

Jeremiah 31: 7-13 "Straight Paths" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/3/21

I don't know how many of you stayed up to watch the crystal ball drop at Times Square New Year's Eve, not live of course, but midnight Pacific Standard Time. I did so partially out of the fascination that I was just there for the first time a month ago and Times Square is a phenomenon in and of itself. We saw where the ball was going to be placed, where stages were going up, and imagined what the night would be like in the days of COVID. I confess that when I was there, I was quite glad it wasn't crowded, thus providing a much more relaxed atmosphere in which to simply sit and look, sort of like having Disney World all to yourself. As I did, I remembered the many monumental events which had taken place in that very Square, not the least of which was that death-defying stunt the Wallendas pulled the year before of walking a tightrope straight across the center, 25 stories up into the sky. When I returned home, I researched more details on that event and was grateful to discover the two siblings did wear harnesses in case they fell, which probably added consolation not just to them but also to the crowd below. The flying Wallendas are perhaps the world's greatest family of tightrope walkers dating back to the early 1900's. Yet they even have had some serious missteps, not the least of which was when Karl, the family patriarch, fell to his death in 1978 between 2 high-rise buildings in Puerto Rico, having no safety net or harnesses. Later, Wallenda's wife said that before her husband had fallen, for the first time since she had known him, he had been concentrating on falling, on fiddling with the ropes, instead of on walking the tightrope. No one will ever truly know how much that focus may have thrown him off, but preacher Rex Bonar speculated that often the difference between success and failure, life and death, is the direction we are looking.

On this first Sunday of 2021, I wonder where our focus is directed? If we are looking back to 2020, is it to learn from our missteps or to wallow in our failures? If we are looking forward to 2021, is it out of fear and dread for the unknown or hope for a new beginning? As easy as it may seem to emphasize the healthier choice, the prophet Jeremiah and his words challenge our simple answers with the complexities of being in exile, distanced from a familiar routine and desperately missing the way things used to be. Nothing is as easy as it may appear.

Jeremiah was one of the great Hebrew prophets, those ordinary folks who were given the task by God of pointing out injustice and wrongdoing. Basically, as Amy Butler states, they were the burr under the saddle of the people and Israel's monarchy, always preaching some version of you'd better get yourself right with God or watch out. When he started his work, things were looking good – Josiah was king and long-needed reforms were taking place. But things went downhill from there and as Jeremiah preached his message of destruction and warning, he became, shall we say, less than popular with the people in power at the time. He became a prophet of gloom and doom, often called the "Weeping Prophet," and if you sat down and read the whole book, you may become deeply, terribly depressed. However, today's passage comes from a section, 3 chapters if you will, known as the "Little Book of Consolations." It is sort of like a moment of warm sunshine breaking into a winter ice storm giving a much-needed thaw from the frigid hopelessness. In today's passage, Jeremiah tells the people to reimagine what they are seeing all around them, to remember the grace and goodness of God and to count on God coming through for them in the end. God would not leave them but instead would gather and guide them home from their exile. There is even a special word for those who are disabled, for the blind and lame, those caring for children, the weak and the discouraged, everyone will be led

from exile to promise on a straight path from which they shall not stumble. However, some skeptics will certainly have a heyday with this text, because in some aspects, it is a great example of a failed prophecy. The first 2 chapters of the Little Book of Consolations is loaded with promises to the Northern Kingdom that it will again plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria and sentinels shall once again do their jobs in the Ephraim hill country. But the truth is, in their exile, they are forcefully repopulated by the Assyrians, their homes were replaced by other refugees from other reaches of the vast Near Eastern empire, and they never returned home. In fact, most of the Northern Kingdom remained exiles in Syria and Babylonia. Failed promises are a hard truth to face. Even as we just celebrated Christmas, we are critically aware that the angels' promise of peace on earth, goodwill to all has never been fully realized on earth. Truth be told, it was because of the birth of Jesus that many Bethlehem baby boys were slaughtered by King Herod, that the weeping of Rachel for her children cries out over the generations. Rachel's grief becomes the grief of any parent who mourns the loss of their innocent child. Jeremiah's words here lead us to question if the biblical prophecies are all they are cracked up to be. What does this mean with regards to God's promises to God's people?

On this first Sunday of the new year, Jeremiah gives us a new perspective with which to focus on God's promises. While some may say Jeremiah was the ultimate skeptic, especially when compared with his prophetic contemporaries who preached hope and protection, he was actually the one who didn't stay distanced from suffering and exile. With love for the lost and forlorn, he imagined his way into exile as Ingrid Lily notes. Simply put, Jeremiah was braced for exile and therefore advises the people to make the best of their circumstances. Speaking for God, he says, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; multiply there

(in exile) and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.” Jeremiah used his imagination to paint a picture of hope for life outside of the enslaved city, outside of the circumstances of exile. The prophecies of Jeremiah look less like failures when one considers he was speaking in solidarity with the least of society’s children and directing them to look beyond their current state. Her says do not look down but look forward as vs. 13 says, “Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.” Keep your focus on living the best you can in the present without losing sight of God’s lingering hopes for humanity.

If there is one thing I learned about breaking my wrist last summer, it is to be wary of concrete parking partitions. They are everywhere and when I get distracted in my own mind about situations in the past or in the future of which I can do nothing about in the present, I easily stumble over them. Yet if I spend too much time focused on falling again, I will never set foot outside. I guess it resembles a balancing act, using both faith and courage to stay on that straight path, navigating around the stumbling blocks while setting aside the fear of falling. That is what I think Jeremiah is getting at for the Israelites and for us, as he reminds us that God has a plan of promise and possibilities for our future. We can’t let ourselves be consumed with the mistakes or failures of the past nor can we spend too much time tied up in anxious knots over the future. God is ready now to lead us from the troubles around us, from the memories of hard times, to a straight path of freedom and faith to come. “Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.” I was recently introduced to the works of a 23 y.o. young woman named Amanda Gorman, out of LA, named the first ever National Youth Poet

Laureate. Her poem, "The Miracle of Morning," lays out one of many straight paths on which I believe God will lead us out of exile and into this upcoming year, so that we can carry on in that journey toward faith and freedom. "The Miracle of Morning" by Amanda Gorman

"I thought I'd awaken to a world in mourning.  
Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.  
But there's something different on this golden morning.  
Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.  
I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.  
Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.  
A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.  
She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.  
While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,  
Our people have never been more closely tethered.  
The question isn't if we will weather this unknown,  
But how we will weather this unknown together.

So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.  
Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.  
As one, we will defeat both despair and disease.  
We stand with healthcare heroes and all employees;  
With families, libraries, schools, waiters, artists;  
Businesses, restaurants, and hospitals hit hardest.

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,  
For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.  
In this chaos, we will discover clarity.  
In suffering, we must find solidarity.  
For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,  
Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.  
So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:  
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.

Read children's books, dance alone to DJ music.  
Know that this distance will make our hearts grow fonder.  
From a wave of woes our world will emerge stronger.  
We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind  
Are also the moments that make us humans kind;  
Let every dawn find us courageous, brought closer;  
Heeding the light before the fight is over.  
When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing  
In testing times, we became the best of beings." (Prophet Amanda Gorman)

From the prophets' mouths to our ears, let us welcome a joy-filled new year. Amen.