

When a Prophet Brings Hope for the Future

Jeremiah 32:6-15

It's easy to have hope when things are going well, not so easy when things look dark. In the Bible hope is not optimism- it is literally *waiting on God*, hoping in the Lord. We are not alone in the universe.

Jeremiah began as a prophet of warning, warning the nation of destruction if they did not turn back to God and God's ways. Then when calamity struck, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed, the Hebrew people carried off into captivity in Babylon, he turned into a prophet of hope.

I

During the days of warning, Jeremiah preached what some call a "temple sermon" warning against the collusion between temple leadership and the King which ignored the poor and promoted oppressive conditions. A theocracy gone sour.

"Don't trust in the deceptive words, 'the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'", he said. They claimed God's presence in the temple was their safety and the endorser of their politics. In the temple sermon Jeremiah brought this word from God:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the immigrant and stranger, the orphan and widow, or shed innocent blood...if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in the place.

If. And if not, God would vamoose—go where others might listen and be his people.

“Has this house”, God said, “which is called by my name become a den of robbers?!”

Jesus used those same words, for the same reasons, when he “cleansed the temple”, knocked over the tables of the money changers and drove them out.

Jeremiah often acted out his prophecies. Once he walked across Jerusalem wearing a wooden yoke around his neck as a prophecy that Judah would soon be taken into captivity. A priest of the Temple came and told him the yoke was not God’s prophecy, only negative thinking, took the yoke off his neck and shattered the yoke on the ground. Jeremiah then made a yoke of iron and wore it through Jerusalem’s streets.

That’s a prophet! Later in his life the King asked Baruch, Jeremiah’s’ friend and secretary, to bring the scrolls of Jeremiah’s prophecies to him and read them to him. As Baruch read, the King cut up the scrolls and threw them into the fire.

When Baruch returned to Jeremiah and told him what had happened, what did Jeremiah do? He started writing them all over.

II

But when the catastrophe happened, Jerusalem and Temple destroyed, the people taken into captivity in Babylon, Jeremiah became a prophet of hope to his people.

Here's one story. While he was in prison for his prophecies of warning (he spent years in prison), his uncle had a piece of property he was trying to unload while he could. His property was in the path of the approaching Babylonian army. He gave Jeremiah his legal right of first refusal. It was like a cartoon I saw, a house sitting just below a large dam with a giant crack down the center. In front of the house was a large sign: For Sale.

You might say that the realtors were not beating down the door to list the property.

Nobody but a fool would buy that land. But Jeremiah did, and paid full market price. Then he had the deed put into an earthenware jar to protect it for as long as necessary. It was, again, an acted-out prophecy. He said:

“For thus says the Lord, houses and fields and vineyards will once again be bought and sold in this land.” It may take a while, but it would happen.

When we invest our lives in this place and its ministry, it is acted out sermon on faith and hope. I've invested six years of my life here. Some of you multiples of six. It is our investment in the work of God in the world: to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. It is our investment in the power of love and compassion and understanding. So with you who have joined in the last six years. We are investing in truth, beauty and goodness. We don't ever see the full harvest, but we put our till to the ground.

III

To the people languishing in Babylonian captivity, he sent this word from the Lord, a blueprint for living in hope in dark times. "How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?", they cried. But Jeremiah relayed this word from the Lord:

Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and children. Give them to be married. Seek the welfare, the *shalom*, of the city in which you have been placed. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own welfare.

That's God's word to us in these scary, uncertain times in our nation. Take joy in your daily lives, in every moment of goodness and love. Get married. Make babies, plant trees. And pray, pray for the welfare of your community and nation.

We need prophets of warning, who let us know how bad it is and what we need to do. But we also need prophets of hope, who give us the long view, who save us from despair.

I think about our “elders” today, long leaders in church, politics, education, our pundits on T.V. and in newspapers. They seem often like grumpy old men telling us how good it once was and how bad it is now! Denise Levertov quotes another in a poem, “ I am tired of the fine art of unhappiness.” Nostalgia can be a deadly thing. It says God has no new thing to do among us, that God’s creativity is spent.

And cynicism too can be deadly as it says that all we ever do is from base and selfish motives. It expects the worst in us—which sometimes is a self-fulfilling prophecy!

We need prophets of hope! Carriers of hope, hope in what God can do and what God can do through people like us. Will you be a carrier?

Jeremiah’s words are like Wendell Berry’s in his poem: “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front”

So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world....

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias

Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful

Though you have considered all the facts....

Go with you love to the fields....

Practice resurrection. ¹

IV

But that's not all Jeremiah said. He spoke God's tender words of hope in a most personal way:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope. When you come to me and pray to me I will hear, when you search for me you will find me.

And if they, or we today, are still unsure God said:

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I will continue my faithfulness to you. Again, I will build you, and you shall be built!

V

I can *feel* these words today, not just hear them. I hope you can too.

During this summer's Season of Grace we have been talking in earnest about who we are, what we love about our church, and what we yearn for about it, the hope for our future as we seek to be God's people in this time and place.

We have compiled our loves, hopes, dreams in a set of words and phrases and these have been made into a fingerprint through the magic of Jenn and Gina.

It is our church's fingerprint, our identifying mark. There is none other like it.

It also expresses the fingerprint we want to make on the community and world. Not for our sakes, but for God's sake and for the sake of the world around us. We are after all God's fingerprint on the world.

"Here We Walk" has been our theme. Not here we sit. Not here we used to walk, here we walk. It is a proclamation of who we are and who we want to be, and what we want to offer the world.

Amen, means, "So let it be." With you say Amen with me?

1. Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1998), 87-8.

