Hope Travels in Story
Jeremiah 29:10-14
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Washington Street UMC
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We are continuing our focus this morning on what it means to have *hope*. We've talked about what hope is and what it is not. We've framed *hope* using scripture as the anchor which connects our souls in the presence of God, giving us an assurance for a path forward. Last week, we celebrated hope as the thread which leads us in the challenging work of racial reconciliation, which invites us to claim a more faithful future as God's universal Church, even if it means bucking up against our own history and tearing at the moral and social fibers that are still part of the fabric of our nation today.

As we have shared in ministry together over recent years, one thing that has stood out to me about our past failures and the potential for future connection is how we frame our work as the Church. By *the Church,* I'm referring here to our greater identity, to the one, holy, universal, and catholic Church … our shared collective as a people called "Christian," not simply our witness as one congregation on Washington Street. When we talk about our work, when we think about our mission, when we lift up our eyes to peer forward – how do we see the Church operating? What is her goal? If you were asked to sketch out the vision of the future to which the Church should be leading, (again, thinking big Church not just us at Washington Street,) what does that future look like?

Ultimately, what I'm asking is: what is your *hope* for where we are going … for where our community is going … for where our nation is going … for where our world is going?

How we talk about our current experiences and how we ponder future experiences says a lot about what we think theologically – that is, in our lens of how God is leading us. How we read stories, how we interpret stories, and how we tell stories says a lot about our *hope* – it says a lot about what we think our purpose is as a people of faith. Whether we are reading, hearing, watching, or telling them, our stories carry a lot of weight, and they may impact us and those around us more than is easily observable.

In reading her thoughts on *hope* this week, I was struck by Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana's parsing out of how hope travels in story.[i] Her story telling made me wonder, which stories do I enjoy the most? How do I tell my own stories? And, how might we be better story tellers, such that we can convey more authentically and faithfully the hope that is central to our faith in the power of God through Jesus Christ?

As an example, let's focus in on Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah 29 offers a *really* good example of selective scripture reading, and betrays our internal thoughts when thinking of hope.

I remember as a youth growing up in the church hearing Jeremiah 29:11. It was one of my memorization passages, which offers (in the New International Version, because that's how I learned it), "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."

For my high school self, and for many people still today, this text offers a promise for a personal relationship with God, which will provide individual prosperity, protection from personal harm, and, admittedly, for many it offers the possibly of a future that looks like the conclusion of an Oscar winning film with a glorious sunset dawning on a beach, where I sit giddily sipping my Mai Tai as the waves gently ebb and flow against the white sands. If I'm being honest, it's a private beach, and the only noises I hear are the waves and the seagulls. … and if I'm being *really* honest, there aren't even seagulls, I can only hear the waves … and maybe someone asking me if I need a refill.

Such a vision of prosperity, such a vision a future, it says a lot about our hope.

Now, before you get judgey with me and ask, "what's wrong with such a vision of the future," please know I'm not trying to critique how you *live* in retirement, or how you *want* to live in retirement. If this is your vision of living prosperously, I get it. In truth, I want it too, as long as there's a golf course nearby. And again, if I'm being *really* honest, I don't want to wait until the normal retirement age to have it … I would take it tomorrow.

But, and this is me being clear, because clear is kind, I'm definitely saying that this vision of the future is not the future that Jeremiah is talking about. This may be our hope for the future according to whatever is left of the American Dream … but this is not the plan that God has to prosper you, nor the hope or the future that Jeremiah envisions in this text.

How we read and tell our stories, how we interpret and understand stories, says a lot about our hope. To understand, let's dive deeper. I'll come back to the beach and Mai Tais later.

In her book, one of the most powerful parts that Rev. McKibben Dana offers around story telling has to do with the structure of the story. She pulls from the work of sci-fi author Ted Chiang to define two story frameworks.

The first, which is titled a "conservative story," is titled such because it literally conserves the story. At the beginning of the story, there is some form of normativity. Life is good, and everyone is happy. But, as the story goes, something bad happens – maybe it's a natural disaster, an alien invasion, or there's an antagonist who challenges the current way of living through some type of destructive engagement. Following the detriment, which has ruined life as we knew it, a hero appears – perhaps it's Batman, Superman, a scientist, or some other less likely hero. Think about your favorite movies; it will not be hard to identity this plot line, whether it's Independence Day, The Lord of the Rings, or any of the Borne Identity series. In a conservative story, a hero saves the day, and, as the story ends, life has returned back to normal. The world hasn't really changed, it's just reclaimed a sense of normalcy. The original story – the original way of life – has been conserved.

The second type of story is called a “progressive story.” This is titled as such because, instead of conserving the opening story line, there is a progression in the story line. In progressive stories, there is again a sense of normalcy at the start of the story, but instead of a protagonist and antagonist that ultimately cancel each other out to leave a closing that returns back to the start, there’s some form of change that rocks the status quo. The end of the story can be ambiguous, because there is no return to normalcy … instead, there becomes a new normal. Sometimes the changes that happen are slight, sometimes they are major. In the movies, progressive story lines are harder to identify because, as consumerism drives the market, most of us like a clean ending … progressive story lines don’t sell as well.

But even if not popular among the movies, it’s quite easy to identify progressive story lines among real life events. For example, WWII brought an end to Nazi-era Germany. Life, as it was before the war, was not maintained after the war. Things were different, and they changed for the better. But it wasn’t a clean ending. The response at the end of the war wasn’t a universal celebration, for the war was devastating. Things wouldn’t be returning to the status quo that existed prior to the war. Many of the headlines in the papers were muted or subdued. You can still see pictures of the front page of many news sources, which simply read, “War Ends.” Not the movie ending Hollywood would have scripted.

The Civil War also offers a progressive story line – life after the war did not look like it did before the war, because our society had changed. The Emancipation Proclamation offered something of a conclusion to the era of life that existed before the war, and led to a progression in life after the war. It wasn’t a clean ending, and there wasn’t a return to “life as it had been,” but the world had changed, we did not go back to pre-Emancipation life.

Consider those two types of stories – conservative and progressive – and think about our text from Jeremiah. Which type best defines the promise of the prophet? Is the promise that life will return to what it had been, that life post-exile would simply go back to being like life pre-exile? Is that our hope? That life for any (or for all) of us will one day revert to life as it was before … and if so, how far back are we reverting? What era that has existed before us today are we hoping will return? Are we going back a century, pre-Civil Rights? Are we going back two centuries: pre-Emancipation? Are we going back five centuries, pre-American Colonies? Are we going back two millennia: to the Roman Empire? Are we going back even further? … How far back? Back to the garden?

The reality of our Biblical text is that the story of God, the story of Christ, the story of the Church … it’s a progressive story. The future into which we are headed, the hope we have for what will become when God’s kingdom is known in full, it is unlike anything we have experienced before. There is no status quo to which we will return.

Even as the prophet speaks, saying, “Thus says the Lord, I will fulfill my promise to you and bring you back to this place …” The place to which God promised them was not simply a carbon copy of life before they were exiled. They were exiled because things needed to change. They had been unfaithful. They had turned from God. They had focused on self, not community. They had sought power for individuals, yearning for earthly kings to take the place of the Lord. God did not want things to be as they hadbefore, God wanted something different, in deed, something greater.

How we envision that *something greater* speaks of our hopes, of our vision for a future in the presence of God.

And so again, we dive even deeper into the text. How do we tell the story? How do we read the story?

There are two key pieces of this text that are often hidden from our English translations. My skepticism says our English translations is that they shed light on hope from the perspective of the translators. But the Hebrew Text, the original manuscript, offers a very different hope than our English language suggests.

As this text was taught to me, a teenager growing up in the church, the hope that was offered was for *me*. It was *mine*. It was *personal*. It was *individual*. Dare I say, it was *selfish*. It was to be my beach, my Mai Tais, my sunset. … It was my hope, my prosperity, my promise from God that I should fear no harm because God knew the plans for my life. … And honestly, I don't know if that's actually what my Sunday School teachers taught or if that's what my pastors preached, ***or*** if that's what I wanted the text to say, and so that's what I made them say in my head.

But my friends, that's not what this text says. … ***There is nothing individual or personal about Jeremiah 29.***

Every time the word "*you*" is printed in our English language in Jeremiah 29, it comes from the plural pronoun in Hebrew. Every time "you" is read in Jeremiah 29, it is the prophet speaking to the whole body: the community, the full covenanted people who are living in exile. It is the word y'all, yous-guys, yinz, all y'all, you-uns. Say it with whatever regional dialect you find most comfortable, I don't care, but don't let anyone tell you pronouns don't matter. The prophet is speaking of and to the whole body.

And in this promise that is made to the whole body, verse 11 says (in our Pew Bibles, from the NRSV), "I have plans for your *welfare* and not for harm." The NIV I grew up with, which I think is more familiar, says, "I have plans to *prosper* your and not give you harm." The Hebrew word that is translated as "prosper" or "welfare" is the word "*shalom*." ***Shalom.***

"Shalom is God's will for the entire community of creation."[ii]

Not only does the greater context of Jeremiah's prophecy make clear this text is spoken to the whole body, but the pronouns are all plural, making clear no one person (present or future) is being address. And the noun of promise, *shalom* … which in Hebrew is also a verb … drives home the point: in the words of the Lord, as told by the prophet Jeremiah, the promise for our future is not individual, but is communal, and God will lead us to a place the world has not yet known, where *shalom* – peace, well-being, wholeness – is experienced by the entire community, not any isolated members of it.

In his thesis on Shalom, Nathan Hunt offers that in our modern world, we should understand, "Shalom is the outcome of just systems, righteous living, equitable conditions, and reconciled relationships which are validated at the margins by the wellbeing and voice of the vulnerable."[iii] He goes on to say,

"Shalom cannot be cultivated independently," that our individuality is only virtuous "insofar as it empowers the follower of Jesus to live well with God and others." Scholar Walter Brueggemann reiterates this point, saying, "Shalom is never the private property of the few."[iv]

And so we return to the power of storytelling, and we look at how hope travels in story. If we think the story tells us that our hope is singular, that our hope in God or Christ is for nothing more than personal salvation and individual prosperity, we will not only have failed the writers and tellers of the Biblical story, we will have failed our current and future generations.

The hope we learn in the text is the hope we teach from the text. The hope we receive from the text is the hope we pass on from the text. The hope we hear in the story is the hope we will tell in our own story. The hope we believe the prophet is offering is the hope to which we will cling. The hope to which we cling is the hope to which we will insist. The hope to which we insist is the hope that will drive our engagement in this world, whether it's at the polls, in our schools, or even how we interact with our neighbors.

And this brings me back to the beach side with that Mai Tai that has been refilled …

There are days and times when I just need to be alone. There are days I just need to get away. There are days I just want a drink in my hand on the beach. … But in the depth of my soul, such an isolated vision is not my hope for the future. I don't want to drink my Mai Tai alone. I want you there, and I want my neighbors there, and I want my family there, and I want the community there.

Because you see, in the Biblical stories I read, in the stories of history that inspire me, in the stories of my family's life that encourage me, in the stories of humanity that drive us forward, there is a common thread, there is hope that is witnessed and expressed. Such a hope is always found in the collective body that moves the story forward. Whether at Pentecost or in Revelation, our hope is found in the collective witness, as we proclaim and share God's love. So may our hope lead us to tell and to live a better story. Amen.

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[i] All quotes from Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana come from *Hope: A User's Manual*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2022.
[ii] Nathan Hunt. (April 2016) *On Earth as it is in Heaven: Place, Shalom, and the Creation of the World* (master's thesis). Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary, Fresno, CA.
[iii] Hunt.
[iv] Walter Brueggemann as quoted by Nathan Hunt.