

You have most likely heard verse 11 of today's passage from Jeremiah...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.

In some form, it's been inscribed on countless confirmation and graduation cakes, coffee mugs, decorative pillows and wall hangings.

Somehow, verse 10 never makes the graduation cake cut.

Verse 11 by itself gets taken to mean that God has great plans for us as individuals...that our future is filled with hope. I won't necessarily dispute that...hope is always God's MO.

But it's not exactly what the verse in context is saying. And it's certainly not an assurance that God plans to make everything turn out the way we want in our own lives.

This letter was written by Jeremiah after Judah's defeat by Babylon. The king and many others of the ruling class and the elite have been taken into exile. Likely tradesmen, merchants, and craftsman...really anyone who the Babylonian rulers thought could be useful to them were also deported to Babylon.

The unthinkable has happened. They are captives in a foreign land, and all they want is to go back home. It is to them Jeremiah writes.

In the chapter just before this is a story about another prophet...Hananiah. Hananiah told the people what they wanted to hear.

Don't worry everyone, he said. Couple years and this will be over. We'll be back home. God will break the yoke Babylon has on us. We can go home, get things put back together, and carry on.

But that wasn't true. Jeremiah told the people it would be 70 years, not two. That meant most the exiles living in Babylon hearing this letter would never return. They themselves would not go home. It would be left to future generations to return and rebuild.

It had to be devastating news. Hananiah's prophesy was much more to their liking. Jeremiah said Hananiah was wrong. He predicted Hananiah's death. And Hananiah did die, proving Jeremiah right.

The exiles are in Babylon for the long haul. The rest of Jeremiah's letter to them tells them how they are to live in that fact. They will plant gardens and build houses. They will marry and have children. That will ensure there will be a future generation to return.

They are to go about the work of living. They are to pray and continue to seek God. They are even to pray for the well-being of the city of their captors, because for the foreseeable future, their well-being is tied to the well-being of Babylon.

Jeremiah points the way forward to them. He tells them how to maintain their identity as God's people and reclaim their loyalty to the God who formed them. It is in that turning to God...to seek God...to worship...that God will find them. And eventually bring them home.

Although Jeremiah smashes their hope of a quick end to exile, he also makes assurances. He assures them that God's hand continues to be with them even in exile. God's hand will be with them in the ordinary activities of life.

And he assures them that the exile would eventually end. That the future for Judah is still in God's hands, and God's planned future will be filled with hope.

On the one hand, Jeremiah forces Judah to face the reality of their situation and what led to it. On the other, he gives them reason to hope for the future.

A big part of what this letter is about is getting Judah to recognize they are up against something they can't change. In the midst of that, they are encouraged to remain faithful...to endure...to trust...and to not be seduced by false hope.

Those can be helpful words for us. In some ways many of us feel we are living in a time of exile now. I know I do. It's a time when values I thought we held in common...turns out we don't. There have been many ways through history that people have lived in exile, sometimes without leaving their country. That's where I find myself now.

Regardless of where our exile lies, Jeremiah's words come to us. Words to maintain faithfulness...to seek God and God's will. To pray.

But I think Jeremiah's words go even further than endurance. He tells the exiles to work for the good of the city...to pray and work for the well-being of their captors.

When God first called Abraham and Sarah, they were promised that they would be blessed...they would become a populous nation, and they would be blessed with land. But the promise of blessing had a so that – they would be blessed so that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

It seems to me that's exactly what Jeremiah is telling the exiles to do now. They should work for the well-being of Babylon. They should pray for the well-being of Babylon. In short, Babylon is to be blessed through them! The very thing God wanted them to do.

All along, they likely thought surely that doesn't mean God wants to bless our enemies! Does it?

But apparently it does.

Because...and this is important...in the welfare of the city lies their own welfare. For now, their well-being...their shalom...is tied to what happens to Babylon.

I'm still wrestling with what this all means for us in whatever current exile we find ourselves. But what it does say to me is that the well-being of God's people is linked to the well-being of even those we might consider an enemy.

In spirituality practices, this is the notion that we are not islands put in the midst of powerful forces to stand against them on our own.

Instead, we are called to recognize that the well-being of all God's creation is linked. We want to create categories of us versus them. The exiles of Judah thought that. How can we fight against this colossal them? But that's not what Jeremiah gives them instructions for. He gives instructions for being a blessing to Babylon.

Build your lives in the way God wanted you to. Stay faithful to the God who made you and called you. And pray for those who persecute you. Sound a little familiar? 600 years later, Jesus will say the same thing.

God does have a good future planned for God's people. They will return home. They will rebuild.

But as it turns out, things won't return to the way they were. The golden age of Israel will not return. This won't be the last war in the area and other than a brief interlude 400 years later, Judah will never be an independent nation again.

But even then, the prophets will point to that good future...a future that turns out to not be based in nationality or earthly rulers or borders. Instead, the future will rest in those who follow God made flesh, Jesus Christ.

We await the final fulfillment of that future. But we too have the same promise of hope. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit – the Advocate.

That Spirit guides us in our own times of exile. The Spirit guides us to do what God always wanted us to do...plant gardens and build communities. The Spirit guides us to pray, to remain faithful to the God who created us and called us...to seek God and God's will. And to be a blessing, even to our enemies.

The words of Jeremiah still present a way forward for us. Jeremiah...and Jesus...offer us a promise of a future filled with hope. We may want to hear from a prophet that everything will soon be better...that we'll get back to some golden age from the past.

But we won't. And in the meantime, we are called to live our lives...to plant gardens and build communities. We are called to be Jesus people in a world that wants something very different from the vision of that future Jesus shared.

And we are called to see how our well-being is tied to the well-being of all those around us. To pray for them, even the ones we might see as enemies. I'm finding that very hard in a world that just seems to keep getting more and more cruel. I will probably keep wrestling with that over the coming weeks.

But in the end, we too are called to trust, in spite of appearance, that God is with us in our own exiles...that God is working toward our welfare and not harm, that God is leading us to a future of hope.