

“An Advent Message of Hope”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 111

Rev. John Wahl

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Today marks the beginning of Advent. We know how long this season will last; we see calendars telling us exactly how many days there are left to decorate our homes, plan our gatherings, write our cards, and finish our shopping. But that’s not really what Advent is about: it’s not just a pre-Christmas period of time. Instead, Advent is the season of waiting and hopeful expectation, of anticipating the entrance of Jesus into the world: something we believe has happened and will happen again, although we don’t know when. And we can’t become so comfortable – or dis comforted – in the here and now that we’ll miss the amazing, surprising way that God will come.

The book of Jeremiah reflects the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem to the empire of Babylon in the 6th century BCE. The elites, community leaders, and craftsmen of Jerusalem suffered a violent, forced migration; carried off to Babylon to become cheap labor for their overlords. This letter that the prophet Jeremiah sends from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon gives voice to a traumatized community who had seemingly lost everything: their loved ones, their homes, their language and culture, their beloved city and religion.

The burning question during the time and events addressed by Jeremiah’s letter is this: how does one go on after such a devastation? How should the Israelites respond to the defeat at the hands of the Babylonians? Jeremiah advocated for settling in for a long wait. He counseled the people to plant gardens, build houses, and get married; to normalize living in exile; to adapt to life in a far-away land. He even told them to pray for the people of this foreign city and seek its welfare.

The people wanted to do exactly the opposite. They wanted to resist and assume that the exile would end in a relatively short time. Jeremiah offered hope, but not on the people’s terms. Hope would come, but over the long haul.¹

After all, who would want to stay in exile, hundreds of miles away from their home, for generations? Who would want to be instructed to bless their

¹ Charles Aaron from *WorkingPreacher.com*

captors, even if one's welfare is connected to theirs? Who wants to be told to make the best of a bad situation? In a time of exile, we might expect to hear words of lament or comfort from the prophet; instead, he gives them instructions about accepting their situation; of making a new beginning at what seems like the end to everything they knew and held dear.

Jeremiah tells them to focus on the basics: finding somewhere to live, food to eat, and spouses for their children; putting one foot in front of the other. Eventually, the exiles would have to wrestle with theological questions. But, for now, it is a matter of survival.

The people are told to promote the welfare of Babylon; this is a translation of the Hebrew word “shalom,” which means peace and prosperity; human flourishing. Beyond that, the exiles are also told to *pray* for the city in which they were living, and to *work* for its peace. Each of us is called to contribute the common good, to work for the prosperity of those around us.²

By this time, Jeremiah had been a prophet for decades. On numerous occasions, he had warned the people against listening to the messages of the false prophets; those who would tell them only what they wanted to hear. The exile, Jeremiah preached, had taken place because they had failed to live up to their covenant with God; they had not promoted justice and worked for peace. The exile was ultimately not the doing of the Babylonians, God had taken them there. Thus, they should not resist their current situation, but accept it. They should not hate their captors – who were now their neighbors – but find assurance that God will continue to be present with them in their new home. Blessing would come, but not in the way the people had hoped. Blessing meant coming to terms with the present; blessing meant praying for people they would rather blame.

Accepting, here, does not mean that you need to like what is happening; it means that you understand your current realm of power and influence. The people in exile could not change what had already taken place; and could not yet determine the future still to happen. Refusing to take part in caring for themselves and their community would only increase their suffering.

Jeremiah's message is not that “everything is fine”, but that they will have to do the things that are necessary to live: plant and build, marry and increase, work and pray.³

² John Holbert, “Pray for the Peace of the City”

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

Jeremiah goes on to say that this time of exile will last for seventy years; which would mean that change would not end for at least a couple of generations. Jeremiah implores them to accept their situation of exile, but not to regard it as unchangeable. In time, if they took part in the community in which they lived – even if it was not where they wanted to be – they would be blessed. God would always be with them and a different future would eventually come.

During this Advent season, we are living in a time of pandemic that most of us believed would not last so long. Although the experts have been telling us that there might continue to be more variants, we thought that – with a vaccine – we could escape new waves of infection, and hospitalizations, and deaths. Similar to the ancient Babylonian exile, we do not know how long the period of trauma in which we are living will go on.

And, as with any period of trauma, we are now dealing with a whole range of emotions: anger and frustration, confusion and helplessness. The message of the prophet that we read this morning continues to be true: we cannot change what has already happened, and we also cannot predict what is still to come. What we can do is accept our position of influence in the present. We may not like the place where we are, but there are things we can do in taking the next step forward. We can continue to pray for peace and work for the welfare of our community, seeking to comfort those who have suffered loss and help those who are experiencing need; to build up for the sake of our children and seek peace among our neighbors.

In the eleventh verse, the prophet seeks to reassure the exiles in Babylon, writing, “I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.” This verse is often removed from its original context in our day. We sometimes forget that a hope-filled future may not come according to our preferred time frame; that maybe it is not even for us to witness, but for generations to come.

Still, as we step into another Advent season, we do so with the hope that God is always with us; that, with Jesus’ birth, God broke into the world in the past and we believe God will do so again. Why do we have to wait? Why doesn’t God come in power now? In his day, Jeremiah believed it was because the people had not faithfully followed the covenant. Thus, what they longed for most would be delayed. Still, in their time of waiting, they could experience the blessings of homes and gardens, of marriages and children, of good relations with their neighbors even if not in the place they wanted to be.

We believe that we are also live in a time of waiting – the time in-between Jesus’ birth and his promised return. This in-between time has already gone on for

many generations, but how long it will last, none of us know. Many false prophets have appeared, claiming to know the future, but their predictions have come and passed. The time of waiting goes on.

And yet, because we have hope, because we believe that God is with us and will again enter into the world to set things right; we are called to live with expectation. Accepting our current situation does not mean we will not pray for peace and work to make it better. We are also called to plant and to build, to reach out to others because they are our neighbors, and not our enemies; no matter whether our own experience has been of blessing or harm.

Hope, even a hope that can be seen only on a long horizon, gives us the motivation and energy to not give up, but to pray and to work: for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors; and in gratitude for our God who has been, is, and always will be with us. Amen.