

Welcome the Seasons

Days of Hope

Jeremiah 29:11-14

Jeff Marian

Before I read today's scripture reading from the prophet Jeremiah, part of which may be familiar to some of you, I want to place it in its historical context.

In the year 586 BC the Babylonian army did what the Israelites had thought impossible. They breached the city wall around Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon's great temple, and carried off the majority of the population into captivity in Babylon. There, the Israelites languished for seventy years. It's difficult to be in challenging circumstances over a long period of time, but it is intolerable when you have no hope. Hopelessness is the ultimate pit of despair, and that is exactly where the Israelites found themselves – without any hope.

What saved them were the prophets. People like Isaiah and Jeremiah proclaimed a word of hope into the darkness of hopelessness, and today's Scripture reading is one of those words. Hear these words of hope from Jeremiah 29,

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the LORD. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

"For I know the plans that I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, give you a future and a hope." Those are such powerful words, and many people have claimed them as God's promise to them. But I think it's important to note that in the original Hebrew, all of the "you's" in that passage are plural. In other words, Jeremiah isn't proclaiming God's promise to an individual; Jeremiah is proclaiming God's promise to the entire nation of Israel, a promise of hope.

It's easy to hope that your team will win when they are up by fifty points in the final minutes of the game, but how do you hope when that score is reversed? How do you hope when, looking all around, there isn't a hook to hang hope on, when hope seems impossible, when you can't see any way that tomorrow could possibly be different or better than today? That's where the Israelites were when they heard Jeremiah proclaim those words. But because God's Word has power, that promise birthed faith in those captives. They dared to believe them to be true. And it gave them hope. So, instead of languishing in the pit of despair, the Israelites began to watch the horizon expectantly, like a child waiting for the sun to rise on Christmas morning. They waited for God to deliver on God's promise. And God did not disappoint them. Hope came in unexpected ways, and in time they returned to their homeland.

I'm guessing that few of us have ever been held captive in a foreign land. Maybe stranded in a foreign airport, but never held captive in a foreign land. But I think that Jeremiah's words can speak powerfully to us because I suspect that many of us have felt captive and hopeless. I suspect that many of us can relate to the cry of the Psalmist:

O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?

How long will you look the other way?

How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day?

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

How long, oh Lord, will this pandemic continue? How long will I have to wear a mask and fear for my health and the health of my loved ones?

How long, oh Lord, will we languish in political gridlock and divisiveness?

How long, oh Lord, will racial tensions and inequities continue to plague us?

How long, oh Lord, will I struggle with addiction?

How long, oh Lord, will I worry about my economic future?

How long, oh Lord, will I suffer in pain?

We may not be captives in a foreign land, but I think we do know what it is to feel captive and without hope, wondering how tomorrow could be any different or better than today.

But this is the season of Advent, a season when we lean into the promise that Christ has come, and comes

into our lives and our world over and over again. And that changes everything. The Light has entered this dark world, the Light that no darkness has overcome. And do you know what that means? It means that no matter how dark this world may seem, the dawn of God's restoration and healing will come, just as surely as the sun rises each morning.

Does that mean that our personal circumstances will change, or that things will work out just the way we want? No, it doesn't. Nor does God promise that. What I think we can claim is that with the Holy Spirit in us we can change, even if our circumstances don't. And I think we can claim that one day...maybe not in our lifetime...God will make all things new.

Listen to these promises and let them birth faith and hope in you:

"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." – John 16:33

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:38-39

"Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" – Revelations 21:3-5

Friends, we are a people of hope because we are people who have been given mighty promises, promises as trustworthy as the One who made them. And so, we are never without hope.

So, how do we live in hope in these dark days? In a world lost in the pit of despair, how do we live as a people of hope? Let me suggest two things. First, spend time in Scripture. I know we say this all the time, but are you doing it? It's so important, especially when times are tough. I love what Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "The Scriptures impart to us encouragement and inspiration so that we can live in hope and endure all things." Could you use a little encouragement? A little inspiration? A bit more hope? More strength to endure? Of course! We all could in these dark and difficult days. Paul assures us that those things can be found in God's Word, and my experience bears that out. So, get yourself a devotional and use it. Use the Advent devotional that we've published.

Many of our staff are using a free app called Lectio 365 to engage in scripture. Check it out. Get into a small group that's studying Scripture together. Join the Engage Bible Study when we start a new semester in January. However it works best for you, spend time in Scripture.

Second, pray. So much of what we're dealing with in this world is simply out of our control. Sure, we can shine the light of God's love into our corner of the world...and we should... but so many of the problems we're facing are bigger than any one of us. That was true for the ancient Israelites as they languished in captivity, which is why Jeremiah proclaimed, "In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the LORD. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes." God promises to listen and respond when we pray. And as we've said before, sometimes prayer changes things around us, but it always changes things within us. I can't tell you how many times I've gone to God in prayer over some challenge I'm facing, and in that time of prayer God reframes things for me. Perhaps God shows me how this challenge is exactly what I need to grow. Or perhaps in prayer God assures me that if I do all that I can, God will do the rest. What's outside of me doesn't always change, but what's inside so often does.

Here's what I want to challenge you to do. If you don't have a copy of our Welcome the Seasons Advent devotional book, haven't signed up for the electronic devotional resource, I want to urge you to text the word SEASONS to 270-330-8350. And you will receive a daily email devotional that we're doing together as we move through this Advent season. And it will connect us more deeply into the word of hope that sets us free.

Together, let's trust God's promise to not only hear us, but to release us from the things that hold us captive. We are not a people who dwell in the pit of despair; we are people who dare to believe that God does have plans for us as a people, plans for good and not for despair, to give us a future and a hope. Let's pray...