A Future with Hope

Jeremiah 29:4-12 Kimby Young

Romans 8:24-28 October 9, 2016

So Jeremiah is not my favorite prophet. He is often called the prophet of gloom and doom. He spent most of his career railing against the system, yelling at the kings and priests and leaders of Israel that they weren’t paying attention to God. He spent most of his career in prison or worse – rejected by those leaders and ridiculed by the people of the day. He was definitely what we would call today – counter cultural, anti-establishment, way out there, loud-mouth radical. And frankly, a lot of what Jeremiah says is downright depressing – repent, straighten up and fly right, things are going to get worse, the society you are building is about to come crashing down. You see, Jeremiah believed the people of his day were not listening to God. They were trusting in money or power or popularity or smart business and politics. They were trusting in their own skill or savvy or intelligence or ability to manipulate world events to get what they wanted. They were not trusting in God. Jeremiah believed that putting your trust in anything other than God was disastrous. Jeremiah believed putting your trust in anything other than God was idolatry. Jeremiah believed society was about to crumble because the people’s priorities were out of whack. They were not listening to God and they were not doing what God asked them to do – keeping the faith, caring for the poor, being honest and just in all areas of life. And of course, Jeremiah was right. During Jeremiah’s lifetime the politics blew up and the back room deals fell through. During his lifetime a conquering army came to crush Israel and take the leaders into exile. During his lifetime the worst disaster in Israelite history began.

Funny thing is, at that point of disaster, Jeremiah’s tone and outlook changed. When the army was literally surrounding Jerusalem, holding the people under siege, when absolutely everyone else was in despair and convinced they were about to die, when things looked their very worst, Jeremiah started preaching about hope. The last twenty chapters of Jeremiah are about the hope that comes if you place your trust in God where it belongs even when bad things are happening. Verse 11 – the famous verse from this passage – “For surely I know the plans I have for you…to give you a future with hope” – is God’s version of “Chill out now, I’ve got this.” As people around Jeremiah were convinced the world was falling apart or alternatively trying all the more to manipulate the situation to their benefit, Jeremiah says – remember God is in charge. Put your trust in God and God will work it out. God has a plan and God’s plan will come to be. It’s the same message Jeremiah had always preached – turn to God. But it is a message filled with hope for the future. And that future must be a future in God’s hands and by God’s design.

You see there were a lot of people still trying to manipulate the situation, still not trusting in God. They were saying – oh this is just a momentary problem. We will be back on top in a year, maybe two years. This exile will be over and we will be back home in two years. Everything will be back to normal and business as usual. We’ve got political allies. We can control this situation. We can manipulate the powers of this world. Because we are so clever and we are so capable. We will fix this – trust us. Jeremiah says, no – trust God. Our true hope is in God and God alone.

The first part of chapter 29 says – this exile is not a momentary set back. This exile is a correction designed by God. So settle in for the long haul. Settle in to Babylon and quit trying to be more powerful than God. Build houses, intermarry with other residents, have children, have grandchildren, work for the welfare of your new city, because that is going to be home for the rest of your lives – for an entire generation, for seventy years. God’s plan is much more long term than your little plans. God’s plan is for you to learn a few lessons about life and then to remember that God is with you, to remember to rely on God, to hold on to the promises of God, and to trust God to make everything right. God will do that. God has a future planned for you that is so much better than you can manipulate, so much better than you can even imagine. Remember the power of God, and put your trust in God’s plan.

Trust in God. Easy to say, not always easy to do. We face a world very similar to the one in which Jeremiah preached. A lot of things are good, but a lot of things seem to be falling apart. War and terrorism, politics and racism, divisions and destruction, poverty and just plain meanness. It is hard to trust God and to believe God is in charge. It’s hard to not try to take control and make our own plans for life. And as a lifelong avid planner, I’m convinced God is alright with our planning attempts – as long as those plans are placed squarely in God’s hands. I plan, but I want God to be in charge. And when my plans go awry, I try to see God’s plan rising out of the chaos. What is God’s plan for my life? What is God’s plan for my family? For our church? For our town? For our nation? For our world? Any plans we make must align with God’s will. But how do we know God’s will? We cannot know what the future holds, but we can know who holds the future.

Our hopes for the future cannot be hopes we nail down. As the passage from Romans says, “hope that is seen is not hope.” Instead, our hopes for the future rely on our trust in God. We trust that God cares for us, that God wants what is best for us, that God is powerful and present. We trust that God works in the world for good. We believe that God has a plan. And so we move forward in that faith. We do what we believe is the right thing to do, and we believe God will work out what is best for us. We believe. There’s no proof. There’s no assurance. There’s no guarantee. But there is hope. We believe the Spirit of God works in the world and reveals truth to us. We believe that Spirit inspires and gives direction to us. We believe God will help us with our choices and guide us through whatever may happen. We believe. We trust. We hope. And so we live.

So what is the lesson for today? “For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” For me, the lesson is trust God. Do my best – but ultimately, put my plans in God’s hands and trust that God is in control. None of us can know what the future will bring, but we can know God who holds the future. We can know that God lives and loves and offers us grace each moment of each day. We can trust that God’s plan for us is greater than anything we can ask or imagine. Hold on to that hope in all that God has promised by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.