

A Future with Hope!
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Jeremiah 29:11-14

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We come together today, seeking a word of hope, a word of inspiration. We come together today each from our own separate places, wishing we could be together in person but realizing that's not possible right now. Yet we come together as God's people to hear God's word and to worship God together even though we are apart.

This passage from Jeremiah is familiar, especially the first part of it:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

We are longing for some hope right now. This Coronavirus had upended our daily lives in ways we would have not thought possible. For the sake of the health and wellbeing of one another, and for our own safety, we are not able to be together in person for worship. Many of us can't go to work. Our Governor has asked us to stay home. The future feels uncertain. It almost seems like we're in exile.

In uncertain times, God is with us in especially powerful ways. The word of God from Jeremiah came at a time when the people were in exile. The Babylonians had defeated the Israelites and taken them to Babylon as captives. The Babylonians had ransacked Solomon's beautiful temple, the place where people worshipped God. The Israelites believed God lived in that temple, that it was the one place they could be in the presence of God. How hard it was to not be able to be in that place together!

Yet, in that time of exile, God was at work powerfully among them. It was during that time of exile that most of the Old Testament was written. People realized anew how important their faith practices were and wanted to preserve them, so they wrote them down. During that time also, people realized that God was available to them, even outside the temple. Jeremiah reminded them:

“when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes.”

Even though our lives have been disrupted in many ways, God is with us. God is there to respond to our prayers. God is there working for our good.

Did God cause this Coronavirus to come to us? Did God send us into exile? Is this some kind of punishment? I don't think so. You might remember the story of the man who was born blind

who Jesus gave sight. Jesus' disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

I don't believe that the Coronavirus is God punishing us for our sins. But I do believe that God is at work in this time, revealing himself to us. God is making himself accessible to us. God is working for our good.

What is our role during this time of Coronavirus exile?

We are to be faithful. We are to use this time as time to love God and love our neighbors. Use this gift of time for prayer and Bible study. Use this gift of time to strengthen your relationship with God, to bring your cares to God and see that you really can trust in God to care for you. And use it also to show love your neighbor.

If you find yourself at home with family members, enjoy this time together. So often our lives are so busy, we are pulled in so many directions, we don't have the time to be there as much as we'd like to for those closest to us. This gives us time to be together with those at home. Find the blessing in that!

This is also a time to reach out by phone and email and Facebook to connect with loved ones near and far. Martin Luther once said, "Be little Christ's to one another." Think about how you can be Christ to others and reach out in love and care. Reach out every day in some way to someone who may need a word of hope. You be that messenger of love and care for them. You be Christ for them.

This time of exile will end. For now, though, find the blessings in it. Live into the work that God is calling you to do in this time. Let this be a time of hope, a time of growing in love with God and with one another.

I'd like to close with a prayer that was written by Reinhold Niebuhr called the Serenity Prayer. It has been used widely by AA groups. The first part is fairly well known, but there is value for us in this whole prayer. If you know it, pray along.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is; not as I would have it;
trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with your forever in the next.
Amen!