

Jeremiah prophesied to a people occupied, a people dispersed, a people subjected. The southern kingdom of Judah and its people was at the mercy of empires and rulers that saw the land, its people, its wealth, as a means for its own power and prosperity; prosperity that came at the expense of others.

When Jeremiah preached, Judah had become a vassal state of the mighty Babylonian empire. A puppet king was set up to serve the interests of the empire, tributes and taxes were collected for the empire, and loyalty and allegiance belonged to Babylon and its gods.

Judah tried to revolt three times against this mighty empire. With each revolt, Babylon invaded, and with each invasion Judah's leading citizens and the members of its upper classes were deported to Babylon. It was during their second revolt which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 587 bce.

These are the circumstances under which Jeremiah's life spans and into which he prophesies and preaches. And so the book of Jeremiah is about catastrophe and survival. It's about destruction and rebuilding. It's about grief and joy.¹

The passage we heard Shelby read for us this morning are Jeremiah's words of hope - the hope of return. Though it had not happened in his lifetime, Jeremiah envisions a time when God will accomplish a future for Judah and Israel. Through his perspective and his words, the prophet was trying to help people make sense of their tragedy, to recover their identity as God's own children, and move them toward the future. His vision saw the remnant of those in exile returning and entering into a new covenant by faithfully following God's law. That law would now be written not just on stone or parchment, but on the human heart.

¹ Women's Bible Commentary, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 178

Jeremiah saw Babylon and its oppressive empire as God's instrument because he believed the people had turned away from covenant; they had turned away from their relationship with Yahweh forged through escape and freedom from another empire, Egypt, and they had turned away from relationship formed in the wilderness years, their instruction, law, received as gift on Sinai by Moses. They had forgotten what it meant to live as a liberated people and he prophesied catastrophe.

Just a day after his 15th birthday, Marcus Bullock stood in a courtroom and heard the judge hand out a sentence for what he calls "the worst mistake of his life" - an armed carjacking.² For that crime, Marcus would spend the next eight years of his life in an adult maximum security cell, 6 foot by 9, with a three inch window to the world outside.

For the first two years he was in prison, still a teenager, Marcus believed he would get out. That the whole sentence was a mistake; that the judge would reverse his sentencing. He thought he would get out and go to prom with his friends. But then, suddenly, two years in, he realized that his dreams about getting out weren't going to happen. Marcus become depressed and hopeless. Instead of seeing himself getting out and living his life, he could suddenly see himself dying in prison or that his release date would be pushed later as he was pulled further into prison life. Marcus believed he was destined for a horrible life.

That's when his mom, Sylvia, became his life-line. She heard and saw the change in him. She knew her son was giving up. That's when Sylvia made Marcus a promise: for the remaining six years of his sentence she would write him a letter or send him a picture every single day. She told him she would show him his life after prison by helping him see the world through her eyes.

His mother kept her promise. Every single day for six years, she sent him a letter or a photograph. Even though she could not wrap her arms around

² Listen to CBC Radio, Tapestry, Posted December 11, 2020 for full story

her son, she swore he would feel her energy and her love. Sylvia wrote her son about what was happening at church, at her job, she shared year book photos of his friends, took pictures of what new recipe she had cooked for dinner, informed him that people had invented car seat heaters, about her frustration over getting a new washer and dryer. Daily stuff. And through that daily stuff, she kept the connection to world outside alive. She kept their relationship alive. Her promise, and her daily walk with her son through the remaining years of his prison sentence, gave what Marcus said was the “permission to see the future that was ahead of him.” It was a future she ensured with her faithful love.

Jeremiah’s words today recall the promise made by God to Israel: that God will be their God and they shall be God’s own people. Reminding them of their freedom from Egypt and empire, Jeremiah offers words of hope for a future, offering up to his people what his eyes see - that the people who found grace in the wilderness, will return to their land. That the people whom God has chosen and loved with an everlasting love, will be rescued. Then the direction of north will no longer bring cruel and terrifying armies, but will instead see a procession of exiles, the weak and vulnerable coming home. This remnant, including mothers pregnant with new life, shall come home. God, as their father, says Jeremiah, has taken them from hands too strong for them.

Through the prophet’s eyes, the people can see a future when God will set the captives free. Through the prophet’s perspective, the relationship remains intact. God has not abandoned them. And there is a future. A future characterized not by empire, but by abundant sharing of the land by all, a future marked with justice, harmony and peace.

That promise remains. We see and know it in the face of Jesus. This baby born in Bethlehem unveils for us this same God who offers grace in our wildernesses, who continues with us in faithfulness, and who offers us a future. This God who we can see in Jesus, God’s word revealed in flesh.

As we look forward and lean into a new year, we lean into this gracious, faithful God. Seeing God revealed in Jesus, we trust there is a future. As Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr puts it, “it’s important to remember that God keeps transforming creation into something both good and new. Instead of hurtling us toward catastrophe, God always wants to bring us somewhere even better.”

We certainly know what it feels like to hurtle toward catastrophe. Both from our individual lives and experiences, and from our collective, even global experiences. The people to whom Jeremiah prophesied, those in exile, certainly knew what that felt like. Marcus Bullock and his mother, Sylvia, certainly knew it as well.

However, as we begin this new year we can trust the trajectory that God has promised a future that is good, where mourning will be turned to joy. In faithful love, in the riches of grace, we have been given a son who has shown his father’s heart: God amazingly with us and God resolutely for us.

Amen.