

## **SONGS OF JOY AND LAUGHTER WILL AGAIN BE HEARD**

Jeremiah 33:10-15

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(online worship only)

Early last Sunday morning, I glanced at my calendar. I had three events written - one had been crossed out. My eyes lingered on the event I had written there over a year ago - two words "Fall Fest". Fall Fest is a major outreach and social event for our church. Immediately I remembered Fall Fest last year - hundreds of people attended, many of them non-members. We had music, food, games, a petting zoo, bounce houses, a cake walk, and we ended the day with a clam bake. Normally the Fall Fest planning team would have spent hours and hours preparing, going over details again and again. Last Sunday morning I sent a text to four of my colleagues and said, "Are you ready for Fall Fest?" Kim Rose, our outreach coordinator, said, "What I wouldn't do for a fall fest!" (even though it's a lot of work!) Kim, like many people, is itching for a big party.

Also last Sunday, in my sermon, I talked about the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, and the speech Solomon gave at that event - in that speech, he reaffirmed the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. He said, "There will be difficult times ahead. God, there will be times when we'll call on you and we expect you to be with us. And we'll do our part by following your commandments."

Solomon was right - there were hard times to come for the people of Israel, and the worst happened in the year 587 BCE. Those of you that have been on the front lines of war may be able to relate to this scene more than the rest of us. The

Babylonian army stormed the walls of Jerusalem and began a campaign that lasted well over a year. The magnificent temple was completely destroyed. The whole city was plundered and set on fire. The residents who were considered elite - those with professional skills, for example - were taken to Babylon as captives. They ended up living in captivity for around 50 years - whole generations living as refugees.

In the midst of this exile, the prophet Jeremiah speaks for God. "The days are surely coming," God says, "when you will return home. The days are surely coming when you will celebrate again - sounds of joy and laughter will again be heard. You will have wedding feasts again."

Jeremiah isn't trying to instill false hope. Jeremiah is God's mouth piece here. God says, "Do not despair, because I am still with you and there are better days to come."

Despair occurs when we cannot envision a better future, when we cannot imagine the future God has in mind for us. When people despair, they experience an utter lack of hope. If you look around you and notice all that is bad, and you can't see things getting better, that's despair.

The **antidote** to despair is the ability to imagine and envision an alternative future.

During the exile, when the people didn't have a timeline for when it would end, when they were so tempted to just give up their faith altogether, give up their way of life and become like the Babylonians who captured them...when they were despairing, the prophet's message said to them, "Remember who God is. God **will** keep God's promises to you. God intends for you to live in safety, peace, and righteousness. Keep

on being God's people. Observe the sabbath. Tell the faith stories to your children. You will want that strong foundation of worship to return to when you come home. And you will."

The Bible gives us a variety of ways to understand God; God is described in different ways throughout the Bible. I have said before that the way we think of God really matters; it impacts our spirituality and our behavior. For example, when you focus on God's role as creator, you will be more attentive to the gifts of nature and more appreciative of them. When you focus on times when God acts as a judge, you might feel more guilty and ashamed of mistakes you've made. The Bible gives us multiple images because God relates to us in different ways. Keeping in mind the many different images of God helps our understanding of God become broader and deeper.

This morning I'm giving you an assignment. For the next week, try thinking of God in this way. Think of God as the one who gives us visions and dreams of a better world. God, the Vision-Giver. Every day as you take a moment to pray, to reflect, maybe as you're walking, as you're just waking up or as you're going to bed, think of God the Vision-Giver and ask yourself, "What kind of world does God want for us in the future?"

Imagine a world where no one rests until **every person** has the basic necessities of life.

Imagine a future where the environment is treated with loving care, where all of the best minds work together to protect and preserve our planet.

Imagine communities that are organized to provide networks of care for the lonely and the vulnerable.

Imagine a legislative body in which public servants sit down together to create solutions for problems, not caring about whose side wins, rather focused entirely on making the nation work for all people.

Envisioning a better future is a powerful vehicle of hope.

We believe that we are created in God's image, and so we are created to be creators, to be creative, inventive, to use our God-given talents to help make that better future a reality. Think of all of the people throughout the centuries who have first imagined something and then made it happen.

Michelangelo looked at a flawed piece of marble and before he touched it once, he saw in it one of the most beautiful sculptures ever made. When Doug and I were in Europe seven years ago during my sabbatical, we saw a lot of art, but seeing the David was memorable. It is breathtaking.

Jonas Salk was born to Russian-Jewish parents and was the first in his family to go to college. He became an epidemiologist and he believed he could develop a vaccine for polio, a disease which was infecting over 45,000 children a year, paralyzing many. The medical community was skeptical but he persisted. He tried out the first vaccine on himself and his own family. Eventually a nationwide test proved the vaccine to be safe and effective. He never sought a patent for it nor any financial gain, preferring it to be distributed as widely as possible. He spent his last years working on a vaccine for AIDS. His life philosophy can be summed up with this quote of his: "Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality." (repeat)

Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his most famous speech, "I have a dream.". It isn't remembered just because it was moving and eloquent. It was a transformative speech because King was speaking as a prophet; he was speaking for God, articulating God's vision for an alternative future, a better world. When we hear those words, we recognize God's values and we are moved, every time, because they have such deep truth. Of course people should not be judged by the color of their skin. Of course it is the content of someone's character that matters the most! Of course it is God's will for all children, of every color, to hold hands with one another. We can imagine it too.

Like the people of Israel, we are living in a kind of exile. Let's quickly add that we are spending exile in our comfortable homes, and let us not forget that privilege. But still, we've been removed from so much, and we don't know when it will end. The people of Israel felt like giving up. Of course they did! After decades away, they'd forgotten what home was like. We too are tempted to fall into despair or just plain laziness.

Listen to the prophet say to us, as he did to them, "The God we worship is a God who brings people home. The God we worship is the God of Easter who has not quit, who does not give up, not even on that dread Friday or that misery-lasting Saturday."

God is giving us, even now, visions of a better world, an alternative future. The more we strive to see it, the more we describe it to ourselves and to one another, we will become aware that we can help make it a reality. There are things we can do, in the present moment, to help bring about God's imagined future. We can do them together, and we **ARE** doing some of them together in this church.

One of the great hymns of the church is one we normally sing on Thanksgiving Sunday - "Now Thank We All Our God." The opening verse says, "Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices; who, from our mother's arms, hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

I never knew anything about this hymn until recently. If I had to guess, I probably would have told you it was written by someone who was comfortably aware of all of God's blessings.

But here's the whole story. It was written by German Pastor Martin Rinkart during the 30 year's war. He wrote it as a table grace for his family. The 30 years war was deadly as an armed conflict **AND** because of massive outbreaks of typhus and the bubonic plague. Pastor Rinkart was a pastor in a walled city which became a refuge for many fleeing war and pestilence. As other pastors left or died, he was the only minister left in the city. He often buried as many as 40 or 50 people a day, including one day his own wife who died of the pestilence. Yet he wrote these words, "O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in God's grace, and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next."

How could Martin Rinkart not sink into despair? Because he kept before him the presence of God, the Vision-Giver. Not even a 30 years' war lasts forever. Neither does any virus.

The Babylonian captivity ended, too, and the Jewish people returned home. They rebuilt the temple and went back to worship, because they had kept their traditions

alive for all those years. They'd kept the sabbath, remembered the psalms and introduced their children to the stories of their faith.

We will have parties again, and Fall Fests, and big weddings. Let us do everything we can so that the world we return to is better than the one we left behind in March. More loving. More just. More peaceful. More like the God in whose name we place our trust. Amen.

Inspiration and quotes for this sermon come from Walter Brueggemann, [Virus as a Summons to Faith](#)