

## **THEME: Jeremiah: Faith for Tough Times**

### ***“Hope for the Hopeless”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – Confirmation Weekend

May 11-12, 2013 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

#### **Jeremiah 29:1, 11-14 (This will be done via the Video Sermon Starter)**

*1 Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the elders, priests, prophets, and all the people who had been exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.*

*11 For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. 12 In those days when you pray, I will listen. 13 If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. 14 I will be found by you,” says the Lord. “I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.”*

**VIDEO      Jeremiah Week 4 Scripture and Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE      Hope for the Hopeless – Return O Israel (Use Jeremiah background)**

Today we come to the conclusion of our series of sermons on the prophet Jeremiah. We have learned that Jeremiah is the longest book of the Bible in terms of word count and he is one of the most enigmatic prophetic books to read. When you try to read the book it actually doesn't make much sense when you don't understand the historical background going on as the backdrop. Over the last four weeks we have been trying to learn about the history and geography of what was taking place in the land of Judah, which is what was left of the kingdom of Israel during the period of time from 627 BC until 587 BC. Each week we have had a history lesson and a geography lesson and then we have asked ourselves several important questions. What are the major themes of the prophet Jeremiah?

Each day we have been encouraging you to read sections of Jeremiah using our Meditation Moments. I'd like to invite you to take it out for today which also has a place for Message Notes. At the top you will find listed the Scripture passage we just heard and a place for you to write something down. I'm going to give you a quiz in a minute so please have them out and ready. You will find some

more readings from Jeremiah for you this week and I hope you will use it because I think it will be a blessing as it builds on what we are going to talk about morning.

**SLIDE          Jeremiah preached about sin.**

The first major theme of the prophet Jeremiah is the theme of any profit because it is why they are led to preach and that is because there is sin. God raises up prophets because there is some way that people are straying from the path and they are doing things that separate them from God or each other. Remember that sin is separation from God or other people and it simply describes the relationship that can happen between us and God in us and other people.

The major sin during the time of the prophet Jeremiah was that the people of God were worshiping the other gods and idols of the ancient near East, which were not gods at all. They not only worshiped those gods but they began to adopt those values and they turned away from doing things that God wanted them to do. They oppressed the poor instead of caring for them. They disregarded the aliens or strangers in their midst. They turned away from the things that God wanted from them and they turned towards things that were hurtful and destructive.

The prophet Jeremiah comes along and says, "You have turned away from God and you have broken God's heart. You are hurting yourself and other people." This is the first major theme of the prophet Jeremiah.

**SLIDE          "If you continue in this path then destruction will come."**

The second major theme is that of the judgment of God which will come if you continue to go down this path of worshiping other gods. There was sin and there was judgment which came in the form of other empires which would come and overtake Jerusalem and Judah. Almost every night for 40 years Jeremiah would have the same recurring nightmare, that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed one day by a kingdom from the North. The people would be made slaves and be carried off to that foreign land if they continued to turn away from God.

Jeremiah warned the people over and over again, "Unless you repent, God will leave you to your own devices and this is what will happen. It's clear that Babylon is too powerful so I beg you to please turn back to God." There was the message of sin and then there was this call, an invitation to repentance and turning back to God.

**SLIDE        Repent and return to God.**

The third major theme was this idea of returning to God and that it is never too late and you are never too far gone to come back to God. That leads to the last message of Jeremiah.

**SLIDE        There is always hope.**

Yes there is sin and judgment and repentance, but the last message of Jeremiah is that there is always hope. There is hope for the hopeless. There is hope for people, even if they feel like they have no right to hold onto hope. Even if people have no possibility of expecting that they would ever be restored to their land, Jeremiah promised that it would happen and there was hope. We are going to focus today on this last message on this idea and reality of hope.

Last week was confirmation Sunday and one of the youth who was confirmed said to me, "Pastor Jeff, you been teaching us all of this history and geography during the last few weeks. At the end are you going to give us a quiz? We always get quizzes at school when we learn a bunch of new stuff."

Leave it to one of our students to come up with a brilliant idea! I'm only going to ask you for questions that have to do with what we've learned over the last few weeks and you can write those down in this area of blank line on your Message Notes and then you can grade your own quiz. You might even challenge the people that you came to worship with today if you came with someone and sweeten the pot a little bit by agreeing that the one who gets the least number correct has to buy coffee or brunch or lunch after worship! If you are here for the first time this week then we won't grade you unless you are an ancient history buff. So let me give you these questions.

**SLIDE        What were the names of the two idols worshiped by the Jews who were considered consorts?**

**SLIDE        (Pictures of Baal and Asherah on screen from last week – NO NAMES on them, just the pictures please.)**

You will see their pictures on the video screen that might help you remember. The one on the left is the god of lightning and thunder and storms who you would pray to bring rain. The one on the right is the goddess of fertility. These were the two deities that people were tending to worship instead of God. What were their names? No cheating please so don't ask the person next to you!

**SLIDE        What is the name of the Empire to the North which destroyed Judah?**

That kingdom today is modern-day Iraq.

**SLIDE        What year was Jerusalem destroyed?**

It was July 18 of what year?

**SLIDE        What was the name of the King of Judah who rebelled against that kingdom to the North and ended up being the last King of Judah?**

He is mentioned 45 times in the book of Jeremiah and he was forced to watch his two sons be executed before they gouged out his eyes and then made slaves. I'll give you a hint and that the last three letters of his name are, "iah." But it's not Jeremiah!

Do you think you got the answers? Let's see how you did. What were the names of the two idols that were worshiped in the ancient near East?

**SLIDE        Baal and Asherah**

Baal was the male God of rain and Asherah was the female goddess of fertility. What is the name of the Empire to the North that destroyed Judah?

**SLIDE        Babylon**

The year in which the Babylonian Empire destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah was what?

**SLIDE        587 BC**

Finally, what was the name of the King who rebelled against the Babylonians and who was the final King of Judah? He is mentioned 45 times in the book of Jeremiah.

**SLIDE        King Zedekiah**

I'm guessing that you got a few of them right and now you know some the history behind what was happening in the day of Jeremiah. Let's take a look at the map on the video screen to simply review this region during the time of Jeremiah.

**SLIDE        Map of the Assyrian Empire in 650 BC (from last week)**

You see the city of Jerusalem and above that is modern-day Israel and the Sea of Galilee is that top dot on the map. You can see the Mediterranean Sea is a large body of water on the left and the Nile River with Egypt and North Africa to

the left. This large area in the middle is modern-day Iran and Iraq, also known as the Fertile Crescent and the cradle of civilization.

The Assyrian Empire was in power in the ancient near East during this time and we learned that this region is the most valuable piece of real estate because it is what connects Europe and Asia to the continent of Africa and so all of the trade routes and economic activity connect in this place where Jerusalem sits on the map. The great empires were all interested in controlling the land of Judah which is the southern portion of the nation of Israel. You wouldn't want to travel through the Arabian Desert because of the lack of water and so you would go right through the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah didn't need to be a prophet to figure out that each Empire would want to control the trade routes.

**VIDEO      Changing Empires Map for Jeremiah (no audio - from last week)**

Watch what happens on the video screen as we see 45 years of history and empires come and go in 30 seconds. Jeremiah is prophesying during a time of great upheaval between these vast empires. The Assyrians were in control until he was about 16 years old and then when he began to preach the Babylonians were revolting against the Assyrians and so Judah had 17 years of independence. At the end of those 17 years Egypt began to once more flex its muscle. The Egyptians marched through the land of Judah and took control of Jerusalem, putting their own puppet King on the throne, and not stopping until they reached the modern-day country of Syria.

The Babylonians then defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish on the banks of the Euphrates River and then marched down through the countries of modern-day Syria and Lebanon, eventually conquering Jerusalem and then continuing all the way down to Egypt. They didn't destroy Jerusalem at this point but simply exacted tribute or tax that had to be paid to Babylon. Once again, it was pretty clear that once Babylon had defeated the Assyrians and the Egyptians that they were coming next for the city of Jerusalem and Judah.

**SLIDE      Map of Babylonian Empire 597 BC (picture from last week)**

Let's look at the timeline again from last week on the video screen and you will see this history play out of the last eight years of the kingdom of Judah and the last days of Jeremiah.

**VIDEO      Jeremiah Timeline (no audio – please pause when Jeff asks)**

In **605 BC the Babylonians take control of the kingdom of Judah** and they demand the Jewish people now pay allegiance to Babylon. They demand an annual tax called attribute. It was a heavy tax and put a great burden on the people. That was the price of safety and continued freedom in the land. They would appoint your King and you could have one but you still had to pledge allegiance to Babylon as well as pay up.

In **598 BC Jehoiakim rebels** against the kingdom of Babylon. He says that Judah would no longer pledge allegiance to Babylon and they would no longer pay the tax or the attribute. Judah and several other smaller kingdoms join together to fight the Babylonians, hoping the Egyptians would join them. The Egyptians didn't help them and instead the Babylonian army surrounds the city of Jerusalem and began to **lay siege to the city of Jerusalem**.

Jehoiakim dies in battle and **in 597 BC Jerusalem surrenders**. His son Jehoiachin takes over and admits defeat and tries to apologize to the Babylonians. The Babylonian army still marched into Jerusalem and took all of the treasures out of the Temple and carried them away. **Jehoiachin and 10,000 other citizens of Jerusalem, including his mother, were deported to Babylon**. They lived there in exile and were never heard from again. Today, this would look like a foreign power taking our president and his family, the entire Congress, the Supreme Court, every major leader who makes the news and all of the religious leaders to a foreign land. That's what happened in 597 BC and you will read at the end of the book of Jeremiah what happens to King Jehoiachin while he is in exile.

Josiah's son **Zedekiah becomes King**. He rules as King and takes people farther away from God and he is told by the Babylonians that Judah must continue to pay tribute to Babylon. As long as they would pay their tribute they would be left alone. Most of Jeremiah's preaching comes during this time from the first deportation until the Zedekiah rebels against Babylon.

In **588 BC Zedekiah rebelled and Babylon lays siege** to Jerusalem. Once more he hopes the Egyptians will help them but they never do. The Babylonian army marches in this time with a vengeance and they surround the city of Jerusalem for 18 months. The only thing that protects the people in Jerusalem are the wall surrounding the city and they tear down houses to reinforce the walls on the inside of the city. Eventually they run out of food in they begin to starve to death. Jeremiah continues to preach to the people that they should return to God and surrender to the Babylonians. They refused.

Finally, **in 587 BC Jerusalem is destroyed and the kingdom of Judah ceases to exist.** The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar leads the army on July 18 587 BC to the center of Jerusalem while the city is destroyed and burned to the ground. The King and all the leaders of Jerusalem are carried away into exile in the second deportation and the kingdom of Judah is annihilated. For the next 50 years it will cease to exist which is why this is one of the most important dates in Old Testament history. Everything is leading up to this date or is written in response to what happened in 587 BC. This is why this date is important to know. For 40 years Jeremiah is prophesying about what is going to happen on July 18 587 BC and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

**SLIDE        587 BC Timeline Picture**

That is what was happening during this time and it's important to know because it helps you understand how important Jeremiah's message of hope is to the people who end up going into exile for the 50 years following this destruction of Jerusalem. The people were hopeless and they didn't know if they would ever get to return to their homeland.

When you watch the media coverage on September 11, 2001 you felt what many of those Jewish exiles might have felt as they watched their culture and their city and their way of life crumble to the ground. Except, you have to imagine that it wasn't just the twin towers or the Pentagon, but it was the entirety of New York City and Washington DC destroyed. Imagine that and you begin to get a feel for what it felt like on that day. As the people marched away they followed their king who was blinded and they ended up in Babylon as slaves.

Can you imagine the intense anguish and grief of the people? Some fled to Egypt to escape the wrath. Some lingered in the land of Judah and Jeremiah was one of them. He was in prison because the King Zedekiah had him arrested but the Babylonians set him free and allowed him to roam the streets. He marched among the ruins in the ashes in Jerusalem.

The Jews who remained wrote things like the book of Lamentations. Tradition says that Jeremiah wrote it but scholars debate that. However somebody walked through the streets of Jerusalem after it was destroyed. This passage will give you one sense of what they were feeling. This is from the first chapter of Lamentations.

**SLIDE**      **1 Jerusalem, once so full of people, is now deserted. She who was once great among the nations now sits alone like a widow. Once the queen of all the earth, she is now a slave. 2 She sobs through the night; tears stream down her cheeks. Among all her lovers, there is no one left to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her and become her enemies.**

**11 Her people groan as they search for bread. They have sold their treasures for food to stay alive.**

**16 “For all these things I weep; tears flow down my cheeks. No one is here to comfort me; any who might encourage me are far away. My children have no future, for the enemy has conquered us.”**

Many of the books of the Old Testament were written down during this period of time, during the exile. 1 and 2 Kings were written during the exile as they were recounting history of their Kings who had fallen, trying to understand why this happened to them. The book of Ezekiel was also written during the exile. Ezekiel was a priest who also was a prophet of God. He preached in Babylon to the exiles. Some scholars believe that Isaiah chapters 40 through 55 and maybe even the chapter 66 were written during this period of time.

Daniel was a prophet who was fed to the lions and he survived. He also talked about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were put into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and survived. These stories take place during the exile in Babylon. Many of the other books of the Hebrew Bible were shaped during this exile, including the Psalms, like Psalm 137.

**SLIDE**      **1 Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. 2 We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. 3 For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: “Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!” 4 But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land?**

Can you feel the weight and pain in the words as they experienced exile? It is hard to even sing or lift a voice of praise when you feel discouraged and despondent.



There is a question I know that most of you are thinking right now. "Jeff, that is all interesting—ancient history and Babylon and Zedekiah—but why should we really care? Why does this matter to us?"

The point of this has not been to teach you the names of ancient deities or Kings of Israel. The reason why the stories of exile and defeat are in the Bible is because the exile is repeated in every generation. This is a timeless story of people who wander away from God and then find themselves in exile, in a land that seems foreign and desolate.

Some people are like Jeremiah and even though they are following God they still end up in exile. Other people do wrong things and we experience the consequences of their actions.

There are times in every one of our lives, and even for us as a nation, where we wonder if there is any hope at all. There was no hope for the Jews in Babylon. They are stuck in the Babylonian Empire with millions of people spread across the entire ancient near East. In the middle of that is this small remnant of Judah, these pockets of Jewish communities who have faith and who are trying to remember their God in light of the fact that their Temple has been destroyed.

What are the odds that they will ever get returned to Jerusalem? The human odds were none and zero and nil. They couldn't raise an army and they would never defeat the Babylonians. There was no hope. They had lost their leaders. They had lost their loved ones. They lost their property. They had lost their pride. They lost everything as they were living in exile.

What I know is that every one of us will experience exile at some point in our lives. Last week I told you about a young man I visited with who had served in Afghanistan and I am reminded that for more than 10 years we have had servicemen and servicewomen serving in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and we've seen almost 4500 soldiers killed. More than that number have committed suicide upon returning from active duty and more than 300,000 are dealing with brain injuries as a result of combat. I can tell you from personal experience of dealing with some of those families that they are living in exile. There is often a feeling of hopelessness or despair. There are civilian families in Iraq and Afghanistan who are literally living in the land of Babylon and who have lost loved ones and are experiencing exile.

Some of you have been dealing with struggles finding employment for the last several years and many of you have been affected adversely by the economic downturn of five years ago and it feels like exile when you can't find a job and you wonder if you will ever find one that fits who you are. We begin to live in exile and we feel like there is no help and no hope, nothing that can rescue us from this pit of despair.

Sometimes it gets specific, as just about us and not about large groups of people. Your spouse leaves and you are trying to figure out how to put your life back together again. In those moments when you are living in it feels like the whole world has come undone, exile is a small apartment when you have been used to living in a mini mansion. You wonder, "How did it come to this? I'm back to where I started 30 years ago. How did this happen? Am I going to be alone for the rest of my life? What does this mean?"

You get that diagnosis from the doctor that you were not expecting or you find yourself dealing with the loss of a child or 1000 other things that could happen and we walk through moments of exile. These books in the Bible are written for people who will walk through these moments in life, either as a group or individually. I don't have to predict by some power of the Holy Spirit of God and claim to be a prophet to tell you that someday you will walk in exile if you are not there yet. It happens for all of us and we need these words.

If the exile was caused by someone else's sin then you need the words of hope. If the exile was caused by your sin then you need the words of repentance and the call to turn back to God and know that God is willing to forgive. These are the words that we need.

After foretelling the exile that is to come, we find in the prophets a move to offer hope to those who are in exile. Jeremiah warns the people for 40 years. He begs them to repent. But when the time comes that the exiles are taken away to Babylon, his tone changes and he becomes a prophet of hope. We hear this in every one of the prophetic books. Listen to these words the writer of Lamentations. He has already talked about walking through the ruins of the streets of Jerusalem and seeing the rubble. In chapter 3, verse 19 he then talks about how he is always thinking about his afflictions and you know what this is like. You find yourself constantly thinking about the situation that you were in and how hopeless that it feels.

**SLIDE 19 The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. 20 I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss.**

But then we find these words beginning in verse 21.

**SLIDE 21 Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: 22 The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. 23 Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. 24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!"**

In the midst of walking through the ruins of Jerusalem the prophet makes a shift but it has nothing to do with his external circumstances. Everything around him is still the same but he makes the statement of faith. "I believe, even in the exile and in the midst of the ruins that I'm walking through right now, that God has not abandoned me. God is the God of the second chance and the God of the new beginning. I will trust in God and not be afraid, because I know that God's mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness. I will trust in him and therefore I have hope."

This is hope for the hopeless and the only source of that hope is that trust in God. We both know that when we are walking through exile there is one of two responses that we have towards God. When you have been through hell on earth, some people turn away from God. They say, "If there was a God then this never would've happened. If God exists then God would've saved me. I cannot believe in God anymore." Sometimes we actually believe in God but we're so angry at God that we lash out, almost as if we hope to punish God by saying, "I don't even believe in you anymore." Sometimes you find it almost impossible to believe in God anymore because of your circumstances. Most of us have been in a place where we begin to wonder if there really is a God, especially in the midst of an exile that we find ourselves walking through.

But here's the thing that I remind you of as your pastor on a regular basis. When you turn away from God in the midst of exile or pain or hurt or loss, then what do you have left? Then you have no hope. Where will you turn now if you simply give up on God? You have the pain and hurt and sorrow and the exile and the loneliness and whatever else you are feeling and that's it. If there isn't a God who has a plan for you, a plan to prosper you and to bless you and a plan to give

you a future with hope, then what do you have left? Where else will you find hope if not in God?

The other option when we find ourselves in exile is to come back to God. We may have wandered away from God or we may have been faithful all along, but we hold on with white knuckles like the writer of Lamentations. He is standing in the charred remains of Jerusalem and says, "Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!"

The prophets call us to this place of hope. This is what Isaiah does in chapters 40 through 55. If you have your Bible you may want to turn to that section of the book of Isaiah who is writing this section of the book while the people are in exile. These words are clearly for the people who were living in Babylon. You know many of the words in these chapters and the reason that you do is because Handel set them to music in the Messiah.

***"Comfort ye! Comfort ye, says your God! There is a voice crying in the wilderness (calling the people back to Jerusalem from exile.) Every mountain shall be made low and every valley shall be lifted up. Every crooked place made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."***

You can almost hear the music ringing in your ears from Handel's Messiah as the prophet Isaiah promises that a highway will be created in the desert, in the wilderness, and the exiles shall return to Jerusalem with singing, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

What an audacious claim that is to make while the people are living in exile and there is no chance they will defeat the Babylonians. But we hear these words in Isaiah 51:11.

**SLIDE**      ***Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.***

We catch glimpses of this hope in Jeremiah as God promises that he will be there for his people, but we really find a hope like this breaking out Jeremiah chapters 29 to 33. These are chapters are relentless, unbounded. You might open your Bibles to Jeremiah 29 which is where our Scripture passage came from

today. Verse 11 is one that many of you have heard and it was a life verse for one of our confirmation youth last weekend so maybe remember it from then.

**SLIDE**      ***11 For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.***

That verse was written to the exiles in Babylon who had no hope and who wondered if they would ever return home. In 597 BC Jeremiah watched the first 10,000 from Judah be taken into exile with King Jehoiakin. All of the leadership in Jerusalem was taken with them and carried away as slaves. Jeremiah sees this deportation happen and he sent a letter to the exiles, the Jews who were taken away to Babylon. This verse is a part of that letter.

When this deportation happens the prophets who were taken with the exiles told the people not to worry because they wouldn't be gone very long. They promised them that the Egyptians were going to come and rescue them. Jeremiah begins his letter to the exiles with the bad news that this is not going to happen. Listen to what Jeremiah says in verses 8 through 10 just before this passage that we read.

**SLIDE**      ***8 This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you. Do not listen to their dreams, 9 because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them," says the Lord. 10 This is what the Lord says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.***

These exiles would live in Babylon for 60 years. He tells them to go ahead and, "build houses in Babylon. Give your children in marriage to one another and seek the blessings of God on the city in which you live and upon the Babylonians, because if they are blessed then you will be blessed as well. Plan to stay in Babylon for a long time because you're exile will not end soon."

This was not happy news to the people living as exiles in Babylon, but that's how life is sometimes. We want God to deliver us in an instant. I'll be honest with you and confess that when I pray I want the answer tomorrow! If God could just give me what I want when I want it then everything would be just fine, thank you very much! If I pray three weeks in a row for something and nothing happens then I get disappointed in God, maybe not literally but you know what I'm talking

about. You have had those feelings, haven't you? Or am I the only one in the room that thinks that way?

We want God to fix things now and yet when we look at the scriptures God doesn't fix things like that most of the time. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years before God raised up Moses. The Jewish people were in exile for more than 60 years before they returned to Jerusalem. Jeremiah is brutally honest with the people and tells them this will be their reality for a while so keep doing those things you need to do to survive like building homes, tilling the fields, planting crops, creating families and seeking the blessings of the people around you.

Jeremiah also reminds them that God says, "But the day will come when I will bring you back." You can take that to the bank. Jeremiah declares to them, "I am telling you that the day will come when you're exile ends."

The truth is that some of those in exile would not live to see that day. Their children and their children's children would see it but many of the adults would not, but knowing it was coming sustained them. They found hope in that reality and that promise from God. Once more let's hear these words again from Jeremiah 29:11.

**SLIDE**      ***11 For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.***

Whatever our circumstances are in America today, God says to us, "As you turned to me and seek me, I will give you a future with hope."

People ask me all the time if I'm scared about this thing or that thing in American culture and here's what I have to remember. Why should I be scared about those things? I know who holds history in their hands. I know that God has promised us a future with hope. I know that in the end, our lives will be redeemed. I may not know all the details about how it turns out, but I know that God is not finished with me yet or finished with us, and that God has a plan to bless us, to give us a future with hope. I may not even see what that looks like but I'm confident that my children or their children will see this come to pass. Therefore, we have hope.

The people continue to follow God in exile as opposed to taking on the gods of the Babylonians because they knew God's promise was to bring them back. What do these prophecies mean for us in the Bible about being in exile?

They are not there to teach as ancient history or just to teach us that exile will come. They are there to say to us that exile will never be the final word.

**SLIDE        Exile will never be the final word.**

You hear me say that all the time as your pastor, "The worst thing in your life will never be the last thing." The worst day of your life will not be the final experience of your life because God will always bring us a future with hope. It may not be on this side of eternity, but there is always hope with God.

The reality is that we can't live without hope. Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychotherapist in the concentration camps in Germany and he talked about watching prisoners who lost hope. He knew it was only a matter of time before they died because human beings can't live without hope.

Dr. Jerome Groopman holds a chair in medicine at Harvard and he's written one of my favorite books called, **The Anatomy of Hope**. He is a physician and he says these words based on his experience of working with thousands of patients.

**SLIDE        *Hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them. For all of my patients, hope, true hope, has proved as important as any medication I might prescribe or any procedure that I might perform.*** (Use the picture of the book, The Anatomy of Hope on the left of this quote.)

I find this fascinating that the doctor says that the most important thing I can give people is hope, not medicine. Medicine is important but hope is indispensable. This is what Jeremiah was giving the people in exile. Listen to what Jeremiah says in Chapter 33:10-11.

**SLIDE        *10 "This is what the Lord says: You have said, 'This is a desolate land where people and animals have all disappeared.' Yet in the empty streets of Jerusalem and Judah's other towns, there will be heard once more 11 the sounds of joy and laughter. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will be heard again, along with the joyous songs of people bringing thanksgiving offerings to the Lord. They will sing, 'Give thanks to the Lord of Heaven's Armies, for the Lord is good. His faithful love endures forever!' For I will restore the prosperity of this land to what it was in the past, says the Lord.***

I think of people that I have served as pastor who have walked through moments of exile. I think of the despair of a family who lost a child and the loss they will always carry with them, but I see them laugh today. I see the joy that does return in glimpses. I think of the man who lost his job and filed for bankruptcy several years ago. He now has a new beginning and it's not quite like the old job or the old way of life, but in a new start he found joy again and feels like he has a future with hope.

What happens for us in the midst of an exile is that we start to feel like it is always going to be that way. There is a word we use for what happens when our heart begins to believe that we will always be in exile and that life will always be as bad as it is now. We call that depression.

I preached in the past on the text for today, Jeremiah 29:11, in a sermon that I did on depression. I encourage you to take that verse and to memorize it and carry it with you, to always remember it by praying it to yourself. Remember that God has plans for you that are filled with hope. God can see what the future holds and whatever you are going through now is not going to be the last word in your life so put your trust in God.

I met with someone recently who is going through divorce and who lost his job and who also was diagnosed with an illness that needs medical treatment. He told me they were feeling utterly hopeless so I gave him this verse and I told him to write it down to carry it with them. He sent me an e-mail two weeks ago telling me how much he needed that verse and how grateful he was that God would not forget him. He told me that every day he begins by reading this text to remind himself that God has a future filled with hope and a plan for him and as long as he remembers that he can get through each day. He even found himself laughing recently at one of his misfortunes.

That is what the prophet Jeremiah offers us. Let's take one more look at the history of the Jewish people and what happens next.

#### **SLIDE      539 BC Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon**

In 539 BC Cyrus was King of Persia. He takes his army to march against Babylon and the city is surrounded by giant walls. It is built on top of the Euphrates River. They had an iron gate which went down into the river. By night, the Persians redirected the river flow and they came underneath the city of Babylon. The next morning they took the city of Babylon without having to hardly



fight because they took them by surprise. Cyrus became king of the Persian Empire which conquered the Babylonian Empire in a day.

### **SLIDE      538 BC the Jewish people return to Jerusalem**

In 538 BC Cyrus issued an edict which you can find in Persian history, not just in the Bible, that allowed all the Jewish people to return to their homeland. He also gave them money to rebuild their Temple and their city in Jerusalem.

What was humanly impossible for the Jewish people, God did through the forces of history. The people returned to Jerusalem with singing, knowing that joy was coming.

It may not be tomorrow. It may not be a week from now or even a month from now, but there is always hope. God has not abandoned you and when you return to him he has a future filled with hope and a plan for you. This is what Jeremiah was reminding people about, to say that there is always hope.

"I've seen you returning to the Promised Land. I will get there with you but one day you will win so don't give up. Keep fighting and keep pressing on, because the day will come when you return to Jerusalem with singing. Your exile will end."

This is mother's day weekend and as I was preparing this sermon and thinking about Jeremiah's word of hope I couldn't help but think about the three women who were held captive in Ohio for 10 years and the literal exile they were in, one of them even having a child and becoming a mother during those 10 years. Several of the mothers and grandmothers of the young women held captive talked about the hopelessness they felt.

Fern Gentry is the grandmother of Amanda Berry, the woman who gave birth while held hostage. Her daughter, Amanda's mother, died while Amanda was missing. In an interview this week Fern said, ***"I think we all pretty well died of a broken heart though, really. When your granddaughter's missing that long, there's no rest for you. It's just something you carry with you. We just had to hold out hope that something would happen. It's over now."***

She went on to say, ***"When we talked on the phone, we were crying, happy, (saying) we love each other and just thankful that she got away and all the good stuff. She told me about the little girl, and I asked if it was hers, and she said yes it was. She said she was holding out hope for her little girl and***

***holding on so she could see better days. So we've got another one in the family. So we've got two now. We have hope again"***

That is the message of the prophet Jeremiah. Hope is coming so hold on.

Would you pray with me?

**SLIDE      Prayer**

While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I would like to invite you to simply turn to God and put your trust in God. You might simply say, "God, you know what I need from you. I need your help. I want to know you're with me. Lord, I trust you with my life and I choose to follow you."

In whatever words you need to use, would you take this time in prayer to put your trust in God and ask for the hope that God offers...

If you are in exile right now, you might simply say, "God, you know the exile that I am experiencing. Help me to know that you have a plan for me. A plan with a future and hope..."

*God, there are people sitting in this room today who were in the midst of an exile. Some of them are self-imposed because of their own actions and they long to turn back to you today. Some are in exile because of the actions of others, even though they were seeking to do your will. God give them a message of hope. In their hearts open to know that you walk with them, that you see beyond the exile. Help them to feel your arms surrounding them, holding them.*

*Lord, for the rest of us who one day will be walking through exile, and exile we can even imagine today, help us to walk with you each day, now and through any exile become, trusting that in the end there is always hope. Thank you that you are the God who redeems and saves us. In Your Holy name we pray. Amen.*

# “Hope for the Hopeless”

## Theme: Faith for Tough Times- The Message of the Prophet Jeremiah

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1, 11-14

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon;

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### Meditation Moments

**MONDAY, May 13** – Read Jeremiah 38:14-18, 52:3b-11, 27b– King Zedekiah asked, “Jeremiah, what’s your message for me?” As always, Jeremiah spoke plainly: “If you surrender to the King of Babylon, you and your family will live; the city will not be burned.” As always, the king listened but did not hear. So the historian wrote, “Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.” He (and many others) paid dearly for his rebellion.

- Imagine that you are King Zedekiah. Jeremiah has said the only safe course is to submit to the King of Babylon, to be a loyal, tribute-paying vassal. What inner and outer forces would make you want to ignore Jeremiah, and seek a pact with Egypt to throw off Babylon’s rule? Do similar forces ever make it harder for you to obey God in day-to-day life?
- “Judah went into captivity, away from her land.” Zedekiah’s weak leadership had dire results, not just for him, but for his entire nation. How well are you serving those who depend on you in your family, your church, your workplace or other settings?

**TUESDAY, May 14** – Read Jeremiah 29:4-14 – God never gives up and neither did Jeremiah. Before the final conquest of Jerusalem, he wrote a letter to the Hebrews who had already been taken to Babylon. There was no false comfort in his words as he told them they should settle down and prepare for a long period of exile. But there was a future—not just in Jerusalem, but in God’s love, if only they would seek God with all their hearts.

- Through Jeremiah, God told the Israelites he had “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” But the message began, “When seventy years are completed.” Could anything that lay seventy years ahead be a source of hope for you? What makes patience and trust essential as you walk with God?
- In a sense, Jeremiah’s message of judgment and hope was summed up in Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” How do you understand the meaning

of seeking God “with all your heart”? What in your life has driven you to seek God with all your heart, and what steps helped you do that?

**WEDNESDAY, May 15 – Read Jeremiah 14: 7-9** – In the middle of this chapter about drought, famine and sword, there is an appeal to God by the people who are looking for hope. On what basis do the people of God hope God will rescue them? What do you think was the most effective part of their appeal?

- When have you cried out to God as a source of hope? Were you comforted in crying out to God? How was your prayer answered (or not)? We are encouraged by God to bring our troubles to him in prayer. Do you find that helpful?
- We have often talked at FUMC about the reality that the most common way that God answers prayer is through people. Can you look back on your life and see where a person has been an answer to your prayer? Is there someone (or some cause) in your life that God might be calling you to serve and in a sense become an answer to their prayer? End your time today in prayer, asking God to help you see how you might bring “hope to the hopeless.”

**THURSDAY, May 16 – Read Jeremiah 52: 1-30 (we’ll focus on this last chapter for the final three days of our study)** – Notice that chapter 52 is a postscript added onto the words of Jeremiah (see the last line of chapter 51.) This chapter is in essence a retelling of Jeremiah 39 with more detail included.

- Why do you think someone added this postscript? What does it add to the story from chapter 39? What family ties, political forces and spiritual influences seemed to have motivated Zedekiah to rebel against the king of Babylon? What is the net effect of Zedekiah’s revolt on the poor? What was the ultimate reason for this disaster which fell upon Jerusalem?
- What lessons are brought to mind by this postscript or second reading about the fall of Jerusalem? Who is the “Jeremiah” in your life who warns you when you’ve made a wrong turn or bad decision? Are you trying to tune them out (and God) in any way right now? How can you prepare yourself to listen to the prophetic voices seeking to speak into your life?

**FRIDAY, May 17** – Look over the reading from yesterday again. Chapter 52 talks extensively about the “wrath of God” which sometimes makes people uncomfortable. Remember from two weeks ago that we talked about how the people of Jeremiah’s day understood God in the metaphors they used regularly and for them God was not only merciful but also just and they saw God as having warrior like qualities as well. We also recognized that sometimes we get angry when we see or experience an injustice and that God most likely gets angry as well.

- Have you been particularly affected by any books or movies regarding war? Have you read or seen any more than once, and if so, why? Have you personally witnessed the horrors of war or assassinations? If so, how did you react at the time?
- What is your gut reaction to the “wrath of God” revealed in this passage? Does it make you yearn for a happier ending? Or do you feel satisfied that the punishment fit the crime? If you could play God for the day, how would you distribute justice to someone like Zedekiah and his family? (Thinking of it in this way should make us thankful that we are not God!) You might end your time today in prayer for those who have experienced war or violence and ask God to be present in those places where there is conflict going on.

**SATURDAY, May 18** – Read **Jeremiah 52:31-34** – In the final verses of Jeremiah’s book we find an interesting conclusion. Most of Jeremiah deals with God’s judgment upon Israel and Judah. Are you surprised by the way the book ends? Why or why not? Why do you think this happier note of Jehoiachin’s elevation follows the previous passage about Hezekiah’s rebellion and imprisonment? What is the significance of eating at the king’s table? What does this say about how God rewards faithful people, even those who have to wait 37 years for answered prayer?

- When have you had to wait for a long time for an answer to prayer? What did you feel about God while you waited? How did you recognize the answer when it finally came?

**Family Activity:** If you could award honors or medals to other members of your family or group, what would you give them and why? Plan a family meal where you can give each person a “medal”. You might actually make some medals and color them and give them out. Say a prayer giving thanks to God to each person by name, recognizing the gift they bring and that you gave them a medal for. Close your prayer by thanking God for being invited to the “King’s table”.