

**A YEAR TO RECONNECT**  
Jeremiah 31:1-14 (selected verses)

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I never liked History courses when I was in school. The emphasis seemed to be on dates - on WHEN something happened as opposed to the MEANING of the event. We always seemed to be studying one war or another.

But as an adult, I have become much more interested in history. Travel helps. When I am in a place where something significant happened, I feel more connected to it. The discovery of historical fiction - history told through story - has helped me learn far more than I did through textbooks.

I find it comforting to look at historical events that are similar in some ways to the current moment. Realizing that other people have been through traumatic, challenging times is a useful perspective.

A few years ago, when incidents of racism became increasingly blatant and public, I found myself reading stories of resistance to the Nazi regime. Reading true stories of people who courageously stood up to the hatred and bigotry of their time was inspiring.

Reading biographies, autobiographies and memoirs - or watching them as they become movies - helps us remember that there has never been a perfect period of history, and that in every era people summon up the bravery and persistence that is called for to not only survive but to experience human thriving.

During the pandemic, I have turned to the story of exile in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament. It's not a pure parallel, but the literature of the exile resonates with our time and circumstance.

The Jewish-Babylonian War resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and many residents taken captive, forced to leave their country to live in Babylon - the exile lasted 50 to 60 years. The Old Testament narratives of the exile ask the question - what happens to the people known as the chosen people, when they are no longer in the promised land? Do they maintain their worship practices when they are not allowed to go to the temple - when, in fact, there's not even a temple to go to? Do they eventually just adopt the worship practices of the Babylonians? And what happens when they finally get to go home?

Now the pandemic is not the same as a war. But it **IS** something that is not entirely in our control. It **HAS** caused us to feel out of place. We haven't been forced to leave our homes - to the contrary, sometimes we have been forced to stay at home. But it has all felt like a kind of an exile. Some of our normal freedoms have been taken away. We have been so confused as the situation has changed, the protocol has changed. Schools have open and closed. Masks have been required and not required. The lingering pandemic is like a cloud that is always over our heads. Sometimes it's just there, ever so light, and sometimes it's menacing and blocks out everything else.

Like the people of Israel exiled to Babylon, our spiritual practices have been disrupted. As grateful as we are for the technology that has sustained us, we also know it's not the same. Many people have stayed in close touch with the church, but many

have drifted away, too. As much as we have tried to reach out, there are those who are slipping through the cracks.

So we are calling this year, 2022, The Year to Reconnect.

We don't know what this year will bring - no one seems to be making predictions anymore, have you noticed? But we know that we can be intentional about every opportunity we have to deepen our relationships - our relationships with one another, with our own selves, and our relationship with God. The circumstances might not be ideal again this year - but even in exile, God's people found ways to adapt their spiritual practices so they would remain vital. They learned, as scripture says, how to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land."

In our passage for today from Jeremiah, God tells those exiled that they are not forgotten, that better days are coming. Most importantly, God reassures them that they are still beloved. Here's what God says - to them, and to us: "I have loved you with a love that lasts forever...again, I will build you up. Again, you will dance with joy. Your lives will be like a ash garden; you will grieve no more. I will turn your mourning into laughter and your sadness into joy. I will comfort you. I will shower you with abundant gifts."

You could read those words and say, "God is promising that there will be a time when the shadow of the pandemic leaves us completely." Or you could read these words to say that - despite the pandemic, despite all the challenges that surround us, **EVEN SO** we can affirm our faith in God whose love is constant, God who wants good things for all creation, including us.

As this new year begins, I imagine that one thing we all desire - whether this is a conscious desire or not - is for our lives to have meaning. And one of the keys to a meaningful life is connection, belonging, relationships.

Psychologists and neurologists alike will tell us that we are hard-wired for connection. Belonging doesn't just happen when you sign your name on a piece of paper. The emotional, mental and spiritual benefits of belonging happen when we feel a sense of connectedness to others - when we feel attached, close and accepted. We don't all agree about everything in this church, but we do know that we share a basic set of values, a similar worldview. Feeling a part of a community like this one brings benefits that are actually scientifically-proven. [A recent MIT study](#) found we crave interactions in the same region of our brains where we crave food, and [another study showed](#) we experience social exclusion in the same region of our brain where we experience physical pain.

Many of you found creative ways to connect with each other during the worst of the pandemic - I heard of weekly zoom meetings in which friends played cards together, I witnessed gatherings in parks when the weather was good, I know many of you deliberately worked to stay in touch. And during the time that the church was closed for in-person worship, not a week went by when we didn't hear from our members how grateful they were for our online worship.

A few years ago, we had a very icy Sunday morning with treacherous conditions, especially on our blacktop parking lot. There is just no way to make a parking lot safe in that kind of weather. Several of us were inside the church building early, wondering what our crowd would be like. I remember looking out the front door and seeing that

Bob Marimon had arrived. Bob was in his early 90's at the time, a long-time faithful church member. After we saw Bob's car arrive, we saw several other people pull into the parking lot, all of them over 80. Tim and I observed that, as we were manning the doors, concerned about someone falling. There's more than one reason why that contingent of the church was here on an icy Sunday morning, even though arguably it was most dangerous for that segment of the population. 80 and 90 year olds coming to church in the sleet is a testament to the strong pull of relationships. People who have known each other for decades deeply value their relationships with each other and long to see one another.

It is my profound desire that everyone in this congregation - whether official member or not - feels connected. Connected to another person, connected to a ministry. The old hymn says, "Blessed be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love." One cannot be a Christian alone. There's something about relationship that is at the heart of our faith.

Church staff and leaders will be intentionally working on connecting our community members with each other this year. But The Year to Reconnect is also about our own personal connections with our deeper selves. It's easy, in this loud and distracted world, to lose touch with who we really are, who we are meant to be. It's easy to compare ourselves with others, and usually our comparisons are negative, especially if we're using social media. Your home will never look as perfect as someone else's picture, your face will never look as beautiful as someone else's photoshopped face, your family get-togethers will never be as fun as someone else's staged events. We are influenced, even when we don't try to be, by the constant

barrage of scenes from other people's lives. During this year, I encourage you to find some quiet time to reflect on the questions, "Who am I? What is my life saying to me right now?" How can we re-connect with our own goals and dreams, at every age?

Finally, we will focus this year on how we can reconnect with God. All of these paths of reconnection are similar, and they often converge. Taking the time to remember who you are created to be is not a selfish act; it is a deeply spiritual act. Reconnecting with God and reconnecting with your own sense of calling are not two separate projects - they go together.

I read several articles this week that encouraged people to NOT make New Year's resolutions this year. For one thing, it's been a hard two years for everyone. We've lived through so much - do we really need to add something to our plate, to make life even more difficult for ourselves? Some people don't recommend making New Year's resolutions because they so often result in us feeling badly about ourselves when we can't fulfill them...feeling like failures, and perhaps ending up in a less healthy place than when we started. I understand all of that, and I also understand very well how many people are living with negative self-esteem and battling addiction, mental illness and other demons.

But I'm not ready to give up on the idea of living intentionally. When I look at the life of Jesus, I see how well-balanced and grounded he was. He knew who he was, he had a crystal-clear understanding of his purpose and call. He was able to respond to people with compassion and really see them, because he took the time to nurture his own spirit and reconnect with God.

Welcome to 2022, A Year to Reconnect - with each other, with our own spirits, and with God who is with us in this present moment.

In a moment, as Scott plays some music for us, you are going to be invited to walk towards these front tables and take a star word. You'll notice that the words are face-down; the idea is this. If the word were face-up, you might choose a word that you would naturally gravitate towards, or a word you think you need. Star words are meant to include an element of surprise - they are meant to spark an epiphany, a moment of aha revelation...take a word and keep it in a place where you'll see it. On your desk, your bathroom mirror, your dashboard, wherever works best for you. See if the word speaks to you about your connection to God and yourself in some interesting enlightening ways this year. Perhaps the word will guide you towards some new insights. But first - let us pray.

Holy God, thank you for the gift of new beginnings. As we enter this new year together, remind us that we don't have to do anything or change anything about ourselves in order to earn your love. Your love is a gift, freely given, there for us to accept. Still you give us the opportunity to change and to grow. For all of your gifts to us, we are abundantly grateful. In Jesus' name. Amen.