

Church of the Divine Love

Sermon Sunday January 3rd, 2021

Jeremiah 31: 7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2: 1-12

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

It's Not 2020 Anymore.

With a new year comes new possibilities. Let us spend a moment to respect the tumultuous year that was, but that nevertheless produced some good things. And then, with a resilient attitude, look forward to what 2021 can bring. A new year always brings a sense of hope, doesn't it? The previous year with all its tragedies, problems, disappointments, failures, and sadness is now behind us, as opportunities lies ahead.

What does it look like to see hope coming from a distance? Hope can, at times, be a distant thing that rests on the edge of our vision in the same way that the horizon shows itself as the line between what we can see and what is too distant for our physical eyes to grasp. It divides what is before us and what is yet to come. The prophet Jeremiah is largely known for two things: an arresting call narrative and complaints. The book begins with God telling Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." These words lead to a dialogue between the prophet and the One who called him that concludes with the commissioning of Jeremiah "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." The call of Jeremiah is reflected in his writings, which address the coming of a new foe to the people of Israel.

The Babylonia Empire and the terror of its coming rule, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of Judah, and the impact of that exile frame the overall structure of the book of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah is difficult to understand. It is a long and complex mixture of poetry and prose that, historically speaking, seems to follow no particular order. It is both a dismal and hopeful work, displaying a creative imagination almost unparalleled in the whole of scripture. It juxtaposes images of death with images of hope, giving us a variety of voices to translate as we seek to understand its meaning in history and in our present time. It would seem that the challenge in comprehending Jeremiah is found now only in its peculiar literary structure and lack of chronological flow but is more rooted in its parallel messages of hope and despair. How do we hold both at the same time? For the prophet, most of the book does not attempt to do this. It embraces despair. If we include the book of Lamentations, we note that his reputation as a complainer arises from valid observations of the words attributed to the prophet. At the same time, the focus text for this week presents a compelling and compassion vision of a hope that is on the way.

The Divine imperative calls for rejoicing. Praise for the impending work of God stands independent from its manifestation. In fact, the text begins with a command sing aloud, which later repeats as a declaration of future response to the promised restoration. The biblical narrative can be seen in its entirety as a pattern of revelation and response. God reveals Godself or God's purposes and plans, and the people respond. Just as the revelation may take varied forms, the response manifests in different ways.

Throughout the writings of Jeremiah, the prophet laments as a response to the decrees and actions of the Holy One. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated. Perhaps the words of assurance expressed to Jeremiah in his call narrative enabled him to lay his heart bare before the Sovereign God. Lament transcends complaint. The prophet engages in more than venting with God out of frustration and despair, although his words certainly reflect that. Lament does not coincide with hopelessness; in fact, it counters it. The power of lament derives from its trust in God with our whole selves. It believes that the God who created us can bear our disappointments and discontent. Further, it contends that the Great I Am wants to be the one that the people of God turn to with suffering and trial. Lament hopes fiercely and freely believing that the God in whose image we are made also responds to us, to our condition, and to our feelings.

The events of 2020 invite us to lament. The impact of a global pandemic, the rise of white nationalism, and a contentious election in the United States, encourage us to recognize the suffering and struggles we collectively and communally face. The resistance to comply with public health guidelines during this time may arise, in part, from a desire to avoid confronting and contending with the pain of this moment—the isolation and loneliness, the uncertainty, and the many losses. Lament and hope both demand courage, confrontation, and trust. Both can serve as acts of resistance against injustice and an affirmation of the vision of God’s intended community and creation. Weeping will give way for singing aloud and shouts of joy. Mourning turns to gladness. Sorrow becomes satisfaction. Hope emerges from despair. Hope that flows from a deep lament does that work. It re-engages both parties to the covenant. God, who initiates the covenant, stirs to compassion for the plight of the suffering experienced and expressed by the people, who are not to keep silent in the face of trauma or to glorify suffering, but to cry out to the God who is able to offer a new chapter in the story and a new beginning.

Hope comes into the world upon the light of Christ and the promise of restoration and flourishing. Hope comes into the world wanting to be received to the children of the covenant. Hope comes into the world with the sound of singing and shouts of joy. Hope comes into the world like the dawn of a new day, shining first from a distant horizon while moving ever closer and gathering those who were scattered back, safely and securely, into the Shepherd’s flock. Also, many of us are feeling personal pains or anxieties this new year. Some of us are wrestling with important decisions regarding a primary relationship or a task to be done; some know firsthand the powerful effects of disabling disease or worry about health issues in the upcoming months; some have had to deal recently with a major loss; some wonder if we can make it in the coming year without the presence of one who meant so much; some of us are feeling very lonely, in spite of people all around us; some of us fear growing older, or fear what the future may hold; some wonder if dreams will ever be realized, or whether the new year will be even more frustrating and filled with feelings of futility than the last.

We have been living through a global pandemic for almost an entire year. Our journey has been long, and we do not know when the end will be in sight. The ambiguous loss creates discomfort. We are tired of wandering through the wilderness, all the anchors which used to hold us in place uprooted, setting us adrift. Adapting daily to new information and ways of doing things is tiring. Personal losses, whether through death, a job loss, or other changes, deplete our emotional reserves. Many wonder why God would allow this to happen, and some have lost their faith in God. This is where our story and that of the three Magi converge. We are not lost. We are traveling toward something greater than ourselves and Emmanuel – God with us, is as close as our breath. As Christians in this broken, hurting world, we can

act now to reach out to our neighbors and offer hospitality of the heart. We have what the Magi and Matthew's community had: hope for a better future in Christ.

Like them, we follow the star that brings us to Jesus, and, in knowing Jesus, we change course, going home another way. Life will never be the same as it was before the pandemic. The Magi did not know God in the way that the Judaeans did. Yet God's sign compelled them to become part of God's hopeful story. In our Book of Common Prayer, the Christian hope is defined as living "with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world" (p. 861). God is doing a new thing even now, and we are all invited to be part of the unfolding hope. **Happy new year to all of you and may God bless you! Amen.**