

Hope and Home in Advent Exile
Jeremiah 29:1,4-7,11-12; John 16:33

Advent begins in longing for deliverance and longing for home: “O Come, O Come Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” Hope and longing. Our Hebrew prophets lead our way, especially Jeremiah.

In the comic strip *Shoe, Shoe*, the newspaper editor, is reading the news and says, “There are mood swings.... And there are mood bungee jumps.”

That may be how you feel these days, and that’s how Jeremiah felt most days, as God called him to be a prophet of judgment *and* comfort, warning *and* hope.

He grew up the son of a priest living among outcast priests, priests who had backed the wrong king. It happens. When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to God’s people, he answered, “O Lord, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth!”

And God said, “Don’t say, ‘I am only a youth!’ I will give you the words to speak.”

That’s the first message of the sermon: Never say “I am only...!” God will have your back! God called Jeremiah to “pluck up and break down” and yes, “to build and to plant.” Yes, both, because the prophet addresses reality, and reality is never one thing. It is messy, always.

No wonder Jeremiah had mood bungee jumps!

I

His calling was costly. Once he was thrown into a cistern and left to die. He ended up in jail, as some prophets do.

His prophecies were often acted-out signs. He once took a beautiful vase, then broke it and said, “You are God’s beautiful vase, and this is what’s going to happen to you.”

Once he walked through the streets of Jerusalem wearing a wooden yoke around his neck as a prophecy that the Hebrew people would be under the yoke of Babylon for a long time.

Hananiah, a false prophet, was saying that the Babylonian yoke would soon be broken. Two years max! Soon it would be “Happy Days are Here Again!” (He was angling for a spot as the King’s prophet!). So, he went to Jeremiah and said, “Your negative thinking is bad for the nation’s morale! You’re being unpatriotic!” And he tore the wooden yoke off Jeremiah’s neck and smashed it to pieces.

What did Jeremiah do? He, following God’s *next* word, had a yoke of iron made, put that on and continued wearing it around Jerusalem!

The words of Jeremiah which we remember most are the ones Jesus quoted as he cleansed the temple: “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have

made it a den of thieves!” Jeremiah said these words to a nation that worshipped the temple more than God, and desecrated the Temple by oppressing the nation’s poor and the weak. Not by wearing the wrong clothes to church, but by neglecting the weak!

Sometimes we get our religious institutions mixed up with God and what God wants. That’s the second message of the sermon!

II

As Jeremiah had prophesied, the nation fell to Babylon and the people were taken into exile in Babylon. And now Jeremiah had a new calling: to comfort and give hope.

How do we live when everything seems to be hopeless? The people in Exile cried, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:3) Jeremiah gave them a word from God, perennial wisdom for how to live in bad times:

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have children.... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own welfare. (Jeremiah 29: 5-14)

Those words are wisdom for us today. *When times are dark, the way of hope is everyday faithfulness and ordinary love.* When the big picture grows dark, focus on the little picture. When we cannot see very far, we focus on what is close at hand. If anyone tells you what's going to happen the next four years in our nation, don't buy anything from him! We may not like what's going on, but pray for it and work for its welfare!

In difficult times, pay attention to the little, but really not so little, things, like loving the ones you've been given to love: your husband or wife, or child, or friend, or those who sit with you in church.

“Loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself” still applies!

You may not be able to change the world around you, but you can make your community better, your church better, maybe even make yourself a better human being.

Jeremiah also points to the pleasures that are still there, all around us. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Make babies, enjoy your grandchildren, rejoice in friendship. This is the path of everyday faithfulness and ordinary love.

You've heard the expression, “Bloom where you're planted”. God is saying, “Times may seem gloomy; bloom anyway!”

III

This path of everyday faithfulness, it is not just something you feel, it is something you do! So let's go back to Jeremiah, now sitting in jail as the Babylonian army approaches. I call this episode the Jeremiah Real Estate Faith Test!

Jeremiah's uncle is getting nervous. He owns a piece of property right in the path of the approaching army, and he wants to unload it. It's like a cartoon I saw: there's a small house sitting just below a big dam—a dam that has a large crack going down the middle of it. The house has a sign in the yard: For Sale! Would anyone here rush to list that property?

As his nephew, Jeremiah has the right of first refusal. Only a fool would buy his uncle's land. But Jeremiah bought it, and paid full market price. Then he had the deed put in a secure earthenware jar so that it would last as long as needed.

He bought the land as an acted-out sermon on faith. Here was the promise of God: "Houses and fields and vineyards will once again be bought and sold on this land!"

On this first Sunday of Advent, Hope Sunday, I call this audacious hope!

And it happened, years longer than anyone wanted, but it happened: the Hebrew people came home!

Why do we plant daffodil bulbs in the Fall? Because we have faith that we will still be around next spring.

Why are we planting trees on the church grounds, trees we ourselves may never see fully grown? Because we trust in a future we cannot see! That's what faith is!

IV

So this last section I call it "*Praise for small churches.*" We may say to God, "I'm only..., we're only..." But God says, "Don't say, 'I'm only!' Here's what we're going to do!"

I was a young man, sitting in my first class with the famous preacher who became my mentor, George Buttrick. He asked us all to introduce ourselves and I said, "I'm Steve Shoemaker, and I'm the pastor of a small church." He said to me, "There's no such thing as a small church!" I remember exactly where I was seated when he said those words.

When someone asks, "What's the size of your church?", answer, "The right size!" In a culture making idols of bigness and wealth, we're small enough to trust in God!"

Jesus said words we all need to hear these days:

Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom! (Luke 12:32)

Yes us. Give you! Yes, us! The Kingdome. Yes, even that!

People are worrying and fretting about the state of the church in America, people leaving in droves, churches closing. But this might be a time of rebirth.

During their time in exile, some of the Israelites complained to God: "You saved us in the past. You brought us through the Red Sea and delivered us from slavery! *Where are you now?!*" And God answered through Isaiah, another prophet of the Exile:

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. For, behold, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs forth! Do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:18-19)

You've passed the Jeremiah Real Estate Faith Test! You bought this land, built this building. Some Baptist leaders thought we didn't need another Baptist Church! Almost seventy-five years later, you're still here. You've embodied Jesus' welcome to all. You've been a servant church ministering to so many others outside our walls. Now, this is a *new* time. "Behold, I am doing a new thing!" God says. "Lift your chins, your eyes and see!"

Near the end of his life, as the days were darkening, Jesus said to his disciples:

In this world you will find tribulation—a shaking, a troubling—but be of good cheer, be of good courage, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Yes, he has. And because we are *his*, we know how to die and how to be reborn!

For over 70 years the American church has enjoyed enormous size, wealth, and worldly success. “The times, they are a-changing.” Bob Dylan sang. But now might be the best time to be a Christian, to be *church!* *His* church.