

Jeremiah's Letter to Exile

Years ago, the pastor at my home congregation began a sermon with this story. There was a boy in the hospital who had been badly burned. Although conscious, medical staff believed it was unlikely he would survive. His attitude and demeanor displayed a sense of hopelessness and he seemed to get worse day by day.

One day, in keeping with state laws about children's education and making ways to continue it during illness, the school sent a tutor to teach him about adverbs and adjectives.

The teacher struggled greatly...it seemed completely futile to teach a child who was so surely going to die. But the teacher continued.

After several days, the boy actually began to improve. He developed a new determination and his body seemed to follow. His caregivers were amazed and wondered if they were witnessing a miracle.

When the boy had improved enough it seemed likely he would survive, he was asked what made the difference.

His answer was, the tutor! I figured nobody would bother to teach me about adjectives and adverbs if they were sure I was going to die!

I don't know if the story is true or not – I wasn't able to confirm it. But it is one of those stories that tells the truth, even if it's not factual. It tells the truth about the power of hope...especially when all seems hopeless.

Hopeless describes the situation the people of Judah find themselves in. We're now about 200 years after Isaiah spoke the words we heard last week.

Much of Jeremiah's book, like all of the prophets, is scathing words of judgement. And the judgement is for the same things as all the other prophets – idolatry, injustice, especially towards the poor, greed, and general failure to live by the covenant God made with them.

He spoke words of warning...they were headed for disaster. Their alliances and political solutions would fail.

And then, the warning came true.

The Babylonians conquered Judah and their brightest and best were sent into exile.

False prophets were also an issue. In fact these words are a direct rebuttal of the prophet Hananiah who told the people the exile would only be for a couple years. Hananiah told the leaders and the people what they wanted to hear.

Jeremiah told them the truth...the exile would be 70 years. If we're going to talk about hope, the first thing we need to speak against is false hope. False hope is perhaps an even worse enemy of real hope than despair.

For hope to be real, it has to be something that endures when every visible bit of evidence suggests that we should give up.

And real hope comes from trusting the source of our hope. For Jeremiah and for the people of Judah...and for us...that hope comes from God.

We trust in a God who brings life out of death...a God whose past actions give us hope for a good future.

Jeremiah does not tell the people that their hope lies in rising up against their captors. It does not lie in the false hope of a quick return home or in plotting their escape.

Their hope lies in the promises of God.

In the meantime, they should do the ordinary stuff of life. They should have children and grow as a people.

They should plant gardens and work for the good of Babylon, because whether they want to be there or not, it's where they are...among people who are their enemies.

They should work toward Babylon's blessing...which honestly God has wanted them to do from the very first promise to Abraham and Sarah.

God's promise for a good future still stands true, assures Jeremiah. But it will be a while, and in the meantime they should live.

And it's in the ordinary stuff of life that hope can be found. The future may look uncertain...but facing an uncertain future, just living life can be a profound statement of hope.

Hope is more than just a feeling. Hope really is a call to action. A call to live with courage in whatever the current reality is. But it's also the call to live in anticipation of that future.

When Jeremiah told the people of Judah that this exile would last 70 years, not two, it meant that most of the people hearing his words would not live to see the day of liberation.

But they could still practice that hope...and keep that hope alive for the generation that would return to Judah.

And honestly, that's really what we can do in the midst of our own times of darkness, turmoil, and uncertainty...we can practice hope.

What does it mean to practice hope? Ask yourself this, What are you hoping for right this minute? What would it look like if it came true? How would you live right now...what would you do today if you believed that future was already assured?

These are the questions for us to reflect on as we think about how to take Jeremiah's words for our own lives.

Today in the traditional church year is Christ the King Sunday. The narrative lectionary doesn't do much specifically with Christ the King Sunday, and some years I work it in and some years not.

Christ the King Sunday is a newer addition to the church year. It was commemorated by Pope Pius XI in 1925. At the time, Benito Mussolini in Italy had founded the National Fascist Party and was rising in power. Hitler was beginning his ascendancy and nationalism was on the rise.

Christ the King Sunday was a reminder to Christians that Christ is our true sovereign.

Now, Christ as King can be all too easily wedged into nationalism as well...that's the stuff of Christian nationalism. But taken as it was intended, Christ as King is a check on all our human temptation to put our hopes in a human ruler.

When Christ reigns in our lives, we will live according to that reign, no matter who is in power in the secular world, or what the government's policies are.

Our hope for God's good future can remain strong no matter who is in charge. The people of Judah were living under a king they did not choose...a king who in fact led to the destruction of their land.

But the best resistance they could practice was hope...practicing hope is a reminder that however powerful a ruler may think he or she is, there is a power greater.

That power is God, working to bring all of creation to that new future of hope, love, and justice.

Whatever shape the future takes from here, Jeremiah tells us...live...live your ordinary lives in hope and faithfulness. Practice hope. Live in a way that reflects the future God is

planning. Study God's word, especially the teachings of Jesus to get as clear a vision of that future as we can get.

Practice love and mercy in a vindictive world. Practice generosity and kindness in a world where greed and meanness are rampant.

And practice faith...trust that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is an assurance that that hopeful future has already been won for us.

Whether you are today despairing over the national and world situation or something more personal to you, Jeremiah reminds us that there is a power working on our behalf. It is a power that does not come from politics or any other human endeavor.

That power is the power of a God who brings hope out of despair and life out of death.