

Healing for a Future with Hope

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship

on February 7, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

A future with hope. Those four words beautifully capture the essence of the human experience. Everyone, absolutely everyone, wants a future with hope. Everyone wants, and needs, something to look forward to, something to spur them on through the current challenges to reach for what lies beyond. Absolutely everyone wants a future worth having, and that desire is the birthplace of hope. This is not to say that hopelessness doesn't exist because it does. It exists in refugee camps and war zones all around the world. It exists in immigrant detention facilities right here in the United States. It also exists here in places as diverse as the inner-city streets of Detroit and the rolling hills of Appalachia where poverty is soul crushing and feels inescapable which often it is. But not always. And that not always is just as real as the hopeless reality in which seeds of hope somehow take root. They take root in hopelessness because the spark of the divine flickers and then bursts into flame in the hearts of some, refusing to be extinguished by the poverty, hunger and poor health encountered at every turn. These are the ones who eventually find their voice and the strength to fight for the hopelessness from which they came. They work to escape gritty streets and barren hillsides which sought to keep them down and beat them back. They refuse to give in to a system designed to keep them captive and in that refusal we are able to glimpse God at work, if we look closely enough, if we dare to see beyond appearances.

Of course, hope is vital to our overall sense of well-being, to our overall physical health. This we know all too well. When our doctor gives us news we'd rather not hear – like surgery is needed or cancer has returned – it's a gut punch that knocks the hope right out of us, even if just for a moment. But, as the shock and worry subside, hope can and often does creep back in. The choice is to be made is to focus on what is possible instead of what isn't. Decisions such as these grow out of the hope that is part of the human spirit, hope that can be diminished and even banished if we let it. But it will always make a return, even if it doesn't look like hope

anymore. This is what happens when a person makes peace with an end to life, focusing on making the most of whatever time remains. Living life to the fullest in the face of knowing it soon will end. This, dear ones, is truly courageous hope sometimes misunderstood as surrender. This kind of hope is life-giving even as death approaches. A strange thing to think about in this way, I know. But as the deaths from Covid rise, and we remember the now six deaths resulting from the January 6 insurrection, we must make our own peace with these twin realities as a step forward toward the healing we so desperately need for ourselves and our beloved country some elements of which have felt unrecognizable of late. Healing, dear ones, is the key to hope being born out of fear and hopelessness. Healing is the gateway to a life of hope, especially when hope seems only a distant dream.

The prophet Jeremiah understood this connection between healing and hope being reborn very well, as the text we read this morning reveals. Understanding a bit of the background of the situation Jeremiah is addressing here will be helpful. First, Jeremiah was a prophet, or someone who speaks for God. Literally. That was his job. It was not the same thing as being a priest because that role was based on heredity (you were born into that priestly tribe) and that role was very precisely delineated in the Pentateuch, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. Executing the prescribed Temple sacrifices and rituals at the correct time of year and in the exact right way was the priest's job. No pastoral counseling. No preaching or teaching, per se. Just presiding over rituals and rites. Not so with prophets like Jeremiah. Prophets were picked by God and God told them what to say, or so the theory went. Of course, as you might imagine, this made figuring out who was really a prophet and who was a self-designated opportunist difficult to determine at times. But, no matter. A true prophet, like Jeremiah, pushed ahead with his charge from God and this is what Jeremiah is doing in the text we read this morning.

Important to understand here is that this text in its original form was a letter Jeremiah wrote from his location in Jerusalem to the recently exiled leadership now in Babylon after the defeat of the Israelites and the destruction of Jerusalem. The Babylonians were especially adept at keeping resistance from conquered peoples under their control because they would take only the leadership captive, removing them from their

homelands where they could foment discontent. Instead, they were physically relocated to Babylon where they were essentially set loose, but with no chance to return to home. They were captives behind city walls in a strange city. They were angry at being defeated and being removed from their homes. They wanted to fight back and defeat the Babylonians so they could go home to Jerusalem. This was completely impossible for many reasons, a fact Jeremiah understood. So, his purpose in sending them his letter was to get them to see their situation differently. Put into today's parlance, Jeremiah wanted to reframe their situation for them so they could see how God was still acting through it. And he knew they needed to heal first from all they had been through with the war and defeat, with the arduous journey to Babylon only to be plunked down in a strange place, no future in sight. He understood their anger but he also knew that staying angry would never allow them to heal and if they could not heal, they could not receive God's guidance for how to reclaim their lives. So, Jeremiah gave them a "to do" list.

Jeremiah literally gave them a list of things to focus on instead of their anger and fear. Here's what he told them to do. First, "build houses and live in them." Put another way, he's telling them to commit to being where they are. Don't live in tents or temporary housing. Build a permanent house. Second, "plant gardens and eat" what they produce. Be healthy, he is telling them. Take care of yourselves. Build up your strength for whatever lies ahead. Third, he tells them to build families. Take spouses, have children, build families. Build lives right here in this strange land because you need the love and support families provide. Fourth, he tells them to "seek the welfare of the city" to which God has sent them. He is literally telling them to pray for their captors! He is telling them to pray for the best possible situations in the place where they are instead of the place where they were but may never be again because it is in their own best interests if the place where they are living is safe and its people are happy and secure.

Then he tells them something sort of surprising but just as important as anything else. He tells them not "to be deceived by prophets and diviners" who are telling them lies about what is going to happen. This is a key insight for understanding what is going here for Jeremiah and the

people he is trying to guide toward healing and hope. He is telling them that there are people in their own group who are lying to them about what they should be doing, and they have to be careful not to fall victim to their lies because those lies will lead them away from God. Jeremiah tells them God has said, “I did not send them.” They may tell you they are from God, Jeremiah says, but they are not. Do not believe them for they will only lead you away from God and God’s will for you. And how are the people to know who is from God and who is not? That’s always the million dollar question, isn’t it? Jeremiah explains it beautifully. He reminds them of God’s promises and reminds them of God’s words: “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.” There it is, right there. A future with hope. That is always God’s desire for God’s people. Not vengeance. Not power. Not destruction. Not greed run rampant. God wants always God’s people to have a future with hope, where life is challenging but ultimately good.

Jeremiah then reminds the people that none of this is a hand-out from God. They have to work for it. They have to build the houses and plant the gardens and create the families. They have to turn away from false prophets. And they have to pray to God, searching for God, with all their hearts. At this point, Jeremiah says something really curious about God. “If you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.” I will *let* you find me? What’s up with that? Simple, it goes back to that whole notion Jeremiah is reinforcing here – that being in this kind of trusting relationship with God takes real effort. It does not just happen. You can’t just give it lip service. You have to work at it. You have to work at trusting that God does indeed have a plan for you, a plan for a future with hope. You have to work at building a life, especially in those moments when it feels like life is working against you! Put another way, dear ones, Jeremiah is reminding us all that a working relationship with God does in fact take work and effort on our part. You have to do what you need to do to heal from pain and trauma life brings your way, trusting that God goes with you every step of the way. You have to work at building a happy life, a healthy life, a life grounded in faith and trust that with God all things are possible. You have to work at all this. It is not a hand-out to you from God.

So, dear ones, as you head back out into your week, remember Jeremiah's words of encouragement to all of us struggling through difficult and even scary times in our own lives personally and the life of our nation. Remember to search diligently for healing and happiness and give thanks to God when it comes to you. Remember to give your all to life each day, praising God for every moment. Remember to reach out to help all those others who are struggling. And remember always that God promises each of us that if we seek for God, we will find God. If we trust in God's promise of a future with hope, that future we will open out before us. Is this easy to do? Heck no! Some days it is downright impossible to do. But those are also the days when Jeremiah's advice makes the most sense – building the future God wants for you begins with you and it is a task that never really ends. Every new day is a new gift from God whatever it holds. Every new day, we know, holds both challenge and blessing because this is how life works. The question for you in this moment is, then, what will you do with the gift of life God offers you each day? How will you let yourself heal so hope can flourish and grow in your heart and in your life? Now there's a question for you!! Dare to ponder it to discover just what God has in mind for you. Amen.