

Sermon: A Future with Hope
Text: Jeremiah 29:10-14
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Context: WWPC
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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.

Jeremiah 29:11

When we hung that beautiful *Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow* banner outside the chapel a few weeks ago, my only thought was that it was the perfect bookmark to the journey we've been on together for the last year.

A way to commemorate and celebrate the work we've done to lay a strong foundation for our church in the present moment, even as we worked to plan and build and grow into a bright, hopeful future.

At the time I had no way to know that on this Dedication Sunday, the last day in our Season of Celebration and Gratitude, our need to find strength for today would be so acute, and so literal.

And yet here we are.

Like many of you, I woke up on Wednesday morning so blue and so stunned I could barely function.

It felt like an earthquake had struck overnight because an earthquake did strike overnight, one that shifted the tectonic plates upon which the very foundation of our country rests—the institutions, values and traditions that have made America possible, in all its wild diversity, for the last 240 years.

In moments like these, when the world we've always known shifts underneath us, when we feel threatened or uncertain or anxious about the future, we all want to be assured that things are going to be okay.

I wish I could assure you of that today, but I can't. I'm not going to make that promise, because I think we all know that things are not going to be okay, at least not in the short term.

America is going to change in the days to come. Sadly, there is no doubt about this, because the change has already started.

The hate and the racism, the xenophobia and the misogyny, the taunting and the mockery we heard and saw day in and day out on the campaign trail has released the beast in our country, as many of us feared it would.

Starting on Wednesday stories immediately began to emerge about how frat boys in Alabama were heard yelling sexually provocative chants at female students and laughing about how it's now okay to yell such things—and do such things.

Some fifth graders in a school in New Jersey, white kids all, told their black teacher they did not have to listen to her because she was “going to be gone soon.”

A good friend of mine has a nine-year old granddaughter who happens to be adopted from China. He asked me not to use his name, but he is also a good friend of this congregation and a national level leader in our denomination.

When his granddaughter came home from school on Wednesday, she reported that some of her classmates told her she was soon going to be sent back where she came from.

Sadly, these incidents are just the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds of other cases of racial bullying and racial threats and racial intimidation have been reported since then, in elementary schools, on college campuses and in town squares, all across the country. Just this morning, I read an account of a particularly ugly incident that occurred at the Ingles in Weaverville.

Less than one week into this new era and America has already started to change.

Now, we trust that the beautiful and amazing country we all love is more durable than this, that America will not change fundamentally, or permanently, weeks and months and even years to come.

But the hard truth is that, for a season anyway, it's probably going to feel like we suddenly are strangers living in a strange land, that we've been exiled from the country we've all known and loved for our whole lives.

Naturally, this comes as a shock, at least to people who look like the majority of us here today.

We live such privileged and protected lives – protected by our race, protected by an ocean on either side of us, protected by our bachelor's degrees or graduate degrees, by our reasonably healthy bank accounts and our reasonably good health insurance and perhaps by a reasonably solid pension plan.

So insulated are we by all of this privilege that we've really never known or experienced what it's like to navigate life when the peace we take for granted is no longer guaranteed, or to live with deep uncertainty about what the future holds, or to live in a country that doesn't feel like home anymore.

For most people who don't look like us, for African Americans, for immigrants, for racial and religious minorities of all kinds, this experience is not new. It is normal. It's what life is like almost every day. But it is new for us white folks, and it's unnerving.

The good news is that we have a field guide for how to navigate this experience of exile.

The short text from Jeremiah that I read a moment ago is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture. *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.*

This promise does not come to the Hebrew people on their way to a family vacation in the Rocky Mountains, or to a luxurious retirement community in Palm Springs.

Instead, as only prophets can do, Jeremiah proclaims this word of hope to the Hebrew people while they are in exile in Babylon. After a harrowing escape from Pharaoh's Egypt, after finally arriving in the Promised Land following a 40-year sojourn through the wilderness, you'd think the people of Israel would be home and dry.

But history eventually visits a rude surprise upon them.

An invading army overcomes their defenses and deports children of Israel, carting them off to exile in Babylon. To their great astonishment, they now have no choice but to live as a racial, ethnic and religious minority.

You can hear the pain of this experience in their psalms and their prayers:

By the rivers of Babylon—

*there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there
we hung up our harps.*

*For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?*

How long O Lord, must must we bear this? How long until you return us home?

They ask this question, they pray this question, over and over, until finally the answer comes...

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

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.

Jeremiah can proclaim this word of hope and promise because he sees beyond the world in front of him to a better, brighter future that awaits his people.

The New Testament version of this story, of this field guide to navigating life's hardest and most bewildering turns of events, is not centered around the experience of surviving exile.

It is a different kind of narrative, a story of abandonment and lost hope. It's centered around a betrayal in a midnight garden, an untimely death on a cross and a heartbreaking burial in shallow tomb.

For church goes everywhere, this is a deeply familiar account, one we know in our bones. So I'm going to let the great writer Cheryl Strayed briefly summarize the moral and the truth of what may be the world's best story:

“. . . the other half of rising—the very half that makes rising necessary—is having first been nailed to the cross,” (from Dear Sugar, The Rumpus Advice Column #88).

I believe this is true. I also believe Ms. Strayed is only partly right. Crucifixion may be a necessary condition of rising, but it is not in itself a sufficient condition.

Imagine that you're Jesus. Three days ago, Roman soldiers did in fact nail you to a cross. And then one of them took a spear and stabbed you in the side.

So, like anyone under these circumstances, you are now lying in a tomb, flat and lifeless. It's dark and airless inside this deathly chamber.

Escape is hopeless, and not just because you're dead but also because the entrance to this shallow cave has been firmly sealed with a three-thousand-pound boulder.

But then, suddenly, a tickle of breath floats through your nose and down your throat and into your lungs. Your fingers twitch. Your eyelids flutter open.

As your senses begin to come alive, you suddenly and vividly remember that you've been gutted. Literally. Because the pain where that spear pierced your side flares so bright and hot it takes your raggedy breath away.

Your hands and your feet are gashed and wounded. They, too, are now burning with such acute pain there is no way you could use them even if you wanted to.

How are you going to get out of a situation like that? Well, one thing is for certain. You're not going to do it by yourself.

When it comes to rising even Jesus needed a little help. An action committee of angels to roll back the stone. A caucus of people, no doubt mostly women, who weren't afraid to walk into the stench and, if needed, unwrap the grave clothes.

A small cadre of steel-nerved loyalists who don't appear in the story but who perhaps helped limp him off, almost certainly helped limp him off, to a place where he could recover and gather himself for what was still to come, for his return to the world's stage.

So here is my declaration and my charge to you this morning: we are that caucus of people.

We are going to join with other ordinary people just like us – librarians and flutist and birdwatchers, farmers in Madison County and in Minnesota and, yes, in Mississippi, retirees who grow orchids on their sunporch, and housewives who make homemade blueberry jelly in their spare time.

We'll join with long-time residents of our country and with recent immigrants, with Presbyterians and Unitarians, with Methodist and Muslims, and with millions of other people of faith and conscience from Maine to Maui.

Together, we get to serve as the steel nerved loyalists upon whom our country's rising now depends.

So don't grieve my friends, organize.

Don't protest – well, actually, you might want to protest. I suspect I'm going to do a bit of protesting myself. Because how can we not? Bear with me now because in the spirit of Jeremiah, I'm fixin' to call some things out.

If the producers at Breitbart News think they've won, that their operatives are now free to reverse the gains so many of us have worked so hard to realize over the last four years, the last eight years, the last twenty years, even the last fifty years, well then, it's clear that *they have not met us*.

If the lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry think we're going to sit back and watch the gains we've made to mitigate climate change, to care for creation and protect our environment, to insure a healthy and sustainable future for our children and our grandchildren and for our planet, *they have not met us*.

If James Dobson and his allies at the Family Research Council think we're going to sit back and happily let them instruct congress to roll back the gains we've made to advance women's rights, and the rights our LGBT sisters and brothers, *they have not met us*.

If readers of the aptly named Drudge Report think we're going to sit back and watch silently as our Muslim neighbors and our Mexican friends are threatened with deportation, *they they have not met us.*

If the the KKK thinks they can openly march on the streets of North Carolina's cities in a misguided and perverse celebration of the rise of white supremacy without meeting stiff opposition, *they have not met us.*

If the bullies on college campus, and the bullies in positions of power, think they are now free to treat women as objects, free to treat women's bodies as their personal playthings, free to proclaim that it's now okay to sexually assault our sisters and our daughters and our wives, *they have not met us.*

Those are strong words, no doubt. If they make it sound like the soul of our country is at risk, that's because I believe it is risk. Which is why it's essential that we rise up, that we make our voices heard on all these fronts.

But the question of how we do this is as important as the question of whether to do this.

Here's why.

Because fifty years ago, when America's cities were burning and its streets were filled with marchers, America's greatest prophet rose up with a word from the Lord.

Dr. King had the vision and the wisdom and the courage to remind everyone who was engaged in the struggle for civil rights for all Americans that hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. That darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. What was true then is still true today.

And because not everyone who voted for change on Tuesday voted for hate.

Think of your cousin in Alabama, or your niece in Indiana, or your high school classmate from back in the day.

Maybe she's now struggling to keep a roof over her head, and feed her kids, and put clothes on their backs. She's working day and night to make sure her son has football cleats and her daughter has a steady, adequate insulin supply.

She's doing all this on her own because she finally had the courage to send her meth head husband packing. And she's now doing it on some \$200 a week, plus tips, because three years ago the packing plant shipped her \$18 an hour job, along with her health benefits, to Bangladesh.

We all know somebody like this. And the very last thing she needs is for you or, yes, me, to declare on our FB page for all the world to see that we, too, thinks she's a racist. Because here's what we don't know: in 2008 she cast her vote to elect America's first black president.

In 2012 she voted to return him to office. But now she is desperate for change because her life has been hanging by a thread for the last three years, and it feels like that thread just might break if she votes for four more years of the same.

Sisters and brothers, our job as Christians is not to judge this woman. Our job is to listen to her and to love her.

And, finally, because one of the people who voted for change on Tuesday might be sitting next to you in the pew or in the choir loft this morning. As Presbyterians and as Americans it is our solemn duty to respect their right to vote their conscience, because the moment you and I stop doing that something fundamental has changed in us, too.

Is this hard to do? Yes, of course it is. No one said following Jesus was going to be easy. It's especially hard today because most of us here this morning are still nursing broken hearts.

Yes, it hurts like crazy when our hopes for a better future are stabbed in the gut.

Yes, the time during which those same hopes lie dead in the tomb is dark and terrible.

But here is the good news, capital G, capital N, the news that our friends at Brietbart News and the KKK simply don't know: in the end love always wins. Life always triumphs, eventually, over death.

Love trumps hate and Easter always trumps Good Friday because that's how Easter works.

We've got work to do friends: the work of healing and of reconciliation. The sacred work of making peace and doing justice.

So choose your job. Choose how you're going to help bring hope back from the dead.

Once you decide, then roll up your sleeves and then let's get down to it. Because the future, like the mouth of that love-busted tomb, remains open; it remains ours to reclaim and to build.

And it starts *right now*.

Amen