

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# A Future with Hope

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The prophet Jeremiah lived during one of the most crucial and terrifying periods in Israelite history. That's bold statement for biblical scholars and historians to make given our faith story includes floods, plagues, and desert wanderings. Perhaps they identify the threats to their existence as so perilous because they emerge from human behavior. Something they could control.

During Jeremiah's life he feared everything that could go wrong: what people expected, believed, and how they behaved could take them down. He lived in the decades leading up the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE when the people divided along partisan lines, blasting the community from inside with storms of hostility. All residents were called to love one another and tend the welfare of the community and yet households **accused** the other for their faltering descent.

On the one hand, a false prophet of the time assured Jerusalem's establishment was secure. No need to change and a quick fix would return them to prosperity of old. On the other hand, Jeremiah preaches an unwelcome truth that their decline resulted from the growing injustices from the way they ignored the God's covenant. Their habits tore at the fabric of their faith and very lives.<sup>1</sup>

Reading Jeremiah feels like a gut punch with all the predictions of doom and the violence. The rhetoric between

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, to Plant, a Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1-3.

the two prophets echoes the partisan messages that fill my spam filter these days and the tv commercials I try to tune out.

In Jeremiah's time, all that could go wrong did go wrong, which led to their exile into Babylon. Nestled in the vitriol and ugliness, our reading today records Jeremiah's glimmer of hope.

*Dear God, we too live in disruptive times, wondering if and when we see a clear path for our future. Dispel from our minds any of the nagging to-dos or the replays of regrets or any thought other than you. Settle us together to respect the voice of this prophet as he speaks for you in these holy words. May we hear you call to us today and direct our future. Amen.*

### **Jeremiah 29:10-14**

<sup>10</sup>For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>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.

Just like the Israelites, we live in disruptive times.

We'd rather not talk about the pandemic, but it lumbers around like an elephant in the room. Either the whispered fear of infection or a positive test force some of us to retreat. The division this virus seeded remains a lightning rod for partisan mindsets, and we continue to push ourselves away from one another and into social isolation.

The side effects of the pandemic revealed economic injustices, an ugliness, we could no longer ignore. Many who linked one paycheck to another just to pay the rent prior to 2020 became celebrated as essential workers. This population suffered illness and death at higher rates for the work they performed. While others who held lower-wage jobs and became furloughed were driven further into the margins.

The war instigated by Putin sends shock waves around the world with economic hardship. It cut off grain supplies to already famine-stricken regions. His war sickens us when we learn of torture and all the civilians and children killed as wantonly as livestock in the field.

At home, new evidence emerged of fellow countrymen threatening the lives of our leaders and constitution at our nation's capital on January 6.

Tack on to these immediate fears, divisions simmer over access to abortion, climate change, an ability to vote, or trust the election's outcome.

At a personal level, if you think anxiety is unique to your household, please know mental health professionals see it in epidemic proportions as we struggle with the weight of all these challenges.

When we wonder what on heaven and earth is going on, we look for companions who have been through similar terrors. How did they make it through? What was it like?

As people of God, we look to scripture and there we find Jeremiah. He led with truth at a time of hardship. His clear-eyed honesty about the circumstances they created gave him credibility. No one could deny his assessment of their situation. His integrity drew people to listen when he spoke for God.<sup>2</sup> At the time the Israelites remembered and we can as well: throughout our faith history, God works and speaks through ordinary people.

Like other prophets, Jeremiah was born into the community and was able to understand every custom and habit of the people. They were his folks. When he moved to the fringes of society, he saw clearly the damage inflicted by the actions of

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message Bible* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 1342.

just a few. His insider status and enduring interest in their welfare gave his message authority.

Jeremiah preached “turn now, each of you, from your evil practices...do not follow other gods and worship them.” He saw people worship idols – the same type that lure us today. Money. Self-proclaimed saviors. Small gods who looked like them and dismissed others.

Unfortunately, no one or just not enough listened. The people divided against one another and fell under the Babylonian rule of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Rather than acknowledge their own culpability for their failure, the populist prophet, Hananiah, preached a pleasing word. To paraphrase, he says; “don’t worry, folks, God’s rescue is right around the corner. Don’t worry about breaking your ill-conceived notions of prosperity or justice or faith.”

It’s easy to preach good news. It’s easy to preach a word that does not demand change. That’s sunny optimism that ignores the facts. Optimism feels good to say yet turns to saccharine for those hungering for truth.

Defiant, Jeremiah plunges ahead...God says it may take “seventy years” to complete your hard work,

“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 harder to preach hope that demands patience. And it’s harder to receive good news that requires us to invest ourselves in bringing about what God desires, rather than just sitting back. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann observes, people who object to hope end up joining a religion of humble submission to the present<sup>3</sup> and close themselves off to the future.

This hope comes not from human hands, God’s work. Jeremiah preaches:

“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.”

This kind of hope rises despite conflict. It holds on to the memory of others who aligned with the humble and patient work of God. Hope lives in our bodies not an act of will so much as an act of courage and imagination.

Maryann McKibbin Dana is a minister, ultra-marathon runner, and writer. In her recent book, *Hope: A User’s Manual*, she describes meeting with a group of from a church involved in peace and justice work. In the course of their time together,

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<sup>3</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implication of a Christian Eschatology*, Trans. James W. Leitch, (New York: Fortress Press edition, 1993), 26.



the participants, eager to confront what they saw in their community, felt the weight of the task before them. She saw their shoulders slump with the urgency to help now, and the vulnerability required to step out in the community, perhaps ostracizing them from friends and family.

As rookies in their effort, they feared they would stumble and maybe make things worse. They nit-picked every idea and discounted the little actions in favor of grand gestures, but those they could not fund with people, policy, or money. Finally, one person asked, “does this get any easier?”

Dana remembered the advice from an elite-level runner:

It doesn't get easier.

You just get stronger.

Anyone who has tried a sport, hikes a hill in the neighborhood, or encourages a youth team knows the first mile hurts. Then two miles and a few wind sprints. Still hard. You never outgrow the discomfort. Stand on the line of the 23-mile mark of a 26-mile marathon and see even the elites will grimace.

So it is with any work to bring hope to a community and to ourselves. She writes: “hopeful people know, safety isn't part of the deal. Discomfort isn't a sign to stop. It's a sign to lean in further.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Maryann McKibbon Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2022). This entire book resonates so deeply in our hunger for hope when the world seems to tell us otherwise. I commend this for devotional reading, discussion, or as a balm for your soul.

The words of Jeremiah inspired our Stewardship theme for 2023: a future with hope.

We acknowledge the landscape around us feels a bit like exile from what we had both as a church and a community. We recognize the past many years felt tumultuous with so much change. Pastors leaving and arriving. Being separated from one another. Limited funds for outreach. Limited funds for investing in the people to shepherd us.

Yet, we trust what Jeremiah preached. Holding on to the faith bequeathed to us by those before us, and patiently building, together, we trust God will work with and through us.

In the coming weeks, please spend some time considering your commitment to Westminster for the year ahead. Think about God's generosity to you and the way you may choose to express your gratitude through this congregation to which you belong. I invite to talk with your family, other members, with staff, clergy, and your officers. Ask about the day-by-day workings beyond your routine at church.

Learn about what it takes to launch the programs and fund our mission work. Notice the ways this building serves our church and community on a daily basis, from the wee hours of the morning into the dark evening. Ask about the vision officers and others have for Westminster as we seek to love God and neighbor.

In the process celebrate the launch last week of the *Teen & Parent Mental Health Speaker Series*. Ed Sutter rallied the staff and congregation to facilitate conversation about the most tender of topics – our mental health.

You may not think twice about the vacation bible school held last summer. Do you know a majority of churches abandoned VBS? It was just too hard. At Westminster, Children & Family ministry rallied seasoned volunteers and youth who attended VBS just years ago. Truly one generation reaching behind to hold the hand of the next. This church grows by one soul and then another, a new family walks in. This is how the gospel spreads, by the stories we tell in daily life of being the place of hope as no other.

Observe those serving on the committees to welcome the refugee family. See the anxiety if they will get to the next appointment. Become sufficient to pay their bills. Set down roots and flourish. As a congregation, you responded immediately to furnish their home. This is only one example of the way the church comes together to bring hope to others. I can think of no clearer example of what it means to embody resurrection hope.

In the weeks ahead, please pray about what your commitment might mean in this unique time.

Our way forward is clear: love God and neighbor. To become the beacon of hope this community so desperately needs in these divisive times.

Practicing good news is the harder work to which we are called.

Jeremiah promises when we search for God, we will find God. God promises a future with hope. This hope requires us to be connected – to our deepest selves, our community, our best purpose.



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