

February 3, 2019

The National Presbyterian Church

"When the World Comes Tumbling In"

Jeremiah 29:4-14, 2 Kings 25:8-12; 2 Chronicles 36:5-7, 15-21

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In our sermons this winter, we're working our way through the story of the Bible, and we come to a period of time when the descendants of a man called Abraham – who lived c.1800BC, and whose descendants we call "the 12 tribes of Israel") split in to two independent nations

- Israel in the north
- Judah in the south.

And in the three centuries following the split – from c. 900BC-600BC these two nations managed to create a downward spiral of political, spiritual and moral turmoil that led inexorably towards "divine judgment"!

To be sure, the great prophetic leaders of Israel and Judah – people like Amos and Hosea, Micah and Isaiah. Repeatedly warned the people that this would happen if there were no repentance. But few if any were listening, and fewer still repenting and changing their ways.

So, between the years 722 BC and 587 BC, both nations were dismally defeated by their enemies in battle and were carried off into exile in what is now modern day Iraq.

- Israel (in the north) was taken away by a nation called "Assyria,"
- Judah (in the south) was taken away by a nation called Babylon which (as I read in 2 Chronicles) not only destroys the Temple in Jerusalem, but in 587BC – the whole city.

And with this defeat, destruction and exile we come to the end of an era!

In fact, for the descendants of Abraham, it's as if there whole world had come "crashing down" and "tumbling in," never to be the same again.

It was DEVASTATING! DESOLATING! AWFUL!

EVER EXPERIENCED THAT? – Devastating, Desolating, Awful? Everything you've ever known or dreamed about tumbling in and falling apart? A Defining moment. A "Before" and an "After," leading to a future of mass confusion and hopelessness; a sense that life may not be worth living at all? A radically different future from the past.

The truth, of course, is that many people have experienced this – and I know that some of you have too.

Sometimes, as in the days of Assyria And Babylon, this "tumbling in" can happen because of external and powerful forces at work on the grand stage, often outside of us, so that our small lives are crushed by the big tectonic shifts of history.

- 9/11, of course, is one of those defining moments leading to massive personal loss for some – and for all of us, the stepping up of security and the fear of terrorism in ways unimaginable before.
- Far more deadly, of course – for the Jewish people, the awful defining moment with a "before and an after" was the Holocaust in WWII.

- Or with the peoples of Ukraine and Ireland – it would be the famines of the 1930’s and mid 1800’s with millions dying – and in the case of Ireland, at least 1million immigrating to North America.

And this is just the tip of history’s iceberg, to which we can add numerous much smaller events – human crises – no less painful that are sadly part of everyday life:

- the loss of a job or home or a dream
- or a business going bust
- The dis-integration of a marriage -- and a family
- The death of a loved one
- A mistake we make and must pay for
- A catastrophe: like a shooting, or earthquake; or war – that leaves us with some kind of post-traumatic-stress that never goes away

So that in a thousand ways, life can come tumbling in, leaving us with a “Before” that we grieve and long for; and an “After”: a future that’s filled with confusion or hopelessness or nothing at all!

And that’s what happened, and how it must have felt for people of Judah:

- defeated by the Babylonians
- and watching friends slaughtered; and their holy city and temple burned
- and being dragged off into exile and servitude for the rest of their lives

AND THE QUESTION IS THIS:

- How did they make it? How did they recover?
For those that did make it – and found some kind of a new life:
- How was it even possible to start again?

Well, at least for the prophet Jeremiah (who was caught up in these time, but stayed behind in the desolation), THERE WERE 3 THINGS that he urged the defeated exiles to remember, all of them expressed in our passage in Jeremiah 29 (one of the great chapters in Scripture).

Speaking to the devastated exiles, Jeremiah reminds them of

1. God’s ongoing Presence and Love for them,
 - despite their past;
 - despite (in their case) their culpability
and
2. Of God’s ongoing Plans and Promises -- about the future that he has in store for them – and that He controls
and
3. Of God’s ongoing Purposes for their lives, in the present – where they are, where they now find themselves, God has meaningful work to do.

And I’d like us to think briefly about each of these this morning, beginning first with the assurance of:

1. God’s Ongoing Presence

In vv 12-13 of Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah speaks for God and assures the people THAT

“When you call upon me AND come and pray to me, I will hear you.
and When you search for me, you WILL find me.

As if to say:

“Despite all the odds and appearances: I’m still here!!”

- “You may be in Babylon far from where you want to be – but I’m still with you!”
- “You may even be accountable for the mess you’re in – but I’m still with you.”
- “I may seem to be ‘hard to find and far away’ but my love for you has not - and never will -- change: I’m still with you!”

And this is important! In fact it’s crucial to know!

Sometimes when tragedy strikes and the world comes crashing down we think that the most important thing is to understand “Why?” We need a reason!

And finding a reason is not un-important but the fact is that the first thing most of us need in moments of panic and crisis is usually

- *not actually a reason – but a person;*
- *not an explanation of the awful things that have happened -- but AN ASSURANCE that we have someone to travel with us in the darkness!*

and Jeremiah assures the people carried off into exile, for whom the world has come tumbling in, that this is precisely what they have from God: HIS PRESENCE – when they seek it; a fellow traveler in this awful moment; no matter what the past, God still with them.

And not only that, but Jeremiah speaks as well about the “Plans and Promises” that God has for them as well, to give them a “large dose of HOPE” for the future, for the days that lie ahead.

2. God’s Ongoing Plans and Promises

Speaking for God, Jeremiah writes in vv.10-11 and 13-14 of Ch. 29:

When Babylon’s seventy years are completed I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

¹¹For 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.

- and I will restore your fortunes (a promise)
- and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, (a promise)
- and I will bring you back (a promise)
to the place from which I sent you into exile.

And God kept these promises! In history, it actually happened. So that within 70-90 years, not only were the people back home in their land, but the destroyed temple in Jerusalem itself was rebuilt!

HOPE for the future “promised”; and the realization of that future: signed, sealed and delivered!

One of the crises of our day among many is the loss of HOPE. The loss of any sense that there is anything worthwhile for us in the future.

In fact, on the web you'll find article after article stressing that hope is important for a successful life, and urging people to find hope:

YOU GOTTA HAVE HOPE!! You have to find strategies to create hope!

But I find myself reading these articles and asking "How"?

*"How in the world can you find hope for the future when you have no control over the future?
And no clue what the future will bring?"*

Seems to me as if we're being urged into a world of mere wishful thinking

But what Jeremiah says to the desolated exiles whose world has come tumbling in is that "the future belongs to God; it's in God's hands" – just as the present and the past are

In fact, all time belongs to God and GOD is well able to control both time and the future not to be used against them, but for them:

¹¹Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, thro' Jeremiah
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.

- I will restore your fortunes (a promise)
- I will gather you from all the nations (a promise)
- and I will bring you back (a promise)

Promises about the future – that God kept!

So when the world came tumbling in:

1. Jeremiah spoke of the ongoing Presence of God – a relationship
 - that transcends the past
 - and resolves our Loneliness
2. and Jeremiah spoke of the "Plans and Promises God"
 - provides courage for the future and
 - by giving us Hope
3. And then 3rd, Jeremiah speaks about God's Purposes for our lives:

3. God's Ongoing Purposes

There is WORK TO BE DONE – that God wants us to do. Work that provides purpose and meaning in the present - Jeremiah 29:5-7

- ⁵Build houses and live in them;
- plant gardens and eat what they produce.
- ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters;
- take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage,
that they may bear sons and daughters;
- multiply there, and do not decrease.
- ⁷AND seek the welfare of the city
where I have sent you into exile,
- and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In other words, “Get on with all the mundane stuff – families, houses, all of that,” and more than that “Be an agent of transformation for good, a witness, even to the enemies who conquered you!”

Last year, in 2018, Dr. Blake Allen, wrote these words in an article for the American Psychological Association: in which he said

“Scholars in positive psychology consider *meaning* to be a fundamental component of human well-being– and there’s growing evidence that people have

- better mental health,
- greater life satisfaction,
- and greater ability to cope with life’s challenges – in handling both our own emotions and our interactions with others

when they have *meaningful work*, in particular

<https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2018/07/valuable-employment.aspx>

And back in 2014, the National Academy of Sciences published a report that there was clear evidence that, among teens, there was a strong correlation between meaningful work and service for others (as opposed to just doing what you wanted), and the ability to deal with depressive thoughts (not a solution to full blown depression, but a significant step out of the doldrums).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/04/how-meaningful-activities-protect-the-teen-brain-from-depression/360988/>

So this is what Jeremiah has to say to these folks back then. And I suspect he’d say the same to us too when life comes crashing down and tumbling in:

BRING GOD INTO THE PICTURE.

God has purposeful, **MEANINGFUL WORK FOR US TO DO IN THE PRESENT**: “to seek the welfare of the city (community/world) where I have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Seek out this God and his work for you! -- whether you feel like it or not -- whenever possible: Do something, anything, “purposeful” – for God and others and then (2nd) when life comes tumbling in, **FIND YOUR HOPE IN GOD’S PLANS AND PROMISES** for the future, says God through Jeremiah to the Jewish exiles whose worlds have come tumbling in: “I know the plans I have for you to give you a future and a hope.” Trust me (says God): I have a future for you – plans and promises. I own time and eternity” and the future – yours and mine -- is safe with God.

And above all (3rd) when everything falls apart, count on **GOD’S TANGIBLE, COMFORTING PRESENCE**.

It’s good to know “why” things happen: sometimes there’s an explanation; and sometimes there isn’t. But always we need to know that we have a fellow traveler with us, to deal with our loneliness when we are devastated, and to know that nothing we’ve ever done in the past, or that has happened to us in the past can change that.

Says God through Jeremiah to the Jewish exiles whose worlds have come tumbling in “seek me and you **WILL** find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”

That’s Jeremiah’s prescription for times that tumble in – For them back then – and for us now.

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