

## **ADVENT HOPE**

Jeremiah 29:4-7, 11

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If I were to give you a very brief, very rough crash course in Old Testament history, it might sound something like this: God promises to set aside a group of people for a particular purpose. They were going to be “model students” if you will, test cases...God would say to this particular group of people, live a certain way, live according to these rules, especially these ten rules, not because I want you to lead restrictive lives, but because I want you live in harmony, in shalom. And then I can show other nations the way to live. I can point to you as an example.

So God says to Abram, “you will be the father of this new nation; I will give you as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.” And a people develop. But people need land, they need a homeland. So God appoints Moses to lead the people towards their homeland. It takes them a long time to get there, and along the way, God gives them these rules for living. “I want you to be at peace with one another, so don’t go after each other’s things, don’t steal; take care of the elderly, the widows and orphans and all who are vulnerable; don’t go after each other’s beloved partners, and do not kill each other.” “Practice a trusting way of life and faith until it becomes second nature to you.”

The people reach the promised land. They are ruled by kings and judges, some of them good leaders, some of them not. Whenever the people forget God’s rules, whenever they forget God, God sends prophets, people to speak for God, and the prophets re-

mind people of who they are and who they are called to be. The prophets nudge people back into obedience.

The years go by, decades and centuries. And then one day, Israel is invaded. Many of its people are forced into exile. The book of Kings says that the exile is a punishment for all of the ways that the people of Israel had disobeyed God.

And that's where our story for today picks up. The people of Israel are living in Babylon, in a foreign land, and they are longing to return home. They're blaming God, they're looking for a leader, they're hoping to hear some good news. Some people are telling them just what they want to hear. "The exile is almost over. Pack your bags. You'll be able to head home any day now." But Jeremiah claims to be speaking for God, and he is a different message, a very unwelcome message. He says to the exiled and homesick people, "You need to put down roots here." Quite literally. "Plant gardens. Build houses. You are going to raise your children here. In fact, your grandchildren will grow up here." And as if that wasn't bad enough, Jeremiah says, "Oh, yes, there's one more thing God wants you to do. Pray for this city where you are now living. Pray for its welfare."

Can you imagine how well this message was received? You know that phrase, "Don't shoot the messenger?" Jeremiah tells the people that not only will they not return home in their lifetimes - not only will their children not return home in their lifetimes...but they are expected to pray for the welfare of the land of their invaders and their captors! It's a hugely unpopular message.

Exile. It's an experience. The experience of feeling out of place, displaced. It's the experience of feeling like you're not at home, that you don't belong. I submit to you

that it's a feeling many of us have right now, in a different way, to be sure, but still. I hear phrases like this often, "I don't understand what's happening in our country. No one can talk to each other anymore. We are so divided, along so many different lines." It happens to us personally, too, a feeling of exile, of brokenness, despair, hopelessness, when life just doesn't turn out the way we thought it would. Isn't it a kind of exile when the future you had counted on is no longer? The loss of a job and with it economic security. The loss of a relationship for any number of reasons. A serious illness. The death of a loved one. Even just coming to terms with the rapid and radical change all around us, and feeling lost and uncertain in the world. It's all a form of exile.

And like our mothers and fathers in the faith, we too want God to just make it better. Take away the pain, restore some order to the chaos of our world.

And yet the message comes to us, as it did to them. Hunker down. You're in this for the long haul. Plant seeds. Invest in the future. Raise your children. Help raise your grandchildren. Teach them what you believe, show them what your values are; they will make the future better.

We had a staff planning retreat this week and Nate talked about some of the youth group alums who are now in college who are pursuing mission trips and experiences in college and even out of college. He talked about how gratifying it is to see that those seeds that are planted here, those seeds that are nurtured in their homes, are coming to fruition. Young men and women have caught the mission "bug" and don't see their mission trips as one-time experiences but as a way of life.

You don't always see the fruits of the seeds you plant. Some plants take longer than others to grow to full maturity. Planting is an act of faith. We plant because we believe in a better future.

It is so tempting, I know it is, to wallow in despair. To complain about how bad things are, to blame the other political side, to post angry outrages on Facebook. It is also tempting to just ignore it all and focus on what brings us pleasure in the here and now. But the Bible gives us neither option.

There is work to be done. There are houses to be built and there are gardens to be planted. Each nail we hammer, each row that we water is an act of hope. It is an act of resistance against the voices of despair, an act of resistance against the forces of violence and evil which threaten to take over.

We do it because of what comes in verse 11 of our passage for today. Because of this good news. You see, Jeremiah did have this message to deliver as well. The exile wasn't over, but it wouldn't last forever either. Better days were coming. Here's verse 11: "For surely 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." God does not and will not abandon us. God has plans for us, for all of us, plans for a future with hope.

Waiting for that future is not passive. The waiting of Advent is not sitting around twiddling your thumbs waiting. It is actively working to bring about that better future.

I believe that God has planted something, too. God has planted a seed within each of us. There is something that each of us is called to do, something that tugs at us, that nudges us, that pulls on our heartstrings. If we pay attention, if we're attentive, which sometimes requires patience and stillness, we will know what it is. Are you called to help

teach someone to read? Are you called to volunteer at a school? Are you called to provide respite care for a busy single parent, or for someone caring for a loved one with dementia? To donate money to help find a cure for a disease? To lobby our legislators to work to stop the plague of gun violence? Which seed are you called to plant?

The second piece of good news is that we don't have to do this work alone. The Christian faith is communal. We are here to encourage one another and support one another, to bolster each other, so that we can all keep the faith and maintain our spirit of hope. There is someone else in this church family, I guarantee you, who shares your calling. You don't have to do it alone; in fact you shouldn't even try.

In these times, when we feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world and of our own lives, let us lean into each other, lean on each other, and find hope in the knowledge that we are not alone. We need to balance our lives with quiet and meditation, as well as with raucous laughter and loud music; we need to sing and pray and celebrate and give thanks. Because this work is the work of a lifetime. It is hard work planting gardens, but when those seeds come up, when they first begin to sprout, is there any more hopeful feeling? And when the harvest comes and you eat the food you grew yourself, does anything taste better? God has plans for us, plans for a future filled with hope. Surely we can do our part and keep on, gardening faithfully, planting the seeds of love and justice, and doing it together.