

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Planting Pine Trees in the Rubble
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Wow, what a blessing! Sarah, we are thrilled and honored to have you with us this morning. What an incredible gift you have. You are always welcome here!

There's a phrase in that song that has always captivated me: "The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices. For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." The thrill of hope, that feeling Chicago Sports fans all over have felt this year... There's something inspiring about the idea that a sad and broken and tired world can, in spite of it all, begin to rejoice. Such a poignant and appropriate thought as we kick off this year's Advent Series.

The one thing I didn't anticipate however, is this phrase is actually kind of hard to say. Turn to your neighbor and say to each other "the weary world rejoices" as fast as you can. It's actually kind of hard not to end up sounding like Elmer Fudd when you say it: "the weawy world wejoices."

What is it about the birth of Jesus that allows us to rejoice? Israel's story is not unlike our story. We think that we can get along just fine without God, but what we end up doing is fuddling things up. Right about the time when it appears that hope is lost, God steps in and says, "Why didn't you turn to me in the first place?"

For much of Israel's history, the circumstances that they found themselves in were less than ideal. And pivotal moments are often birthed when we've exhausted *our* best efforts. Into their darkness, a glimmer of light bursts forth. Even in the darkest of places, the faintest flicker of light is able to conquer. That glimmer of hope the prophets held was a promise made many hundreds of years before, a promise to Abraham and to David—"remain with me, and I will remain with you." But at this point in the history of God's people, the presence of Yahweh was pretty thin.

Throughout this Advent Series, we are going to be looking at passages from the Old Testament Prophets. These are the words of average, everyday men who had the unique ability to hear from God when the ears of those around them were closed. These grizzled, relentlessly faithful—though not always optimistic—men trusted that the plans of Yahweh will always be fulfilled, but not without opposition. In the midst of it all, it's the Prophets who teach us how to hope in difficult times.

If you study the story of Jeremiah, you quickly come to find that he was a bit of an emotional basket case. He swung from one extreme to the other: he was either blissed out or bummed out. Sometimes Jeremiah says such cheerful things like, "I wish my mother's womb would have been my grave and that I hadn't made it to Day 1." A real life-of-the-party kind of guy.

One of the reasons he was so extreme was because this was a very extreme time in the story of Israel. Israel had forgotten what it meant to live in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Instead of trusting in God's provision and care, King after wicked King in Israel turned God's people away from God to the worship of false gods. The one who brought them out of Egypt and all the way to the Promised Land was replaced by gods of their own making. God's people had turned their backs on God, so to get their attention, God allowed a neighboring nemesis, a Babylonian Hurricane by the name of King Nebuchadnezzar, to descend upon Judah and sweep its people away to exile, decimating Israel and leaving its people completely disoriented. The only ones remaining in Judah were the poor, the peasants, the ones nobody really cared about in the first place. People like Jeremiah. Jeremiah was the Prophet to the remnant.

This remnant in Judah still had a king, a guy by the name of Zedekiah. So Jeremiah is constantly in the King's ear.

Now this morning's text is a bit misleading. The tone of this is definitely hopeful. Jeremiah speaks about the fulfillment of Israel's history when its people will live in security. But if you want the full story, you really need to go back to chapter 32 at the acoustics of this text. When he speaks these words, Jeremiah is incarcerated in the courtyard of the King. The King had gotten so fed up with his doom and gloom, Debbie Downer, unpatriotic attitude, that the King said, "Enough with it," and threw Jeremiah in jail—just to shut him up. The people were tired of Jeremiah's news; they just wanted something palatable and cheery. But really they were just stuffing cotton in their ears.

Sometimes we do that around this time of year. Instead of looking honestly at our realities, we are content to get caught up in the glitz and glitter of the Holiday Season. Never mind that bombs are going off in Paris, and people continue to terrorize one another. "We'll deal with that in January." For now, we just want to feel good.

But that type of happiness just gets packed away with the lights and garland in January; that kind of cheer doesn't last. The kind of hope Jeremiah is talking about is the kind that is able to stand toe to toe with struggle, the kind that looks for meaning and hope amid the struggle. That can say **"Surely the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah."** This is paradoxical trust, hope when hope doesn't make sense. This is the trust that as the author of Lamentations says, **"I have forgotten what happiness is...Gone is my glory and all that I hoped for...The thought of my affliction is wormwood and gall! But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."**

In Luke chapter 1, he says that hope **conquers darkness with such forceful intensity that it scatters the proud, humbles the mighty, feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty handed.** This is not just overlooking the present by thinking positively. A new day is dawning. So, as those who trust in the promise that a righteous branch would spring up for David, we can have hope in challenging circumstances. This is the kind of hope that can stand toe to toe with whatever the world sends our way and trust that Yahweh's fundamental quality is faithfulness. God will be faithful to you. In whatever you are facing, God's word to you is always and forever

one of protection and care. Just a few chapters earlier, Jeremiah uttered some of the most utterly hopeful words that have ever been written:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

It's one thing to have a hopeful outlook when things are difficult, but what Jeremiah shows is how to go on living in tough times. If you go back to Jeremiah 32, something interesting happens: Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel comes to pay him a visit while he's in prison and makes him an offer to sell Jeremiah a field at Anathoth.

Then Hanamel my cousin came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

Babylon is reigning down on Judah, the Prophet is warning—"See, I told you." And then, out of the blue, Jeremiah's cousin pops in for a visit and they do a real estate deal—and it's not just because the Judean market is at rock bottom.

There's something more powerful and profound going on here.

'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.'

Jeremiah bought a field as a protest to exile. What he is saying that he believed—in the very marrow of his being—that Yahweh would ultimately be faithful to his word and that one day they would be back in their land. A day would come when owning Promised Land real estate would make sense again. This is not fake-it-till-you-make-it thinking, this is not pie-in-the-sky wing and a prayer. This is an indescribable, deep down, rooted trust, that God was not through yet.

There's a real possibility that there is someone within range of my voice who feels like they are exiled within their own land. Life is disorienting, security can collapse in a moment's notice, life can turn—maybe someone here knows what that feels like. What Jeremiah shows us is that mature hope is able to see beyond the rubble to the rebirth that is coming, and go on living as if that rebirth were already here. God IS faithful; it's up to us to live as if that were true in our lives.

Last Sunday, as I was getting ready to return for the stewardship celebration, Amy and I and the kids were in our room, Amy feeding Conner and Annie playing on the bed with her. When accidentally, she pulled the reading light down from our headboard and the bulb fell on her face, leaving a burn the size of one of those mini candy bars. In that moment we felt ashamed, we felt inadequate, all of limitations as parents were now apparent on the face of our daughter. Later,

Amy said, that she would literally cut off one of her toes instead of that happening. Life can change without warning notice.

But no matter where you are, Jeremiah 33 reminds us that God has a word. God has a plan. Destitution does not have the last word. The tragedies that come do not define us ultimately. God's ways will not be thwarted by a bad economy, by unemployment, by disease, by outright poverty, or even by death itself.

Three years ago, people on the East Coast prepared for Christmas in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. That year, a story was shared about a man, whose own house had been skewered by a falling 30-foot pine tree. But as clean-up crews broke down that tree to remove it, the man saved the top 7 feet of the tree and planted it upright in his front yard as a kind of pre-Christmas Christmas Tree—as a symbol of hope. He dug out a few surviving ornaments from his house. Soon neighbors added symbols of the storm itself—surgical masks, battered coffee cups, and the like. It was a sign of resilience, a sign of hope and of a desire to re-build in the midst of devastation.

As we begin Advent again, perhaps it's not such a stretch to suggest that what God did in sending his own Son here in human flesh was rather like that. That amid devastation of exile, God staked his claim, like Jeremiah, God made an investment in hope. In the midst of devastating circumstances, God continues to carve out Kingdom real estate, he began in the form of his own incarnate Son's body. It stood then and stands for us in heaven now as a sign of hope, of resilience, of a divine intention to take this sin-battered world and rebuild.

I cannot in good conscience give you the trite words of holiday cheer, nor will I tell you that life doesn't have sharp edges. But I will tell you that when you bump up against those sharp edges, and even when they leave a scar, God's plan rolls on. You are not forgotten, you are not without ultimate hope, because that root is about to shoot, that branch is about to spring, the baby is coming. So keep moving, keep living, keep investing, keep waiting.