

Future Hope

The Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

June 2, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 29:11-14

This text from Jeremiah 29 is probably one of the best known, if not the best known, of the entire book. On the surface alone it is a powerful text, clearly stating that God is paying attention to the bad things that are happening and God assures the people of not only a future, but a future filled with hope. Jeremiah assures the people directly and powerfully that God is still in the midst of the people despite their having been carried off into captivity in Babylon. God has not abandoned them, even though it feels as if that is the case. Even in the midst of these current tragic circumstances – defeat of the kingdom of Judah in repeated wars with Babylon and now captivity in Babylon – God is still present, is still working, is still loving the people in the midst of the worst that could happen to them. This was, and is, a simply extraordinary message from Jeremiah promising as it does that God is still at work for the betterment of God’s people in the midst of the most tragic circumstances possible.

Important to understand about Jeremiah and this beautiful text, however, is that Jeremiah was not well liked by other prophets (it was an actual occupation at the time) or by the other religious and community leaders of what is called the Diaspora

community in Babylon. The Diaspora was the name used to describe the community of Jewish people who had been carried off into captivity following the defeat of the kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. The other prophets, and the religious and community leaders of this group were all about doom and gloom as they mourned their defeat in battle and subsequent loss of their homes in Jerusalem. They longed and prayed for only one thing – to be returned immediately to Jerusalem by some act of God and they insisted this would happen because it had to happen. The people were not to settle in and build new lives in this place. All their energies were to be devoted to finding a way to make atonement with God, to appease God so they could get back to Jerusalem as quickly as possible. They believed only this immediate restoration of fortune would prove that God was still with them, that God still cared.

Enter Jeremiah who says the exact opposite. “Build houses and live in them” he says in verse 5. “Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters.” Don’t get lost in fretting about what you’ve lost Jeremiah said. Step out in faith and dare to create new lives right where you are! He might have gotten away with this instruction to the people but for some he crossed a line when he asked them to pray for the welfare of Babylon, the city where they now resided, the capital city of the army which had defeated them, destroyed their homes and

carried them away to this foreign land. Pray for Babylon! We can't do that, the other religious leaders said. Yes, you can and you must, Jeremiah explained. Because the welfare of Babylon is your welfare. You must pray for the well-being of your new home here because its well-being is truly your own. Jeremiah didn't stop here though. He went on to challenge the other prophets and religious leaders who were urging the people to remain in lament and sadness, only praying for what was not real in this moment – their return to Jerusalem. “Do not listen to the dreams they dream,” Jeremiah says to the people. “It is a lie.” Gutsy!!

Now we come to the point in the story where this morning's text comes into the picture. “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.” To give you a future with hope! This is what God is doing right now, Jeremiah says to the people. I know things seem bad. I know this is not what any of us wanted our situation to be, but here we are. This is where God wants us to be right now for reasons we don't know and can't possibly understand for the simple reason that we are not God. What Jeremiah is trying to teach the people, trying to get them to understand in order to be transformed into the new life God has in mind for each of them is this: Future hope is always anchored in present reality. You will never find a future with hope if you can't find the hope in the present on which to build your own

bridge to the future. Jeremiah's admonitions to the people to move ahead with their lives – to build homes and plant gardens and get married and have babies – this is a testament that they trust God's promise of hope in the future by acting and living hopefully in the present. In a very real way Jeremiah is encouraging the people to begin creating, building, their own hope-filled future by living a hope-grounded life in the here and now. You won't get to hope in the future if you don't live in hope right now, Jeremiah tells the people.

Seems like this powerful, transformative message would be enough for Jeremiah but it's not. He keeps going. "Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." Let's look at this a little closer. Jeremiah tells the people that they are to build hopeful lives right where they are, trusting that God does have plans for their welfare and not harm, that God will give them a future filled with hope once they create this foundation of hope for themselves. Then, and only then, will God truly hear their prayers. This is because only when they have abandoned their own fears and laments will they be able to search for God with all their hearts. With *all* their hearts. There's nothing halfway about trusting God knows what God is doing, Jeremiah tells them. You either believe that, or you don't. You either act on that belief by creating hope-grounded lives right here

and right now, or you don't. And if you don't, you'll never truly find God. You'll never really know who God is and what God can do for you unless you let God be God in the present as well as in the future. This is all in your hands, Jeremiah says. God is making it possible for you to do this. Build new lives reflecting your trust in God's promise of a future filled with hope, or stay stuck in misery and sadness, thinking God has abandoned you because life is not the way you want it to be. No, that's not how this works, Jeremiah says. This is a two-way bargain between you and God. God promises hope and a future and you build a life grounded in that hope in whatever situation you find yourself. You either trust God or you don't. Put another way, Jeremiah is saying you just can't second-guess God.

Jeremiah's understanding of hope contains some echoes of how we look at hope today, generally speaking. I think we all associate hope with God. We trust that God wants the best for us and that is a kind of hope. What's unique about Jeremiah's sense of hope, though, is that he sees hope as not just something that is future oriented. Let me explain. We might say, I hope the weather cooperates so my garden thrives this year. Okay, fine. Jeremiah would say, plant the garden in confidence that it will do well trusting as you do that however it ultimately turns out is reflective of God's will. Jeremiah believed and taught that the hope of the future must begin with hope lived out in the present,

no matter how difficult it is to do that, no matter how great the tragedy experienced in the present moment.

On the one hand, this seems to be a pretty common sense approach to life – a sort of “life is what you make it” kind of attitude. And I think that’s not far off from what he’s saying. It does come off as a little Pollyanna-ish though – Like saying “when life hands you lemons, just make lemonade” – as if that were an easy thing to do. Let’s be honest, there are times when that is not the case. Sometimes life can be just crushing. Medical problems too often point away from a hope-filled future and toward a scary one where real life and death issues loom large. A job loss, a house fire, a car accident – all of these can be factors that precipitate a cascading experience of economic and emotional issues that can wash us away like dead trees carried away by a flooding river. How can Jeremiah possibly expect people – expect us – to build lives of hope in the midst of such catastrophes? Honestly, I don’t know what Jeremiah would say but he seems like a pretty practical guy to me which is why I think his answer to any seemingly impossible catastrophe would be pretty basic – you build hope one step at a time, whenever and wherever you can find it. And, you may have to dig deep to find it. Really deep. I also imagine he’d say that when you’ve exhausted everything else, when you’ve given up on unrealistic expectations and impossible dreams, you’re left with what’s real and that’s the moment when

you will find God. Jeremiah says, “I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you ... back to me.” I will be with you always, God says, especially when everything else disappears because it’s then that you can truly find me. No matter what, God is the hope on which we build our lives and our futures. And when the future seems to fall apart before our eyes, God is still there waiting to welcome us back.

Hope is front and center these days as graduation season kicks into full gear. Many colleges and universities have already celebrated their graduates in May and high schools are following suit this month. I can state from personal experience that hope for a desired future is the pre-eminent topic of many a graduation speech offered by celebrities and students alike. I have no doubt a few of these speeches will be outstanding, a few will be real duds and most will be pleasant and even momentarily inspiring. But I’m pretty confident none of them will come close to Jeremiah’s sage counsel to remember that a hope-filled future always begins in a hope-grounded present. The foundation of a hope-filled future is always built in the present, one brick at a time, no matter what the circumstances. Hope lived into reality one day at a time, trusting always in the promises of God, makes hope for the future more than just a dream. It literally makes it real. Amen.

