

This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *A Future with Hope*

Jeremiah 29:8-14

June 30, 2024

This summer at Second, our focus is scripture's promises for people of faith and doubt. The assumption behind that theme is that all of us are both, that we have faith, and we wrestle with doubt. I'm not sure about you, but sometimes I can experience both faith and doubt in a single hour. And we are also, I think it fair to say, people of both hope and despair. Often in roughly equal measure. We cling to hope. We are overwhelmed with despair.

If this description feels familiar to you, then the scripture you just heard might seem naïve or unhelpful in its simplicity. The words of the prophet Jeremiah publish a promise. The promise is this: God is in charge. And because of that, a hopeful future lies ahead. God has a plan. A plan for wholeness, for peace, for *shalom*, for welfare. A plan for blessing a future of hope.

Having heard the promise, we might wish we had the opportunity for a rebuttal. Which news sites are you reading, Jeremiah? How do these words land in the heart of graduates who look to what is next with anxious worry? How do they sound to those who are grieving loss—a loved one, a relationship, a job, a sense of confidence, a former strength now lost, a dream whose time has passed? Where is the hope for those who daily experience physical or emotional pain? And what about all of us who have desperately prayed that the future would be brighter for our children and our grandchildren, and who now wonder if our best days are in fact behind us? What is the source of your hope, Jeremiah? What kind of world are you living in?

That's a good question, and the answer might surprise you. What kind of world was Jeremiah living in?

Jeremiah's active life, his prophetic career, coincided with the greatest crisis in the history of his people. He lived through a period of unmitigated disaster. Absolute collapse of every kind. Destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The beginning of forced exile in Babylon. Imagine *these* words, *this* promise, spoken in *that* moment. I imagine that Jeremiah's original audience would also have appreciated the opportunity for a rebuttal because from where they stand, Nebuchadnezzar, the tyrant king of the Babylonian Empire, is calling all the shots. He's in charge. And as for this God for whom Jeremiah claims to speak, this God is absent at best and perhaps derelict in his duties. And so, Jeremiah's people wonder if their days, their best days, are behind them.

Now I do think that Jeremiah's people, like so many of us, have a profound longing to feel hope, to feel hope again. They wanted to believe. To the depths of their souls, they wanted to believe that what the prophet said was true. But there are so few signs of the kind of bright future he describes. Nevertheless, the prophet is insistent. Even now, he writes, though you cannot see it and may not even be capable of believing it, even now God is making plans.

This captivity, this hopelessness, this fear, this despair—this is not the end. Jeremiah promises that a new day will dawn. And our job, as people who have experienced the power of God in the past, is to stand on our tiptoes and live toward the promise we cannot yet see.

Hope, if it is true hope, is not flimsy, is not weak, is not naïve, and is never passive. The Apostle Paul says that *only* three things will survive, will endure, will last: faith, hope, and love. And so, hope is durable, durable in a way that optimism could never be.

And that's a good thing because hope must be durable. Living in this world will test the resiliency of our hope in ways we could not imagine. And when this happens, when it happens to you, to those you love, it is easier to give up. It is simpler to isolate ourselves. It is natural to allow despair to overwhelm us, to listen to voices that aim to convince us that hope is nothing more than a childish dream. If you have ever found yourself doomscrolling social media or worst-case-scenario-ing (that's a verb I created) everything at 4 o'clock in the morning, you know what I mean. I trust I am not the only one. Have you ever noticed how quickly despair expands, how it crowds out everything else? It takes up all the space in the room or in our minds. Have you ever observed how defeating despair can be, how it freezes us in our tracks, convincing us that it is foolish to believe a different future is possible? And we might as well quit now.

In my ministry I have walked alongside deeply faithful souls who have fallen victim to exile. They are pinned to a past they cannot change or trapped by the emptiness of what they always assumed mattered, swimming in possessions or power but utterly drained of purpose or passion. I've watched how faith fades. Vision grows dim. How past hope succumbs to the harshness of present reality. And perhaps this is where you find yourself this morning. If so, I believe that you have been led to this place because today's promise is for you.

First, let me be clear. The prophet Jeremiah was *not* a particularly optimistic person. Afterall, his nickname, well-earned, is the weeping prophet. Since first being called by God as a child, he has endured the betrayal of his people, the injustice of his nation, the failure of his leaders, and the judgment of his God. There are no stars in Jeremiah's eyes as he sits down to write a

letter to the exiles. Afterall, Nebuchadnezzar is on the throne. His people, Jeremiah's people, are scattered to the four winds, and all he has is this vision that will not let him go. All he knows is that God has promised a hopeful future. All he trusts is that it is still somehow possible. He will not live to see the fulfillment of his prophecy, and yet he cannot keep from sharing the hope that he has been given. Jeremiah is not filled with cheery optimism but by the defiant force of hope. And so, he gives voice to the promise. And he issues a bold charge: there is work for God's people to do.

Jeremiah is insistent that the circumstances of our lives and the state of the world do not dictate the character of our hope. I want to say that again. The circumstances of our lives and the state of our world do not dictate the character of our hope. We are not helpless in the face of all that seeks to immobilize or demoralize us. We have agency.

The prophet says that when we seek with all our heart, we will find God. When we call on God with all our hearts, we will be heard. We will be brought home. And we can choose to anchor our confidence in the promise of God's presence. We can look for signs of the Spirit in trying times. We can practice hope by providing hope to somebody else. Afterall, like all virtues, hope is grown by practice. We can be a beacon of hope in the life of someone else. That's what I saw all week long in the classrooms and gathering spaces across this building. Hope. Hope in the presence of volunteers who took a week of vacation or teenagers who got up early on summer break to be here each morning, smiles on their faces. I saw it in the bright eyes of children who felt loved here, just as they are, whose faith grew by leaps and bounds. I heard hope in the voice of a grandmother who sought me out on Friday morning to share that her grandson had come home on Wednesday and declared, "This was the best day of my life!"

According to the prophet Jeremiah, if you want to feel hopeful, you must not retreat or withdraw. Serve. Pray. Engage. Commit. Give. Invest your life in the life of

your community. Seek out the face of God in the faces and voices and stories of others. The best way out of despair is to do something for someone else.

A few summers ago, our family was in north Georgia for a long hike with some old friends. One of those friends is eighty-two years old, and Roger made his way through mountain laurel and up muddy hills with great, admirable finesse. Later, Roger was telling me about his other hobby. He loves to chop fallen trees into firewood. I've seen the man's shed. He has enough firewood saved for at least a dozen north Georgia winters, and yet, he keeps chopping. Perhaps that is optimism. His wife had told him that they would never live long enough to use all that firewood. And Roger said, "She's probably right, but then again, I know it will keep someone warm." And *that's* hope.

The superpower of trusting in a hopeful future is the capacity for good that it unlocks in us. This summer, our family has been slowly working our way through the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We finished the third movie, *Return of the King*, on Friday evening, and I was curious to see how the movies line up with the novels. And so, I pulled out Tolkien's novels. The storyline tracks well enough, but the constraints of a feature film left some of the book's most memorable lines on the cutting room floor, I'm afraid. For example, at the very end of the final book, my favorite character, the hobbit Sam, wakes from a very long sleep to the sound of a familiar voice, the great wizard Gandalf. And here, though absent from the movie, the great writer gives us the gift of these words:

"Sam lay back and stared with open mouth. For a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not [speak]. At last, he gasped: 'Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. *Is everything sad going to come untrue?'*"

Jeremiah's answer, despite all evidence to the contrary, is yes. By God's power, all that is broken will be repaired. Through God's grace, all that is torn apart will be woven together again. Because of God's love, all that is wounded will be healed. In

God's time, all that is wrong will be made right again. Someday, someday, everything sad will come untrue. And somehow, somehow, it will be all the greater for having once been lost.

I tell you a mystery. The future is filled with hope. Let's start chopping wood.