Future with Hope" Part 1

July 10, 2011 Maple Grove United Methodist Church

You know the story of Pandora's box, which in the myth was really a jar. Pandora had been given this jar and told not to open it under any circumstances. But you know how it is--curiosity got the better of her and she peeked inside. And out came all the evils of the world—plagues and diseases and the like. By the time Pandora could get the lid back on, everything but one had escaped. Caught on the lip of the jar, only hope remained.

Now one way of looking at the story is that if the human race is going to have all these evils and troubles, which we do—we'd better have hope too. But my question about the story has always been: if the jar contained all the *evils* of the world, why was *hope* in there at all? At the very least, the story points out that hope is a gift, but a difficult gift.

Scripturally, the book of Jeremiah reveals that hope is a difficult gift that is needed most in difficult times. Jeremiah was not known as a cheery sort. He was called "the weeping prophet;" our English word

'jeremiad' refers to a speech that is long and sad and angry.

Jeremiah relentlessly prophesied that everything would get worse and worse until it all fell apart; he foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people. And every one of the disasters Jeremiah prophesied came to pass.

But when everything had fallen apart, when defeat was total and people had been marched 500 miles into exile in Babylon, Jeremiah-- oddly, miraculously--became a prophet of hope. He announced to the exiles, those who had been ripped away from home and family and temple and forced to live in a foreign land: "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." Jeremiah understood deeply that hope is a difficult gift that is needed most in difficult times.

After the defeat and destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah's heart was with the exiles. He wanted to go with them to Babylon, but he was not allowed to. So he wrote them a series of letters, one of which is reported in Jeremiah 29. And here is what he told them: Build houses for yourselves there in Babylon and plant gardens. Get married there and have children. Don't listen to those other prophets,

the ones telling you that everything will be okay in a couple of months or a year, because it won't. You'll be in exile the rest of your lives.

And yet, Jeremiah writes, and yet, "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." Jeremiah understood that hope is a difficult gift that is needed most in difficult times.

Jeremiah's letter clarifies the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism is the notion that things are about to pick up, that things are getting better every day. Optimism believes that if you can just get the right job, pick the right stock, elect a new president, or try it one more time, it's bound to work out. That's optimism, and there's nothing wrong with optimism. In fact, one of the best books I've ever read is called *Learned Optimism*, about how to become more optimistic.

No, there's nothing wrong with optimism . . . except that it's not enough—because sometimes things are not about to pick up, things are not getting better every day, and if you try one more time, it still won't work out. That was the first part of Jeremiah's message to the

exiles. This, he said, is not a time for optimism, because no matter what you do, exile is going to go on and on.

No, Jeremiah wrote, this is not a time for optimism—this is a time for hope. Hope is what's left when optimism is gone. Optimism gets you three miles into a marathon; hope gets you to the finish line. Hope is the conviction, deep down, that in the end it will be all right, and if it's not all right, God will make it all right anyway. So hang on. Hope is a difficult gift that is needed most in difficult times.

Walter Brueggemann has been teaching for years that exile is a metaphor for the way things are these days.<sup>1</sup> Not that most of us have gone through anything that compares to the destruction and dislocation of the Jews by the Babylonians. It's a metaphor, not a comparison. The things we used to take for granted, Brueggemann says, don't work any more. That the nuclear family is stable, that jobs last forever, that the church will always be at the center of life—these old realities have ended, leaving older people feeling uprooted and younger people feeling rootless.

Preacher Barbara Taylor has summarized this sense of exile this way: It's not necessary to move to lose track of home this days.

You can stay right where you are and still feel the ground shift under your feet. The neighborhood where you have lived all your life begins to change complexion. Where did home go? The marriage breaks up and the children become pinballs, bouncing back and forth between parents. Where did home go? Or your own parents die, and the house you grew up in is taken apart piece by piece. Where did home go?<sup>2</sup> And might I add, the church you've counted on for years begins to decline in numbers, and they don't make preachers like they used to. Where did home go?

Yes, there's a little exile in all our lives. Jeremiah notices it all, and knows that some of it isn't getting better overnight. He takes note of every loss; he bows his head and cries his tears. And then he rises up and says: "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." Hope is a difficult gift that is needed most in difficult times.

Hope is rooted in the past, hope is oriented toward the future, but hope is lived today. Let me tell you what I mean.

Some people claim that hope is based on evidence, on observable signs that things are improving. But again, that's

optimism, not hope. What about when there isn't any evidence? Is there no hope then? No, as Paul writes in Romans 8: "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Other people believe that hope is built into the human spirit—hope springs eternal in the human heart. Well, in some hearts more than others. I have no doubt that God made us to be hopeful creatures, but in my darkest hours, I'd hate to have to generate my own hope.

No, I want to say that hope is grounded not in evidence and not in the human spirit, but rooted in the faithfulness of God. As our God has delivered and comforted and saved before, so will God deliver and comfort and save again. Our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who delivered the people from slavery in Egypt and Daniel from the fiery furnace. Our God is the God who when the very Son of God lay dead in the tomb, did not let death have the final word but raised him to new and glorious life.

The Babylonian exile was not the first difficult time God had faced. Nor is the hard time in our church or the hard time in your life

the first hard times God has faced. Hope is rooted in the past, in the faithfulness of God who has delivered before and will deliver again.

Hope is rooted in the past, but is oriented toward the future. Jeremiah announced: “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.” Hope declares that however bad things have been and however bad things may still be, God is doing something new and invites us to see it even before it happens.

It is common for people who like me are middle-aged or . . . more than middle-aged . . . to think of hope as looking back--back to the good old days, back to some golden age when bad things hadn't happened yet, life was simple, and the church was full. But time only runs in one direction. There's no going back, only forward. Even when the exiles did get back to their native land, and they did get back, it was a different place--good, holy . . . but not the same.

When I was first appointed to one church, the leadership had a retreat day led by a consultant. And she asked those leaders to stand on one side of the room if they believed the best days of that church were behind them and to stand on the other side if they

believed its best days were still to come. And I new instantly that we were in trouble, but I also knew we weren't quite done for. Everybody in the room walked over to the "best days behind us" side of the room, everybody that is except for two young women. And with those two young women, God built a future for that church.

Without a picture of the future, a vision of what God has in store, it's impossible to go on, there's nothing to go on for. There is literally no future without hope.

So hope is rooted in the past and hope is oriented toward God's future, but hope has to be lived out day by day. If hope only looks back it becomes merely sentimental. If hope only looks ahead, it becomes pie-in-the-sky, detached from reality. Jeremiah announced to the exiles a future with hope, but in the meantime, he told them, get married, have families, build houses, plant gardens." In other words, have a life . . . *now*.

The life of hope is not sitting around reminiscing about how things used to be. The life of hope is not just sitting around dreaming about what might be. The life of hope is lived *today*. It trusts the

faithfulness of God, believes that God is not done yet, and in the meantime lives each day in God and for God.

O God our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
be thou our guide while life shall last,  
and our eternal home.

Hope is a difficult gift and it's needed most in difficult times. And here is the word of the Lord: "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." May that word be your word, my friends, today and especially when you need it most.

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 157.