

Hard Times: Hope in the Ruins

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
Lamentations 3:22-24

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14 Disturbing hope: Settle down in Babylon

29 The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.

4 The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. **6** Get married and have children; then help your

sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that

you don't dwindle away. **7** Promote the welfare of the city

where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

8 The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims:

Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you.

Don't pay attention to your dreams. **9** They are prophesying

lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the Lord.

10 The Lord proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. **11** I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares

the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. **12** When you call me and come and pray

to me, I will listen to you. **13** When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. **14** I will be

present for you, declares the Lord, and I will end your captivity.

I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile,[a] declares the Lord.

Lamentations 3:22-24

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,[b] his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

Hard Times: Hope in the Ruins

Jeremiah 29:11 says this:

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

This verse is one of my favorites. You may know it well. You can find it printed on cards, water bottles, tote bags, key chains and all kinds of merchandise because it is such a powerful verse; it is a comforting verse. I even found a t-shirt that caught my attention. The shirt said “chill” in letters that looked like blue ice cubes with a reference to Jeremiah 29:11 below it. Chill out, right? The idea is: “just relax, God has a plan for you.”

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

Just take it easy, God's got this. I can imagine just sitting down in a comfy recliner and putting my feet up and just chilling -- waiting for God to do something really good for me. Now I know it's just a clever tshirt -- but it really made me think about this verse. And while I would really, really love it if I could preach that kind of message and if faith were that simple, this verse has a much more complicated meaning. Friends, context is everything when we study scripture and seek to know who God is and who God wants us to be as followers of Jesus. As I studied the text surrounding this verse this week, I was profoundly touched by the deeper meaning of this verse. Because it seems to me that the text calls us to active faith rather than putting our feet up and chilling. Today's topic in our sermon series about Hope in Hard Times is Hope in the Ruins. What kind of image comes to your mind when you hear the words "hope in the ruins"? The picture that first popped into my head is the American flag on top of the rubble of the World Trade Center. I can also see in my mind's eye images of survivors being pulled out from under buildings after devastating earthquakes. I think about Corey Ten Boom's story of surviving life in Nazi concentration camps. I see the image from an article I read about Ebony Brown-Olaseinde holding her newborn twins. They were born in the ICU where Ebony was because she was deathly ill with Covid-19. When the twins were delivered, she miraculously recovered!

¹ Don't we cling to hope when times are hard?

In today's scripture from Jeremiah it is hard to see any hope in the ruins for the exiles. Last week Bud talked about the fascinating history of the Kings of Israel and the conquering force of Babylon. Today's text is a letter that the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the exiles who had been deported by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 597 BCE; the letter was written sometime between

this 597 exile and the 587 destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Some of the Israelites were still in the homeland, but many of the leading citizens were in exile at this point. Jeremiah writes to the remaining elders in exile, the priests, the prophets and all the others taken into exile.

So imagine the scene. The Jewish people had been forcefully deported from the southern kingdom of Judah -- they had been taken miles and miles away from their ancestral promised land into this foreign land -- Babylon (now modern-day Iraq). If google is right that's about 1600 miles from Jerusalem. They had been torn away from their families and their homes. They could no longer be near the dwelling place of God; they could not be present in their place of worship - the temple in Jerusalem, so their normal religious practices of sacrifice and prayer in the temple were out of the question in this strange land. They had lost their identities, their positions, their power, and pretty much everything they held dear. Jeremiah was writing to a group of devastated, traumatized people. They were without control of their own destinies. They must have been in despair. I am certain that Jeremiah's message to this portion of God's people who were now strangers in a strange land was not as simple as "chill."

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https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/world-refugee-day-facts/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIrpL9vvSJ6wIVw8DACH1G9gJ0EAAYASAAEgJ_zvD_BwE

Instead, Jeremiah's message is surprising and very challenging. So, listen to this! One of the things that Jeremiah wants the exiles to know is that there are false prophets who are giving them false hope. If you go back and read Jeremiah chapter 28, which I really hope you will do, you will read the fascinating story of Hananiah, whom Jeremiah accuses of being a false prophet - you can read about the interaction between Hananiah and Jeremiah in verse 28- and Hananiah ends up dying! You see, Hananiah had prophesied that the Babylonian exile would end within two years, and that all the exiles and the King and even the sacred vessels stolen from the temple would be returned to Jerusalem and King Nebuchadnezzar's reign would end. I could picture Hananiah wearing that "chill" t shirt - right -- this exile will only last two years, it will all be ok.

However, the Lord had given a different message to Jeremiah -- and Jeremiah was not the chill prophet, in fact he's sometimes called the weeping prophet. Jeremiah prophesied that the exile would last for 70 years, not 2 years. Verse 10 says, "When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place."

Seventy years of exile is a long time! In fact, it's literally a lifetime. Most likely none of the people alive that day would be going home -- ever! And Jeremiah gives them the bad news -- he says, you might as well settle down here in this foreign land. He says, while you are here you should plant crops; you should build buildings. You should marry, and you should have children. Your children should marry, and they should have children. Jeremiah's advice is to carry on with your ordinary daily lives. And I have to think that even in their ordinary lives, the exiles

must have experienced the extraordinary power and presence of God.

And then the prophet adds something that would have been a shocking thing to even consider doing. He says this in verse 7: Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

Promote the welfare of Babylon and pray for it --- Jeremiah proclaims that the exiles should pray for the people who captured them -- he's saying, "pray for your enemy," it is really in your own best interest. Instead of chilling and waiting to receive a life of peace as God's gift, the exiles are called to be active agents of peace through their actions and their prayers! The exiles have an active role partnering with God to bring peace into their lives and into the relationship between Israel and Babylon. And even in exile, this is part of God's plan and this is part of God's purpose for their lives. It seems that God's plans and purposes are not the plans that the exiles might have had in mind -- I am certain they would have chosen the defeat of Babylon and their return to their homeland. But instead the advice is to settle down in Babylon, live your lives, pray for your enemies--- and that will accomplish God's purpose in you.

First, live your ordinary lives. Second, pray for the one who caused your despair. And then, third, the Lord says continue to search for God with all of your heart; seek God in prayer and studying the scripture: When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me.

I think this is significant because the exiles are away from the temple in Jerusalem which was their ordinary method of seeking God. But God says continue to seek me in any way that you can. Even if the exiles are never able to go to the temple in Jerusalem again, when they seek God, they will find God. When we seek God, we will find God -- even in hard times. God's purpose and plan for their lives would be fulfilled even in this foreign land. Rather than forgetting the Lord, instead of becoming Babylonian and blending in, the Jewish people are called to find ways to remain faithful to God even in a strange land. Some believe this was the period when synagogues were first established to allow for small groups to pray and worship together away from the temple. Does that sound like modern days? They found alternate ways to seek God!

But, Jeremiah's words are not just an ancient story about a group of people who faced great suffering. Because haven't we humans continuously faced hard times and devastating losses across the span of history? For example, there continue to be millions of people torn away from their homelands both forcibly and voluntarily because they fear violence and war. There are over 70 million refugees in the world today and half of them are under the age of 18. And yet life continues even today in refugee camps and in countries providing safety. There are many stories of hope among desperate struggles. And my challenge for you will be to read some of these stories. At noon today, you will receive the higher, deeper, broader discussion guide and you can read some of these stories.²

Even if we have never experienced the devastation of being refugees, don't we personally find ourselves dealing with unexpected despair and loss in our lives? You see God's plan for

our lives doesn't include a life free from pain and loss. We humans face loss of loved ones, marriages, jobs and health. We face loss of dreams and innocence, loss of relationships. And of course, I think we might all agree that living in pandemic times feels like being a stranger in a strange land. We find ourselves in an unexpected situation with no clear answer of when we might go back to our previous lives. We don't know how to live our current lives. And we suspect that our lives will never be the same even when the pandemic is controlled. We are traumatized, devastated, So what hope is there in hard times?

Jeremiah's message of hope to the people who are living in the ruins is not simply to chill and wait for God to solve all their problems. Jeremiah is honest -- he says, this time of hardship is going to last a long time. But that doesn't mean that God has deserted them. Instead, he says: "you are still God's people, and God is still faithful to you." The message is that God was with the exiles, and God is with each of us. The message is that even if the exile lasts your whole lifetime, God goes with you.

Even when we are living in the ruins, even when we find ourselves in a place we never could have expected or imagined, our lives can have purpose and meaning. Even in times of trial, our words and our actions and our prayers serve God's good purposes to bring salvation to God's people.

Friends, our time on this planet is limited. We don't have time to just chill waiting for God to do something good for us. God has already done something good for us. God

https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/world-refugee-day-facts/?gclid=EAiaIQobChMIrpL9vvSJ6wIVw8DACH1G9gJ0EAAAYASAAEgJ_zvD_BwE

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/14/displaced-refugees-andrew-mcconnell-photographs>

continues pouring out new mercies on us every day. So how will we respond? What will we do for God? Especially in days of despair? How will we return God's faithfulness with our own? How might we find God's extraordinary love in the ordinary parts of our lives? How is it that we might build and plant? How might we continue on with our family lives? How might we pray for our enemies? How might we seek God with all of our hearts?

The way I envision "hope in the ruins" has changed this week as I've worked through this scripture. So, I want you to think about it again. What images come to mind that are personal to you when I say "hope in the ruins?" Where do you see the hope of God in your life?

By Friday I began to see hope in the ordinary gifts of God. My friend Brett Gosch got to go fishing this week, and he caught the most beautiful rainbow trout. I saw on facebook that this week was Rosemary Ayers' birthday, and her friend Jeanne Ledbetter baked her the most delicious looking peach cobbler. This week was also Wesley Mock's first birthday, and there was a huge celebration!

I also began to see hope in the way God's people remain faithful to God even in hard times. The Last Sunday Breakfast crew took it to the streets a couple of weeks ago -- they cooked and made

sack breakfasts and delivered right to people who were hungry. The cookies for care ministry baked cookies and delivered them to our local fire fighters to share God's love. We celebrated Holy Communion as an online community last week -- we were together even though we were far apart. And today, we welcome six young people who begin their journeys following Jesus. The loving presence of God abounds even when we feel like we are living in the ruins. This is no time to sit back and chill, but instead this is the time to continue to live out the plans that God has for us.

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

God is faithful to us, may we be faithful to God!