

A Future We Build Together (Stewardship Commitment Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-9, 11-14

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. 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.

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 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 Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A Future We Build Together

Not many of us know Jeremiah well. We might remember that he was a prophet (or have a hazy recollection from a Stewardship talk that he might have written *Lamentations*), but even folks who grew up going to Sunday school don't always know why Jeremiah was writing, or what kind of world he was writing into. Still, if there's one verse people do know from Jeremiah, it's

from this morning's passage: *"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."* It's one of those verses that gets needlepointed onto pillows and written into confirmation Bibles. It's comforting—a verse that assures us that even in the midst of change and uncertainty, in the end, all will be well.

But—without trying to be the pastor who ruins a good Bible verse for you—I have to tell you that that isn't what Jeremiah, or God, meant. Whatever you believe about free will or whether God has a personalized plan for you, this particular verse wasn't written to you or for you. It wasn't written for any one person at all. Jeremiah was an exilic prophet—which is a fancy way of saying he preached during the years leading up to and during the Babylonian exile. You may remember a few weeks ago we heard the story of Jeremiah buying a field from his cousin even as the Babylonians were marching across it to invade the land. One of the few Israelites who was not immediately sent into exile, Jeremiah remained in Judah, speaking God's word to both those who were left in the land and those who had been exiled to Babylon.

Our passage for this morning comes from a letter Jeremiah wrote to those already in exile—a community that had lost almost everything. Jerusalem was under Babylonian control; its leaders and artisans ousted and exiled. The temple still stood (though it wouldn't for long), but even its promise felt distant, its beauty dimmed by fear. And, on top of all that, the people Jeremiah was writing to had been forced to move hundreds of miles from home. They were living not just in a foreign land but in the heart of the empire that had conquered them. Everything around them would have been a reminder of their defeat, their future unfolding according to no plan they could recognize.

It is into this loss that Jeremiah speaks. But what he tells the exiled community is not what they expected—or wanted—to hear. Jeremiah's message isn't, "Hang in there; this will all be over soon." He doesn't promise rescue. He doesn't promise revenge. He doesn't promise a speedy return to normal. Instead, he sends them a letter that says, *"Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take spouses and have children. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*

It would be as if Jeremiah had stood among us in those first few weeks of the COVID pandemic, when we kept thinking that things would open up any day—surely by Easter, or summer, or

when school started again—and said, “Settle in. Learn how to worship on screens. Get ready to teach your children at the kitchen table, mark birthdays with drive-by parades, and find new ways to be community—because this is where you are now.” I suspect most of us would have tuned out such a message and written the messenger off as a pessimist. But if we had taken it seriously, if we had let the words sink in, I imagine it would have felt like a gut punch—like being told that the waiting room we’re sitting in isn’t a waiting room at all—that we should hang pictures on the walls and learn how to live here, because this is home now.

Jeremiah’s voice, of course, was just one among many. Other prophets were offering what sounded like far more hopeful messages. Hananiah was preaching that God had already broken the back of Babylon’s power—that within two years the exiles would be home again. You can imagine how that played. “Two years! We can do two years. We can hold our breath that long. We’ll just keep our bags packed, stay ready, keep our real lives on hold until we can return to normal.” And honestly, had I been preaching in Babylon, I suspect that would have been my instinct as well. We want to be hopeful people, and hopeful people hold out hope that this too shall pass. We want to comfort those who are hurting, to assure them that the hardship is temporary, that relief is coming soon.

But Jeremiah presses a different point—because not every kind of hope is faithful hope. Some kinds of hope keep us looking backward—dreaming about how things used to be, waiting for a restoration that may never come. Jeremiah’s hope—a hope rooted in God’s future—calls us to live faithfully in the world as it is, even when that world feels like enemy territory. His message isn’t pessimism; it’s realism rooted in trust. Jeremiah insists that faith (and hope) isn’t about waiting for the storm to end; it’s about how we keep living when the sky stays dark.

It’s important to note that Jeremiah’s message was never *keep calm and carry on*. It wasn’t an invitation to make peace with cruelty or to ignore what was broken. It was a call to stay faithful in the midst of it—to do the slow, steady work of tending life even in enemy territory. When Jeremiah tells the exiles to “seek the welfare of the city,” he isn’t asking them to pray for the success of Babylon’s empire or to adopt its values. He’s calling them to work for the good of the community where they now live—for the people around them, even those who see the world differently. There’s a difference between serving the empire and serving the common good.

Jeremiah’s command is not compliance; it’s resistance of a different kind: the slow, stubborn

resistance of compassion over contempt, of planting goodness in hostile soil, of refusing to let hatred or despair have the last word. Seeking the welfare of the city means investing in the health of the community right in front of us—not because the empire deserves our loyalty, but because our neighbors deserve our love.

It is, admittedly, an unusual message to give people who feel despondent about their current surroundings—those who scroll through the news or walk their neighborhoods and feel only weariness or worry. After all, exile—whatever form it takes—is supposed to be temporary; it's supposed to end. One would expect a preacher or prophet to lean into that future reality, not dwell on how long it's going to take to arrive. But Jeremiah's message cuts across all of that. He tells us to stop holding our breath and start living here, now—to trust that God's promise is not on hold. *Build. Plant. Seek the good of the place where you are.*

It's never been easy to live this kind of faith. Many of us sit glued to the news in a constant state of alarm, watching the world unravel and feeling powerless to stop it. We may not be living in literal exile, but we know what it feels like to inhabit a world that's uncertain and divided—to watch the foundations of our common life shake, the bonds of community fray, and the ground beneath us shift. For the exiles, living this faith meant learning how to be God's people inside the empire that had conquered them. For Jeremiah, it looked like buying a field even as the approaching army trampled it in their march toward conquest—an act of quiet defiance and faith.

For us, living this kind of faith means refusing to give up on the common good, even when our public life feels fractured or fragile. "Seek the welfare of the city" doesn't mean accepting the world as it is; it means loving it enough to work for its healing. The hope Jeremiah describes grows from small, steady acts—showing up for local elections, tutoring students, serving on boards, advocating for fair housing, feeding neighbors, protecting the vulnerable. It's the kind of quiet, faithful work that strengthens community from the ground up. It's planting gardens of mercy right in the middle of the world's broken soil, trusting that God's promise still holds. It's not waiting for circumstances to improve, but building and planting right where we are.

That's why this passage belongs on Commitment Sunday. Because stewardship isn't about maintaining an institution (not even one as great as Covenant); it's about building and planting for the sake of God's future. It's about trusting that our work, our giving, and our care can still

bear fruit, even when the times feel uncertain. When Jeremiah told the exiles to “seek the welfare of the city,” he was teaching them that faith isn’t private protection—it’s shared participation. Their welfare, he said, was tied to the welfare of their neighbors—even their Babylonian neighbors. To pray for the city’s peace was to trust that God’s purposes extended beyond their own comfort or tribe.

The same is true for us. The good we seek for our neighbors is inseparable from the good God desires for us. When we give, when we serve, when we cultivate kindness and create homes of welcome, we are enacting that vocation. That’s what stewardship looks like. It’s buying a field when the future seems uncertain; it’s planting and having families in a land you don’t necessarily want to live in; it’s believing that God’s plans for hope are still unfolding through us. It’s saying, *“I will invest in the future God envisions, even if I can’t see it yet.”*

Because most of us will never see the full harvest of what we plant. The people who first heard Jeremiah’s letter never got to go home. But they built and planted where they were. They lived as though God’s promise of a future with hope was already true; they trusted that the plans God had for them were still unfolding, even far from home, even in the midst of what looked like the total and complete collapse of everything they valued and held dear. And we’re called to do the same—to plant for a promise we may never see fulfilled. To nurture a community that will bear fruit long after we’re gone. To teach our children—and their children—how to keep tending hope, even in hard times.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. This was never a promise for one person’s future; it was spoken to a people learning to live faithfully together. The “you” God is speaking to is plural. It might be more accurate to say, *“for surely I know the plans I have for y’all.”* God’s plans are for the community as a whole. And those plans begin with invitations—to build, to plant, to hope, right where they are.

Which is what we’re doing when we pledge. We’re joining a centuries-old story of people who, in every generation, dared to believe that God’s future could begin here. We’re saying that this community still matters—that God’s Spirit is alive among us, calling us to love, to give, to serve, to hope. And that matters deeply in a world like ours. When cynicism grows and people stop believing that change is possible, it is the church’s job to bear witness to another way—to a hope that builds and plants and prays, to a God who is not finished with us yet.

So let us build and plant. Let us seek the welfare of our city and the flourishing of our world. Let us invest in the kind of future that looks like God's dream—where grace and justice and mercy take root again. It won't happen all at once. It never does. But every act of faith, every offering, every prayer moves us one step closer to the world God imagines. Because hope is not something we wait for—it's something we build together.

Amen.