

Jeremiah 29: 4-14
Future With Hope
HPPC: August 26, 2007

Background

- After King David, Kingdom divided into 2 nations: Israel & Judah
- Israel had been conquered by Assyrians 200 years before
- Now, Judah was conquered by Babylonians
- Many leaders/prominent people from Judah taken hostage and deported to Babylon, 2nd wave of people have been deported
- Jeremiah God's messenger still in Judah but wrote to the people who were in Babylon, in exile
- These people in exile in Babylon remained in tightly knit communities and maintained regular communication with homeland of Judah

Scripture

Pray

Message

I was being examined for ordination as a minister of word and sacrament. The presbytery of the Inland Northwest gathered with ministers (some who were teachers at Whitworth), and elders from area Presbyterian churches. I was standing in front of them and they could ask me anything theological that they wanted to. And if they didn't like my answer they could vote that I not be ordained and become a minister. I was slightly nervous. The examination had been going for several minutes, but it felt like forever to me. I had answered all the questions seemingly to their satisfaction and then David Peterson stood up. He was serving as the Head of staff downtown at 1st Pres. This was the church that I would be serving at as an associate if all went well. He asked the question, "What do you see God doing in the future?" I froze. I mean my mind froze. The future? I don't for sure. I went to Princeton—all that predicting and prophesying about the end of the world and such—that was in those other churches. We Presbyterians didn't worry about the future, did we?? What's the point? I'm a present kind of person—not stuck in the past and I don't day dream about the

future. I always hated those questions—what do you see yourself doing in 5 years, 10 years etc. I don't know!

Well you know the end of the story—because I'm standing here 19 years later as an ordained minister. I made some response basically that I would need to think some more about that. And I did. I came to a realization that I hadn't reflected about God's future too much. I hadn't formulated a theology for the future. Perhaps I was a bit scared of the future because it is unknown.

But the unknown can be exciting. For many it's wonderful to dream about the future, to envision what God might have in store for us. Hoping is an act of faith—looking to the future. Here at HPPC the future is bright! We are living and participating in a very exciting chapter of HPPC's story of faith. As members and friends of HPPC you get to help shape that future. You have a voice in who you sense God is calling to join the pastoral leadership here.

I want to emphasize the word call. We are in the process of searching for and calling a new associate pastor. This differs significantly from a business process of hiring. Calling involves listening and waiting on God. Calling is a spiritual discipline of discernment. And discernment takes time. It doesn't happen in our timeframe but in God's time table.

The people in exile in Babylon knew what it meant to wait. They had been shipped off to a strange land with a foreign culture. They wanted to go back home—homesick. So they were listening to the prophets and diviners who were basically fortune tellers saying they would get to go home soon. God said no. God's time is different. The exiles would return home after 70 years. Now 70 years signified a lifetime. These folks would live out their lives in exile and only their children could hope to return home. So they were called to adapt--to adjust to their new situation and learn to endure it.

The waiting was to be a time filled with everyday, ordinary living. Jeremiah says to the people, “Get married, have kids, settle down. You’re gonna be there awhile.” But we also see a spiritual dimension when Jeremiah says, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” (29”:13) Look at your heart. Look at your spiritual life and health. Biblical scholar R. E. Clements writes that “the period of waiting and surviving in a grim and threatening world of exile were to be years of spiritual discipline and an opportunity.” Only after a period of self-reflection would the people be able to seek God “with a whole heart.” Only then could a return to the homeland become spiritually meaningful.

I think the message for us is to continue on in ministry at HPPC. Also spend time in self-reflection. “What areas can we grow to be more faithful? How can we strengthen our gifts? How can we be faithful while we wait?” This can prepare us to call rather than hire a new associate pastor. Only after a genuine time of spiritual discernment can the calling be spiritually meaningful.

I was at Starbucks on Tuesday for the bible study—you know the one that meets at 6:30 am. As I was fighting the urge to yawn we were jokingly discussing some of the differences between Robin and me. The bible study at that ungodly hour of course was a ministry that Robin had started and I inherited—I’m not a morning person and I don’t even drink coffee. It was also pointed out that I’m a bit taller than Robin.

More than just these minor differences adjusting to your new associate pastor will involve being open to a new personality and a new style of leadership. This minister will have some new ideas and new ways of doing things. One of the tasks of the interim is to help prepare you for your new leadership. So, to that end I thought of some things in worship that we could experiment with this week. Last week as the staff prepared for this morning’s worship, I suggested a few ideas including a new way to sing a song. Later we’ll be saying a different version of the Lord’s Prayer. I was so grateful that I didn’t hear the 7 last words of

the church, “We’ve never done it that way before.” There was an openness to trying something new. There is a reason to trying new things—I’m not just trying to confuse or embarrass anyone. Sometimes, when we do things differently, we have to think more about what we’re singing or saying. I heard a comment this week at the Listening For God class that stuck with me. One participant said that sometimes he says the Lord’s prayer without really thinking about the words, without really praying it—he was just saying it. The ecumenical version that is listed in the bulletin is out of the Presbyterian book of common worship. A new version can add freshness to our prayer. These are minor, temporary changes but hopefully they begin to prepare you to try new things and for new directions in ministry that your pastors will lead you in.

Through the time of waiting, God is preparing a wonderful future for the people in exile and for HPPC. It is a future with hope. God is trustworthy and faithful. We can trust in God’s promises. God knows what our future brings and God’s plans for us are for our welfare. There are good things in store for us. God promises to hear us when we seek the Lord--when we pray for direction & when we pray for restoration. God has gathered us and God sends us. It’s an ongoing pattern—we are gathered and sent and gathered and sent.

HPPC’s future will be different than it’s past. Things will not remain the same. We live in a time of change not only for HPPC but for the church—the whole church. Many question what the church will look like in the future. Our culture has gone through a huge shift. It’s called a paradigm shift. We are becoming a postmodern culture. Two major areas that we can see the change in the culture affect the Church: these are the relationship of faith and science and our understanding of mission. Let me share with you some of my journey to explain some of these significant changes.

Years ago, I was working in the bookstore at Princeton Seminary when Professor Diogenes Allen came in. He asked me to help him find a list of all the books in

print that had the word “postmodern” in their title. He was curious as to how the word had been used to date. That was the first I had heard the term and it piqued my curiosity as well. Out beyond the seminary walls I was struggling to find my way theologically. I longed for something beyond the evangelical-liberal debate. I was asked to participate in a pre-General Assembly event in Baltimore. We shared stories from our churches that were doing both mission and evangelism. A third way of being the church was beginning to break through.

A few years later I was sitting in the basement of a church. Gathered around the computer were other clergy and scientists. We were discussing quantum physics, fractals and chaos theory. As we batted around ideas regarding creation, there was a moment when the scientists looked at the clergy and said we can't answer the question “why?” As I sat there I began to realize that the relationship between science and religion was changing. Following this, I began to sense that God was calling me to a different ministry. Through a spiritual discernment retreat and a study of spiritual gifts, I realized that God was calling me to be a missionary. I was being sent out to proclaim the gospel to the nations, to reach the unchurched, to share a vision that was counter-culture. I was being called to start a new church in a suburb of Philadelphia and then later help start a church in Latah Valley, right here in Spokane

The mission field is right at our door. We are sent into the world on God's mission. God sends us into our community. We are God's ambassadors to those who are strangers to God's promises. Just as the exiles were told to seek the welfare of the city where God sent them we too are sent to those around us—to pray for them, to witness to God's plan for the kingdom. And like the people of exile, we are confronted with the knowledge that what we trusted in cannot be trusted. God alone is Lord. There is good news. God has not left us. God is with us and with take us home. The Lord is doing something that is not over yet. The exile is part of God's plan. The future of HPPC, exiles, Church is uncertain,

but God is faithful. Wait and prepare for God's future trusting in God's care. The future is full of hope.

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