

## ***Promises, promises***

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Sermon by Lisa Showalter

June 1, 2014

For my husband, Brian, and myself, 2014 has felt a bit like being repeatedly kicked in the shins.

On January seventh, after ten years at his job, Brian was rather unceremoniously “let go.” Watching a husband who had invested, and sacrificed so much of himself for a company who so easily dismissed him was painful and infuriating.

Accompanying this termination were the usual suspects: stress and worry, mostly regarding finances. How long could we sustain without Brian’s income? Where would we find health insurance? Where would he begin looking for a new job? What might he even enjoy doing?

I had always fancied myself a misplaced hippie, living in the wrong time with dreams of selling everything we owned, taking to the road in a beat down car, and living off the land. Turns out I would have made a horrible hippie. I had not realized how tightly I clung to my sense of safety and security until part of that was stripped away.

Just about the time that I began making peace with that situation, I received a letter from a beloved niece informing me that she is expecting a baby. After years of Brian and I desiring to expand our family, the news that my niece is pregnant (who is young and has struggled to find stability in her life), seemed a cruel and unfair twist of fate. While knowing she will become a wonderful mother and rejoicing in this new life, hot tears were still shed at the perceived injustice of it all.

Then, to top it all off, in April our sweet boy and beloved companion for 12 and a half years, Reggie - our dog, up and died on us. We were devastated.

At this point I threw my hands up to the universe and declared that if 2014 was trying to break me, it had succeeded. Perhaps I could have handled one, or maybe two of these events with aplomb, but the cumulative effect combined with an especially harsh winter, left me feeling defeated and wondering if things were ever going to turn around.

Well, I was nearly defeated. The first half of this year has undeniably been a rough season in my life. We have all experienced them. Many of you have experienced much more difficult seasons than what Brian and I have been through, for sure. During this time the passage that kept popping into my head was the scripture we heard this morning from Jeremiah. (Maybe it would be more accurate to say that this was the word God was speaking to my heart.)

How comforting are the words of verse 11? I could swim in the beauty of these words. “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.”

Or from the NIV, which might be more familiar and beloved to some, 11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Such beautiful reassurance. But I think this verse is often misused, twisted to make it seem that God is endorsing what we’re doing now, or that God will give us what we want - and quickly! So this morning I’d like to consider the whole story in hopes that we can honor it and all of us can be reassured and comforted by God’s words.

During Jeremiah’s life, the kingdom of the Hebrews was divided into two, the north being Israel and the south being Judah. There were myriad wars and power skirmishes occurring with the Assyrians, Egyptians, and Babylonians struggling to assert dominance in the region. For a time these groups were so busy struggling with each other that Judah had been given virtual freedom from foreign domination. Because of that a reliance on Yahweh had become lax, and idols and pagan worship had been introduced and had become at times, very intertwined with the Jewish faith. This was something that Jeremiah spoke out about, warning

the people, telling them to turn back to God.

Eventually this time of peace for Judah ended, with the Babylonians defeating Jerusalem and all of Judah. A custom during the time, to pacify the occupants of the conquered nation and prevent rebellion, was to move a significant number of the conquered population to other parts of the empire that had defeated them, in essence like hostages. Usually these were prominent members of that society. In this case, an estimated 11,000 Jews from Judah were moved, or exiled to Babylon.

This still happens today, so we can imagine how absolutely heartbreaking and terrifying this must have been to these Judeans, to be uprooted from their homeland and moved to enslavement, mourning the loss of loved ones and their home - wondering if they would ever return. This was a bad season for the people of Judah, and particularly for these exiles.

In the face of that pain, false prophets began feeding these exiles false hope, telling them that God would deliver them back home in just two years time. Of course, this made these prophets pretty popular - they were telling the people what they wanted to hear. This is the backdrop for the scripture we heard this morning in chapter 29. Jeremiah is writing a letter to the exiled Jews living in Babylon.

Surely they were looking to Jeremiah for words of assurance and hope. And he offers them. But probably not in the way that they wanted to hear. He does not tell them to get their bags packed because deliverance is imminent. Instead, he tells them to settle into life as exiles - to continue on with life as usual, get married, build houses, plant gardens, have children - because you're going to be there for awhile. Not only that! But he asks them to pray for the welfare of the city that they now live in because the welfare of that city is their own welfare. And then he delivers the zinger: you're going to be there for 70 years.

These words must have been like a punch in the gut to a hurting and longing people. This meant many of them would indeed, never see their home again. Many of their children wouldn't see their home again. In our own suffering, crying out to God, how this message would have hurt.

But at the same time, hallelujah! They have an answer and hope. After all, 70 years is a short time in the history of a nation. Many years of prosperity had preceded this, and prosperity would return and endure long after. One elegant quote I love says, “The troublesome times are conspicuous while the quiet times glide by unnoticed.” Hence, we’re a little less likely to note how much more of the latter we have.

So many times in the midst of trials, the hardest part is waiting. You know this wait: waiting for answers to medical tests, or waiting to hear back after a resume is submitted is brutal. For myself, having answers - no matter what they are - allows me to continue on with the necessary, better able to navigate whatever my reality is. So, these Jews living in Babylon now know that their families, their community, will be restored. The exile will be temporary. I see mercy in the answer that God gives them, even though it is tinged with disappointment.

And then, the lovely words of assurance come: “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.” God waits to be gracious to us.

But sometimes God waits on us to prepare ourselves to receive this gift. In verses 13 and 14, God says, “when you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” The children of Judah had to prepare themselves for this outpouring of grace and salvation by seeking God with all their heart, and focusing solely on the one true God. They needed to repent of their reliance on false gods and idols.

I had to repent from turning from Yahweh, and turning to my own other idols before I could see and receive the gifts and graciousness that God was lavishing on me these last six months. And they were plentiful! My idols were those of self-reliance, security, safety, and I’m sure many others. Perhaps I had not trusted enough, perhaps my focus had become divided.

Brian and I love to travel. And somehow on vacations we are able to look at

setbacks and trials as opportunities for adventure. I decided I would try to have the same outlook on this set of challenges. Once I quit trying to pack my bags and head back to my homeland of security, I was able to recognize the gifts that arrived during this time. Once I settled in, and got to know my surroundings in this new landscape, and relinquished control back to God, I could see how bountiful our blessings are.

We realized how incredibly blessed and rich in friendships we are. There were many evenings and morning of gatherings with friends in homes enjoying inexpensive pleasures.

I realized that though I often belittle the nature of my work as a piano teacher, I am able to pay the bills - at least for a little while.

Brian and I were able to enjoy many snow days huddled up in our house - listening to music, cooking up meals, and just being cozy in general. It was a treat and we genuinely enjoyed that time together.

My niece giving birth in July will inevitably add energy and joy to our family.

And there is new life and energy in our own home. Brian's job had been incredibly stressful and the situation was becoming very toxic. However, chances are he would not have left because life is full of responsibilities and the process of finding new work daunting. Many of you know that Brian is now a friendly postal carrier. While his change in careers has meant adjusting our budget, money doesn't buy happiness. And there is more of that in our house now.

2014 is not done. I hope my next 70 days, weeks, or months are not a fraught with more worries and disappointments. But there is no saying it won't be. But now I have a greater sense of patience because I trust that God is working through this and for my peace and well-being. I believe that my future has hope.

The question remains, can we use this verse for ourselves? Of course! But we need to read this promise not like it is a promise of the false prophets in Jeremiah, guaranteeing that our trials will be short and resolved in ways that are tidy and

satisfying. But rather we need to hear this assurance in a way that does not limit the breadth and scope of the work God is doing and the larger story we are part of.

This morning as we enter our time of candle lighting, I invite you to light a candle for whatever current exile you are experiencing. I invite you to consider idols in your life that are preventing you from truly experiencing the gracious gifts of God. And as you light a candle, I invite you to bask in the glorious assurance that God has plans for you, plans for your welfare and not for you harm - plans to give you a future with hope.