

Hope for Exiles

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Jeremiah 29 holds some of the most loved and quoted promises of God in the Bible: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hopeful future.”

The promises orient people standing at the edge of the unknown. We speak them over our young children, send them to new graduates, encourage each other with them in changing seasons of our lives. Maybe you’ve been orienting life around these promises yourself during these unusual days. Because these words are so loved and so often quoted, we often forget just how badly the first recipients of these words needed these promises.

Things really couldn’t get much worse for the people of Judah. They’d been living in the land God promised them, the major crossroads of the known world, with Egypt to the south and first Assyria and then Babylon to the northwest. They’d seen the march of armies and the rise and fall of kingdoms around them. Jerusalem had had 5 kings on the throne within 25 years. Some ruled only for a few months. Two of those kings had been killed by Egypt or exiled there; the other three kings faced the looming threat of Babylon.

And now, at the time of this letter from Jeremiah, there they were, a thousand miles from home. Conquered King Jehoiachin, his mother and his household. Judah’s wisest officials and counselors. The best and the brightest: soldiers, artists, and craftsmen. Faithful people like young Daniel and his three friends. Whether you were left in Jerusalem to pick up the pieces or sent packing, you were trying to figure out what in the world was going on.

Hadn’t God promised that there would always be a king on David’s throne? But there went Jehoiachin, with his uncle Zedekiah set up as a vassal king. Hadn’t God promised that his presence would never leave the Temple? But there went all the gold from the temple treasury that had been there for almost 400 years, carted away in Nebuchadnezzar’s caravan.

A variety of voices, all claiming to speak for God, tried to interpret the signs of the times, to guide the king and the people about what to do. Should they go quietly with enemy Babylon? Should they actively resist? How long would they be gone? Most of all, had God abandoned them?

Left behind in Judah, among people too inconsequential for Nebuchadnezzar to deport, is Jeremiah the preacher. Jeremiah’s preaching didn’t gain him celebrity status humanly speaking. Far from it. For his entire ministry, Jeremiah has been the voice of accountability and God’s judgment for Judah. He’s been the bad-news prophet the kings don’t want to believe. He has been friendless, placed in the stocks, and on trial for his life. All because he exposed the ways Judah had rejected the faithful love of the living God.

The good-news, false prophets are saying Judah’s stint in Babylon will be short. Those of the same mind as the false prophet Hananiah say that within two years everyone will be back home. Jeremiah doesn’t believe a word of it. Not so, Jeremiah says. “It’ll be over when it’s over. Give it seventy years.” His message to the exiles gets tucked into a diplomatic mailbag and makes its trek to Babylon. It wasn’t what the exiles eager for a return to Judah wanted to hear.

“⁴This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they

produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

People of Judah, seek life even there in Babylon, the last place you ever wanted to be. Seek life also for your enemies. Settle in for a seventy-year stretch. Build houses. Settle down. Plant a garden. Marry and have daughters and sons and grandchildren. Seek the flourishing of this enemy city. Ask God to bless it, bless and do not curse. And in blessing it God will bless you. And also, people of Judah, God has not abandoned you there. It may seem like the King of Babylon is all powerful, the one in control. But not so. Did you notice the title Jeremiah uses to refer to God here-Lord Almighty. Literally in Hebrew it means “Yahweh-I AM-of Armies.”

This is the Lord Sabaoth from Martin Luther’s Hymn ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God.’ If you ever wondered what you were singing, now you know. The Message paraphrases it ‘God-of-the-Angel-Armies,’ highlighting God’s power to command all the forces of the universe. The New English Translation renders it ‘The LORD who rules overall.’ Jeremiah’s pretty fond of this title for God: it shows up almost 80 times in the book. Just less than half the time it is appears with another title, as it does here: The God of Israel.

In these few words that identify God Jeremiah does two things: He acknowledges that it is God, not Nebuchadnezzar, who is really in charge of the Babylonian armies. The God who has fought for his people is now the God carrying them into exile. This is hard news. But the exile is not the end of the story. That Lord of Armies is still and also *Israel’s* God, the God to whom they pray, in whom they live out their days in exile. This God has promised to bring them back and into a future filled with hope because it’s filled with him.

About this chapter of Jeremiah, John Calvin writes, “All things were then in such a ferment that some feared more than what was necessary, and others entertained vain hopes, as the case usually is in a disordered state of things.”

Brothers and sisters, we’re living through a disordered state of things. It’s hard to tell which of our fears are reasonable and which of our hopes are viable. Some of us are scared about our jobs, our employees, or our businesses. Others of us are afraid for our own health, the health of our patients, or the health of a loved one.

Our individual fears get set off by different aspects of this time. But we share the anxiety about the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the fabric of life. Many of us would love to wake up tomorrow, wave a wand, and have the rhythm of life go back to the way it was in February. When will I go back to the office? Will the kids go back to school in the fall? What will the long-term effect on personal freedoms be? What can be done to support the most vulnerable populations? What’s that tickle in my throat? We want to be informed about the pandemic, so that we can make decisions about our own day to day living. We read the news looking for reliable sources, some level of peer review and consensus. We try to read the signs of the times, looking to the evaluations of people and institutions that we trust. But the scientific studies, the healthcare guidance, the orders from local officials continue unfolding. And you can never reach the end of the internet reading about it all.

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard was right when he paraphrased the classical philosophers almost 200 years ago: “Life must be understood backwards. But we must live forwards. Try as we might, with all our knowledge and all our expertise our understanding is partial. And yet life and time keep moving on.”

Left to ourselves, especially if we are alone and have hours for our minds to run, we don't live very well in the present, perched on the edge of an unknown future. And that, C.S. Lewis says, is right where our oldest enemy would like us to be-exiled in uncertainty about our future. In the *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis imagines advice from a senior devil, Screwtape, to a more junior devil, Wormwood, about how to thwart a person's hope in God. "We want him to be in the maximum uncertainty, so that his mind will be filled with contradictory pictures of the future..."

Keep a person occupied with her longings and her fears for the future, Lewis says, and you'll rob her of the only time and space she has to receive the gifts of God-the present. Lewis says God would "have [humans] continually concerned with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present...obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure. Living in the present, Lewis says, means thinking about tomorrow just as much as it's necessary to prepare now for "the acts of justice or charity which will probably be their duty tomorrow." Do you hear the echoes of Jeremiah's advice to his fellow Israelites in Babylon? Bear the present cross of exile. Receive the present grace of life. Obey the voice that calls you to prayer and service. Give thanks for the present pleasures: Build houses and plant gardens. Establish families. Contribute positively to life in Babylon however you can. If it prospers, you too will prosper. And then when the time is right, you'll be ready to come back as people restored.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

That hopeful future that Jeremiah saw and preached from a distance came to pass. Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem with waves of people longing for home. But Jeremiah also pointed to the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus' words and life demonstrate hopeful future and that awaits those who call him Lord. Thankfulness for God's good gifts and loving service to those around him. Patient acceptance of the cross when the time came. His resurrection, commission, and promise to be "with us always, even to the end of the age." And the sure and certain hope that he will come back to this far country, bringing his people home.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is Lord of all. Our lives may be changed in ways we did not expect, and we could not have foreseen. But we belong to him, the Lord who holds history in his hands. We look forward to receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And we can walk each day in moment-by-moment hope because he is Lord. Thanks be to God.

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