

You Have A Future with Hope
Sermon Series: Eight Encouraging Words
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We had a wonderful time gathering with our 80-and-older folks this past Thursday. Not everyone was able to be with us, of course, and we missed them. But many were there. We sang together, prayed together, and celebrated communion together. And then we went downstairs to enjoy some tasty desserts. It felt a little like a class reunion, even a family reunion, old friends gathering and reconnecting after months and years apart. People were having such a good time that they started asking: Can we do this again next week? Many, I think, even with the passing of years, were feeling connections of love and support, even hope.

Whether those folks had been apart because of Covid, or the complications of aging, or changes in pastoral ministry here at Good Shepherd, for a brief window of time we enjoyed each other's company, told stories about the past, and gave thanks to the God who had gathered us here in the first place

In the midst of life's changes, a pastor once said: "Sometimes the news that we *need* to hear is not exactly the news we *want* to hear." The pastor wasn't trying to be a discourager as much as a realist. And I'm guessing that most of us can relate.

Sit it down with a financial planner and she's likely to tell you: "You'll be in a lot better shape financially if you cut down on impulse spending and ordering things online." Talk to a physical therapist and he might say: "Do your exercises, wear sensible shoes, and try to get a good night's sleep." Confide in a counselor about a strained relationship, and she might suggest: "Work on your listening skills, apologize when you need to, and be open to change." So, my friends, let me ask: how have you been listening lately? Are you sometimes hesitant to hear news that you really don't want to hear?

The prophet Jeremiah was in the news business. He had a tough job. He sent a letter to the first wave of exiles in Babylon. The first wave happened around 597 B.C. The second wave came ten years later, after the utter devastation of Jerusalem and the temple.

For years, prophets such as Jeremiah had been warning the people that a day of reckoning was coming. They hadn't been following God's laws. They hadn't been keeping the Sabbath. They hadn't been treating each other well. They hadn't always worshipped only their God, Yahweh. "Wake up!" cried the prophets. "There's going to be a price to pay!"

Sure enough, that's what happened. Yahweh – much like a frustrated parent – used the armies of Babylon to punish the children of Israel. At least that's how Jeremiah saw it. And he desperately hoped these wayward children would change their ways and renew their relationship with God.

Picture those exiles in Babylon, far away from home. How do you suppose Jeremiah's letter was received? I'm thinking the people were shocked. In their minds, they were God's *chosen* people. God had promised that an heir of David would sit on the throne forever, but suddenly the throne was empty. They had assumed that *Israel's* enemies would be *God's own* enemies, but now God had cozied up to the Babylonians. The exiles were beside themselves with denial: *This cannot be happening to us!*

So, what do you and I often do when we hear something on television that we don't want to hear, especially during a tense election season? We change the channel and search for a more agreeable voice. It was much the same in Babylon. In opposition to Jeremiah, there were other, more agreeable prophets – including one named Hananiah – who prophesied that Israel's time in Babylon would be short. "You can get through this," said Hananiah, "Babylon is weak. They will fall. Two years tops and you'll be home!" That was just what the vast majority of exiles wanted to hear.

Then along came Jeremiah with a completely different message: "This is going to take time – not months, but years," he wrote. "People, build homes. Plant gardens. Have children." Jeremiah went even further: "Seek the welfare of the city where God has sent you. Pray for that city, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare."

I'm sure many were gritting their teeth as Jeremiah's letter was read. He probably got called every name in the book. Much like today, there may have been death threats. "This cannot be from God," they wailed. "You're asking us to bless our enemies. *We can't do it!* You're telling us to make this place our home. *We can't do it!* You're asking us to adapt to these wretched conditions

– and not just for months, but for years. *We can't do it!* Oh, sometimes the news that we need to hear is not at all what we want to hear.

So, here's the question: who were the exiles supposed to believe? They were getting opposing messages: Hananiah and his positive thinking verses Jeremiah and his no-end-in-sight call for repentance and change. Human nature being what it is, I'm thinking that many of us – myself included – would have been drawn to Hananiah. His message would have been so much easier to swallow.

Friends, we're not in danger of exile today, but don't we face similar quandaries? Don't we sometimes wonder which politicians to believe – who's going to keep their campaign promises and who's willing to say just about anything to get elected? And what about modern-day prophets who claim to speak for God – are they telling the truth? They're especially active on the Internet. Their predictions range from when the end of the world is coming to which political leader is in league with Satan.

How do we know whom to believe? God's people have been wrestling with this issue ever since the time of Jeremiah, and even before. Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't give us a neat-and-tidy formula. We often find out only in hindsight. Did what the prophet say in the name of the Lord come true? If so, then surely the Lord was at the center of it. If not, then the prophet's word was not of God."

This is a sobering thought. If nothing else, we need to be very careful about those in whom we put our trust. We must test what we hear, question often, rarely believe what we read on the Internet, and always compare the message we're hearing with what we know to be true in Jesus. And if Jeremiah is any indication, the news that we need to hear is often not what we want to hear.

Seventy years in exile! That's what Jeremiah said was coming. How was he supposed to get through to the people? Clearly, not by telling them what they wanted to hear. Not by glossing over their sins and shortcomings. Instead, Jeremiah spoke of a future with hope – but only a long way down the road. In the meantime, exile became a time of waiting in a harsh and land. It provided an opportunity for repentance and spiritual discipline. "Seek me with all your heart," God said through Jeremiah. "I will hear you. I will find you. I will give you a future with hope, and someday you will be ready to go home."

Jeremiah took the long view. “Seek the welfare the of the city where God has sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” A good life is still possible. Gardens, food, clothing, shelter, and families can still bring you joy.”

So, you might be wondering, did anything good come out of the time in Babylon? Actually, a lot! Israel wrestled honestly with hard questions about their relationship with God. They learned that worship could happen anywhere, and not just in the temple in Jerusalem. They wrote and collected much of the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament. Synagogues became a vital part of community life. Passover – their birth as a nation – was regularly celebrated. And that was just the beginning.

Friends, during unsettled times, Jeremiah’s letter challenges us to be open to the news we need to hear and not just what we want to hear. The letter is an important reminder that no circumstance – not another interim ministry, not a graying church population, not a lack of volunteers, not an increase in the number of folks who don’t seem to care much about church these days – none of this is beyond God’s reach. “Seek me with all your heart,” God says, “I will hear you. I will find you.”

As in Jeremiah’s day, it’s critical for us to seek the welfare of the city where God has placed us. We must believe in God’s promise to be with us, and to work through us, come what may. And finally, we must trust that God has a future with hope in store for us, if only we are patient enough to wait. Amen.