

“The Prospects for Hope in a New Year”

Jeremiah 31:7–14

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It is a new year, finally! Never have we been so anxious to get a year over with than we were with 2020. Last year brought not only a pandemic of historic proportions, a heightened awareness of racial injustice, and bitter political divisions; it brought a record number of tropical storms, massive forest fires in the west, a locust plague, an asteroid threat, and on a happier note, a rare occurrence of the Christmas Star, that bright astronomical phenomenon caused by the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn. About the only thing missing was a plague of frogs... though there was a week in early summer when the creeks in Schenck Forest, where I often run, were overflowing with frogs!

2020 is finally over, hallelujah! 2021 has begun and it is time to ring out the old and ring in the new! But just because the calendar has turned doesn't mean all of the plagues of 2020 have disappeared. COVID-19 is still with us, even though vaccines are beginning to be distributed. Racial inequalities have not been eliminated. Political divisions endure even after the election. And who knows about the next tropical storm season and the increasing number of forest fires? The underlying factors giving rise to these realities have not been addressed. Perhaps we will have fewer locusts and frogs and only pleasant astronomical events, but there are no guarantees. Who knows what a new year will bring?

The added challenge is that many of us have been around long enough to have developed more than a healthy measure of cynicism about life and the prospects for change. Tony Campolo once said that we are only as old as our cynicism and as young as our dreams. If this is so, many of us are pretty old. We have lived too many years with the hope of something better only to experience the same old discouraging diet of frustration and disappointment. Is it not simply naïve and

uninformed to entertain hope in a time of so many daunting challenges? Who knows? What are the prospects for hope in a new year?

Perhaps our reading from Jeremiah 31 can inform our reflection on this question. These words are part of what is known as the *Book of Consolation* which forms a small part of the larger book of *Jeremiah*. Jeremiah's primary message is one of doom and gloom. The people have been unfaithful to God, God has allowed them to go their own way, and now a foreign oppressor, the Babylonians, will come and destroy the nation and take many of the people into exile. No one listens to Jeremiah, but — as we know — he is right. Most of his ministry, most of the book linked to his name, consists of listing the nation's transgressions and predicting its doom. Yet, within this gloomy text, there are passages of hope, of consolation, passages that speak of a day when God will allow the exiles to return home and experience joy once again.

The reading from *Jeremiah 31* is one such passage. It speaks of a joyous return home, people singing and dancing and weeping for joy. Young people and old people, men and women, the strong and the weak, the blind and the lame — all will return home. There is hope beyond the present suffering. The question is, "When were these words spoken?" Some scholars attribute them to Jeremiah and thus date them to the beginning of the exile. Others, finding parallels with passages from Isaiah, see them as a later adaptation of Jeremiah's ministry. But even these latter scholars date these words to the middle of the exile.

So, following either determination, the words are spoken long before there is any evidence that the Israelites will ever return to their land. Hope is expressed before anyone can reasonably believe it. It is a reminder for us about the nature of hope. Hope for what we know will happen isn't hope. As the author of Hebrews says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1)." Such is the nature of genuine faith, it precedes hard evidence, and hope is what enables us to leave room for the possibility of something better.

There is a scene in the movie *The Two Towers* wherein Frodo and Samwise debate their prospects for hope. Frodo is exhausted by the battles he has endured, and he realizes that the hardest part of his

journey is yet to come, as he must take the evil ring into the fires of Mordor to destroy it. He is ready to give up, but Sam, ever an encourager, insists that they must go on. “How can we?” wonders Frodo, to which Sam replies, “Because we are holding on to something... we are holding on to the hope there is still good in the world...” The truth is they are also holding on to each other — friendship is a part of how we endure challenges and retain hope — but Sam is wise. They must hold on to hope if they are to move forward. So must we.

Some argue that hope can be unfounded, naïve, unreasonable, but our feelings of anxiety and despair can be equally unfounded, naïve, and unreasonable. Consider the current realities of the pandemic, the longstanding racial challenges of this nation, and the political divisions — seemingly intractable challenges. But who knows? There are ways forward if we are willing to embrace them — vaccines, treatments, behavioral adjustments, dialogue models, change strategies. None of this will be easy, but there are ways forward, if we lean in to hope.

John Killinger includes this quote in one of his books. “Two men looked out from prison bars. One saw the mud. The other saw the stars.” Such is our experience and often what we see is what we get!

The words of *Jeremiah* remind us that the very nature of hope implies that we can leave room for better things even without proof of their existence. These words also remind us of where our hope lies. Who is responsible for the promised return of the Israelites to their land? Do they have hope because they are courageous people who will take initiative to improve their condition or because they are cared for by a God whose compassion extends to all? Clearly the latter is the case. God is responsible for their return. Likewise, our hope is grounded not simply in our abilities to make a better day but in our faith in God.

This is not to deny our capacity to improve our lives. It is simply to say that we are not the whole story. To have a thoroughly negative outlook on the future is not simply to make a statement about our view of reality and human nature. It is to make a statement about the character of God. It is to say that God cannot do better. Even on my

most cynical days, I am not willing to say that. For, as God can bring genuine hope to exiles, God can bring genuine hope into our lives.

Yet, as obvious as this statement may appear, it is difficult to embrace. For in this advanced age, we are accustomed to making our own way, solving our own problems, and measuring hope on the basis of our abilities. In the world of medicine, we know what can and can't be done and thus limit possibilities of healing to insights gleaned from medical science. In the world of international affairs, we know what leaders will and will not do and thus develop practical strategies of negotiation. We have moved from too low a view of humanity — God or the gods control everything — to too high a view — we control it all — and frankly, we have reached the limits of this latter arrangement.

In the realm of medicine, we realize that our scientific abilities have outstripped our ethical capacities and we don't even know how to talk about issues like cloning and eugenics much less engage the more mundane matters of end-of-life care. COVID-19 has raised a new set of questions — who gets the vaccine first, who pays for it, and what about people in the poorer nations? In the realm of physics, we realize that, while we have learned how to harness nuclear energy, we haven't a clue as to how to engage the moral issues connected to its use. In our homes, churches, and businesses, we have found the limits of what we can do, we are believers who lean upon God, but have we considered ways of opening our lives to any wisdom and guidance beyond ourselves?

We need to recover our capacity for things like humility and trust, prayer and discernment, an acknowledgment that we cannot make it on our own as individuals and families, as churches and communities, as nations and a world. In the human experiment thus far, we have tried giving everything to the gods, and we have tried taking on everything ourselves. Neither approach has made a better world. Maybe it is time to try working together with the God who made us.

I am reminded of a rabbinic tale in which God and Man are having an argument about whose job is more difficult. God insists that the role of God is much more difficult because God is responsible for the whole world. Man insists that his job is more difficult because he has limited knowledge and power. They argue for a time, neither convincing the

other. Finally, Man suggests that the only way to resolve the argument is to switch places for a day. Reluctantly, God agrees. God becomes man and Man becomes God, and once Man becomes God, he refuses to trade back, and this explains why the world has so many problems!

The point of the tale is to ask the question, “Do we really want to be God, do we really want complete and final responsibility for the world?” Of course not! We want and need God to be God. And God is. We just have a hard time remembering this.

If we take our cue from the vision of *Jeremiah*, hope precedes hard evidence that things will be better, in large part because hope is grounded in something or Someone beyond us. Then, hope takes in everyone. In the prophet’s vision, who returns home? Men and women, young and old, strong and weak, blind and lame. In short, everyone, and especially those who live on the margins of society. “See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north... among them the blind and the lame... Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry...” It is a festive occasion for all!

So, the message for us is that genuine hope for a better day is not just about me and mine but you and yours. It is about a better day for all of God’s children, especially those who have been excluded. It is about a willingness to realize that all of our lives on this fragile planet are inextricably linked such that my condition cannot ultimately improve at the expense of my African-American or Latino neighbor or the underpaid factory worker in Mexico or China or the Afghani or Syrian refugee. Rather, my hope is linked with your hope and that of the residents of Southeast Raleigh and Mexico City, Shanghai and Kabul. The good news is that with God there is always hope. The fine print on this good news says that this hope must be shared by all!

God’s hope is a bit like what happens with young children in recreation leagues. When young boys and girls play baseball, soccer or any other sport, no score is kept, but somehow all the boys and girls walk away knowing a score. Children on both teams walk away saying, “We won!” but amazingly this doesn’t create a problem. The idea that for me to win you have to lose does not enter the thought process of the

youngest. But give them a year or two, some guidance from Mom and Dad, some exposure to the *wonders* of our culture, and a new mindset emerges. We have to keep score, or else the game isn't worth playing, there must be winners and losers, and my goal, of course, is to win!

Such is our thinking in Little League, big business, and all of life. The problem is not simply that there are always losers but that this scheme doesn't square with God's vision of a better future where all are winners, where all are included in hope. This vision is made clear in our reading from Jeremiah and in the story we remember this time of year about a Savior who is born for all the world.

So, what are our prospects for hope in this New Year? Is there any reason to believe things will improve? I do not claim to be a prophet or visionary. I have no predictions to make. But I believe there is always hope as long as there is God and this hope encompasses all people. For those who will just hold on like Frodo and Samwise, for those child-like believers who will make room for everyone to win, there will be singing and dancing in the future; there will be hope, peace, joy and love!