Jeremiah 31:7-14

“Restoring Hope”

There was a businessman who commuted to work from his home in the suburbs of Chicago. Every day, on the way home, a conductor would shout out to the passengers, “Next stop Calvary! Anybody for Calvary?” Calvary was a town that long ago had been left behind. Nobody seemed to live there. Looking out the window of the train, the businessman saw nothing but broken-down houses and dirty streets. No one ever got off at Calvary.

Then one day, when as usual, the conductor asked if anyone wanted to get off at Calvary, a man stood up, and gathered his belongings to get off the train. The businessman was amazed. He didn’t think anyone lived in this town that had looked dead for so many years. The businessman watched as the man got off the train, and walked past the all the battered and beaten buildings, and then beyond them.

The businessman followed the stranger as he made his way through the town, and up a hill on the other side of Calvary. It was then the businessman noticed something he had never seen before. There on a hill, on the other side of town, stood a house with its lights on. And there standing on the front porch were three little girls waiting for their father to come home. It was then that the businessman realized his mistake.

There was another side to Calvary. He had always looked in the wrong direction. He had seen only the dirt, the darkness, and death of the town. He hadn’t seen the other side, where there is life, and vitality, and a loving family waiting to express its love. (Stories that Feed Your Soul, p.119) Today marks a challenging subject for all of us. But perhaps it is a vital subject as we begin a new year.

If nothing else, our experience of 2015, and every year before that, has taught us that over the next twelve months there are going to be surprises. Some are going to be wonderful, but unfortunately, some are going to be challenging; painful even. When I look back in my datebook over 2015, there were a great number of things that happened I would never have predicted at the beginning of the year.

And time and time again, as persons of faith, we have discovered that there is no greater hurdle than looking beyond the immediate crisis to the hope that lies beyond. There is no greater threat to our faith, and maybe our emotional health, than trying to hold onto the belief that there is joy beyond the pain, the grief, or the exile. It may be on this point that the rubber meets the road for many people when it comes to faith.

After all, why do bad things happen to people like us who claim to believe in God? This is an ancient question, asked by prophets, disciples, and just regular church going people for hundreds of years. Is there something better beyond the suffering, the grief, the pain, and the exile?

There, I’ve said it twice now. I did say exile didn’t I, and that was intentional, because to begin to find our way through the mire of this issue, of seeing beyond the immediate, we don’t have to look any further than the impending exile of Judah. Which is at the very heart of the crisis in the book of Jeremiah. We looked at Jeremiah a couple of years ago is some detail in our Family Night series, and you may remember how gloomy the book was to read.

Jeremiah’s words ooze out loads of judgment and wrath. By the time Jeremiah is in the height of his prophetic ministry, the ten northern tribes of Israel, have been taken away into exile, and were permanently lost to history by the Assyrians. The people of Ephraim, another name for the northern kingdom of Israel, was: dispersed, scattered to the wind, killed, or exiled. The northern kingdom was no more, and never would be again.

The people of Judah knew all of this, and Jeremiah warned them that the same fate, by the hand of the Babylonians, was about to descend on them. And as we know, Jeremiah’s prophecy came to fruition, and Jerusalem fell, and the best and the brightest of its people were hauled off to Babylon. The people of Judah had sinned. They had mistreated the poor, worshipped idols, and ignored God’s covenant.

Things were so bad, that Jeremiah actually ran off to Egypt to find some peace. The bulk of Jeremiah’s writing, is therefore focused on judgment. It repeatedly tells us that God’s word will not be mocked. Judah got what they rightly deserved, as unfair as they may have claimed it to be. Judah may have protested that God’s judgment was unfair, but they were guilty, and the nation of Judah needed correction.

No one, including us, enjoys words of judgment. All of us, I am sure begin to squirm when the preacher dishes out fire and brimstone. William Willimon, preaching professor at Duke University, records in *A Cloud of Witnesses* the following incident.

*“When I was serving a little church in Georgia, one of my members had a relative who died…The funeral was in a little hot, crowded, off-brand Baptist church. Well, I had never seen anything like it. They wheeled the coffin in; the preacher began to preach. He shouted, fumed, flailed his arms. ‘It’s too late for Joe,’ he screamed. ‘He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now.*

*He’s dead. It’s all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over… But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day of decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!’ Well, continues Willimon, it was the worse thing I had ever heard. ‘Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family?’ I asked Patsy, my wife on the way home.*

*‘I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that,’ I said. She agreed… ‘Of Course,’ Then she added, ‘the worst part of all is that what was said was true.’”* No one like that kind of message, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. No one liked Jeremiah’s messages, but they ended up be true*.*

The king hated his words so much, he ended up throwing him into a dried out cistern. Jeremiah suffered the wrath of Judah for trying to warn them of the wrath of God. Surprisingly though, is in the very heart of Jeremiah’s writing, are chapters 30-33 in which the tone changes dramatically, and then in chapter 34 it’s right back to judgment.

The contrast between these three chapters, and the rest of the book, is quite stark and that is intentional. It is like Jeremiah, under the Holy Spirit’s direction, steps off his main train of thought, and announces a great big aside. It is like he is saying, “Things are going to be horrible, but I guess I should give you the best part of the story.” There is something grand on the other side of Calvary, the other side of the exile, the other side of whatever crisis you are in.

*“See I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together, a great company they shall return back”.*

 These words echo those of Isaiah, *“Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees, say to those of fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not! Behold your God will come with vengeance with the recompense of God he will come and save you’…And the ransom of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

What a glorious promise! Our sadness will turn to joy. Our exile will become a grand homecoming. The feeble will regain strength, the blind, the lame, those due with children shall all be brought in. No one shall be left behind. This is not, I repeat; this is not a denial of our pain, or our exile. It is a recognition that we need to see beyond it.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale once interviewed Capt. Jeremiah (Ironic that his name is Jeremiah) Denton who was a POW in North Vietnam during the war. In the POW camp things were very bad. Food was scarce, treatment was barbaric and the prisoners were isolated from each other meaning they had no human contact. To gain strategic information from Denton they tortured him for five days.

When he wouldn’t break they tortured him for five more days. Denton claims he couldn’t take it anymore. He said he prayed, “Dear Jesus Christ, dear God, take me. Take over. I can’t handle it anymore.” Suddenly he felt flowing over him a blanket of comfort. It enveloped him and he explained, “From that minute on, I suffered no more pain. I was as comfortable as though I was sitting in a plush automobile.”

Time and time again, people report similar experiences, about how God sustains them in their hour of pain, sorrow and suffering. That is the message of Jeremiah. God acknowledges the weeping but he promises consolation. Yes, God sent his people into exile but he promises to being them home; to gather them together. God will find his people and bring them home. The effect of this promise will be obvious according to Jeremiah.

He writes, “They shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain and the wine and the oil and over the young of the flock and the herd, their life shall become a watered garden and they shall never languish again.” Clearly this is the hope born out in the birth of Jesus. Like Israel we are now through Christ, God’s own people, the sheep of his pasture. Those who were far off are no drawn near to the throne of grace.

And yet something odd and disturbing has happened. Madeleine L’Engle writes of Christmas this way. *“The story of Jesus’ birth has been over sentimentalized until it no longer has the ring of truth and once we’d sentimentalized it, we could commercialize it and so forget what Christmas is really about. It should be a time of awed silence, but it has become a season so frantic with stress that the suicide rate mounts alarmingly and for some people death seems preferable to the loneliness and alienation of Christmas.”*

How tragic and terrible to think that the birth of the Prince of Peace is celebrated with depression and anxiety and the feeling of loss. One wonders why such negative feelings are so acute at Christmas, but the reason may be that we are still waiting for God’s fulfillment. We are still waiting as exiles to be led home. We are still waiting for our feeble knees to regain their strength.

We are still waiting for young women to dance, and young men to make merry. Our mourning has still got a strong grip on us. We have not yet marched into Zion. We still wait for all of God’s children to be gathered together as a mother hen gathers her chicks, as Isaiah states. Here’s a bit of trivia for you. Do you know which Christmas carol that you probably sang over the last few weeks is the oldest.

With its origins trace back to the twelfth century and perhaps older than even that, O Come, O come Emmanuel, is likely one of the oldest hymns we ever sing. The carol has persisted over the centuries because it reflects the hearts of people world wide, who long for deliverance from the troubles of life. The original author of this Carol saw in the exile of Judah’s experience something of his own struggles, and thus penned these words.

*O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!* Who does Emmanuel ransom? Israel. And who because of adoption into God’s family are now Israel, the lost tribes? You and me, of course. How prophetic are Jeremiah’s words? “Sing with joy for Israel! Shout for the greatest of nations...For I will bring them from the north and from distant corners of the earth.”

It does not matter how far you think you are from God; he has brought you home. It doesn’t matter how troubling your life is right now, God has prepared something, and promised you something greater. Rejoice! Sings songs of joy. Be radiant because of the many gifts God has given to you. Read on further in Jeremiah 31. “Do not weep any longer, for I will reward you. There is hope for your future.”

Do you believe that? That there is always hope. There was a six-year-old boy in England, some years back; whose mother wished him to be prepared for any eventuality. His mother explained that should he ever needed help he should dial “0” for the operator and ask for information. One day, when the mother was away from home the young boy’s canary seemed to have become sick and would not longer sing.

He remembered what his mother had said and he dialed “0” and asked for information. The young boy then explained to the operator that his canary was ill and wouldn’t sing. It would seem this particular operator knew a great deal about canaries and she gave some helpful advice and sure enough the canary was back to singing. There after the young boy, whenever he felt lonely or scared or uncertain, he would dial up information.

Because it was a small town he always got the same operator and a relationship began to build between the boy and the operator. One day his canary died and he dialed up the operator and asked if there was any way to bring the canary back to life. The kind woman kindly explained that there was no way to bring the canary back but he should always remember, “There are other worlds in which to sing.”

Years later the boy now a young man was home from his university studies and decided to call up his old friend the operator. A different woman answered and he explained who he was and explained what a great help her predecessor was. The woman said, “I was told by Mrs. Jones, the former operator, that someday you might call again. She told me about you when she was very sick and eventually she died.

But she told me, that you should ever call, to tell you to remember that there are other worlds in which to sing. And she wanted you to know that what was true for your canary is also true for her. (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p.125)

Do you know that it is also true for you?