

**Pentecost 21**  
**9/10/2016**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**  
**Psalm 66**  
**Luke 17:11-19**

## **Hope**

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Jeremiah preaches to a community which is utterly hopeless. Theirs was an experience which I imagine is beyond the experience of any of us here and probably even beyond our imagining. For those who had been taken into exile in Babylon everything is gone. The kingship of Israel is gone. The nobility is dispersed. The temple has been destroyed and the land has been overrun. The things which have defined God's relationship to the people of Israel, which have given Israel its identity, are all gone. These people are no mere refugees, as serious a situation as that would be. They are exiles, even captives, in the land of their enemies. Everything is gone and perhaps even God himself: an utterly hopeless situation.

It is into this that Jeremiah speaks with a word of promise. Even though everything has been lost, even though it has come to be marked as the judgement of God, nevertheless a word is spoken which opens up the future once again. God says, I will continue to be with you. To misquote one of Psalms: Yes, you will be able to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Settle, find and make a home here; I will still be your God and you will still be my people.

As we read ancient texts like this, one thing we do to understand how the Word *then* might be a Word to us *now* is to look for correspondences between that situation and our own. But I have already suggested that the situation of the text is quite beyond our current experience. It is even difficult for us to imagine what would have to happen for us to find ourselves in a situation like that of the Israelites in Jeremiah's time.

We need to explore a little more over the next couple of weeks what it is that confronts us in our decision-making about our resources and buildings and mission as a congregation into the future. There is no sense in which we are hopeless as we move into this process, certainly not in the way in which those Israelites in Babylon could be said to be hopeless. Even in the unimaginable circumstances that we hear might actually lose everything, we know that there are many nets to catch us were we to fall away from Mark the Evangelist.

But hopelessness has more subtle forms than that experienced by the Israelites in Babylon, and there is a sense in which our process of thinking about our buildings to this date has itself been thoroughly shot through by a kind of hopelessness. What we have done over the last year is calculate and measure and diagramise and reason and debate and argue and then recalculate and re-measure and re-summarise and then sift and refine to get ourselves down to about three or four basic options: "sell everything", "keep-the-whole-suite" and what is perhaps the medium between these two, retaining this corner with the Hall and the cottage.

I suggest that we have come to this conclusion "hopelessly" in the sense that it has been rather a scientific process, the process of measuring and describing and debating and remeasuring and balancing. We might say that it has almost been an exercise in magic in which we have tried to determine how the world works and to discover what the

incantations are we can sing such that we might get the best possible result. Such a process is hopeless in the sense that it is impossible to factor God, and what God might want us to do, into the process of engaging with the facts and the numbers.

This kind of hopelessness is also present in the story of Jeremiah and Judah. It occurs before the exile as the leadership in Jerusalem do their calculations. "We have our temple - that should protect us; we've got the kinship, a covenant on the laws; we have our political alliances and we are working very hard playing off one enemy against another". This is also a fairly hopeless process in the sense that you don't really need God when you have all these things you own and can do.

What does this mean for us, that we have done all of this work and that is very hard to know where God fits into it all? I think it means that we need to hold very lightly the conclusions which have come out of our process and also our commitment to these conclusions and our sense of what it is which God might actually "want". One possibility, "Option 1", involves doing as the Son of Man is said to have done: to go without a place to rest ahead. We could, of course, choose this option and then die of exposure. On the other hand we could go with Options 5 or 6 – restoring the palace only to discover that there is a Sampson in our midst who will bring the whole thing down around our ears and kill us that way.

There is no hope (in a deep theological sense) which we can associate with any of these options. What the people are discovering in Babylon is that, as much as they've invested in the kinship of the temple in the land and history and so forth, what it is that God gives them in the end is, in fact, none of those particular shapes of the future but just himself. "I will be your God and you will be my people", whether in Jerusalem or in Babylon. What is given is a restatement of God's faithfulness. Have you died, perhaps of exposure? This is a God who raises the dead. Have you been crushed by the temple? This is a God who can build a temple of praise from dumb stones.

So the question is, How do we factor in the hope which is God's faithfulness as we work through all of calculations and reasonings and projections into the future? We probably have to become God-like as we work through these things. This is to say that we have to enter into a process of promise making, because hope is all about making promises. Hope is about presenting something which is yet to happen as a reality here and now, upon which we can rely and therefore begin to move into the future, not necessarily knowing what shape the future will have other than that the one who promised to be there will, in fact, be there.

Jeremiah said to Israel, For all that has happened, now settle where you are. This God extends beyond the bounds of Palestine. Determine, in a sense even *promise*, to live among those who have shaped your world in the most undesirable and painful of ways.

For us here and now to hold our determinations a little more lightly than, perhaps, some of us might want to, is to make the same kind of promise, the one to the other. If tomorrow does not take the shape I thought it ought to take because of who I think we are as a church, I will nevertheless settle in that tomorrow and pray for and look for God to cause me and others to flourish out of that tomorrow.

I suspect that our calling here is to promise to live among with those who will decide for the "wrong" thing.

In this way we are seeking to become a sacrament of the mission we actually have in the world around us. For we are given to sit in a world which is very different from us, to engage with that world to discover how God is going to do something with the difference. And if we can't see how that might work in ourselves as a faith community, it will never work between ourselves and those have not yet joined us along the Way.

In our decision-making over the next few weeks we must also be making promises. If we can make promises like this, and then seek to keep those promises, we will have demonstrated that we have a hope which is beyond the calculations, the imaginings and the reasonings. We'll have demonstrated that there is a God who can raise the dead and cause dumb stones to sing.

And would that not be a very good thing?

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