

Texts: Jeremiah 29:1,4-14; John 14:25-27

Subject: Letter to Exiles

Theme: Wishful Thinking

First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every Sunday after we get home from church and have lunch, our family sits around the table to plan our week. With school and work, TaeKwon Do, confirmation class, and now more events and holiday stuff on the calendar, we have to know what is happening, where we are going, and who's doing what. We make a plan. Otherwise, things get hectic, we make choices for convenience, and we get more stressed out than we need to be. It's also just a good practice for us all to communicate our needs and make requests. I am thankful that I have such an organized partner that teaches us this practice. Each one of our kids has a calendar, (on paper!) and we write down everything we need to know for the coming week. Probably today, we'll be planning the month, with holiday parties and birthdays, shopping outings, and meals. but we know the week doesn't always go according to plan. Things get changed on the fly - if someone is not feeling well, or an event gets cancelled or added, we have to learn to go with the flow. There are a lot of moving parts and surprises are inevitable. Usually, it's me that screws it up. I forget to add something to the calendar, or fail to bring up an event that may or may not happen, forget an evening zoom meeting - there are so many - and I cause the occasional organizational catastrophe. My plans are never perfect.

Maybe you've heard that saying: it goes something like, "We make plans, and God laughs." I've found that to be mostly true in my life. Our plans are so often about what we want to do, where we want to go, what we want to acquire. God's plans are bit

different, maybe not as comfortable as we would like, and apart from the cross of Christ, perhaps unknowable.

The prophet Jeremiah was writing during the time of the beginning of the great exile to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the Egyptians and taken control of Judah after the fall of the Assyrians. The King and other noble elites were taken away first. Not their plan. Later the temple would be destroyed and the more taken away from their homes to foreign land. No way they could have planned for that.

So many of us love this promise of God's plans in verse 11, but we maybe miss the context in verse 10: "Thus says the Lord: (now you know it's serious) Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back " It's going to take a while. It's not going to look like they had hoped. Can our plans be any more than just wishful thinking?

As Americans we are often shielded from so much of the suffering in the world, we rarely worry about being conquered, or about the kind of warfare that still plagues the land of Jesus' birth, and the neighboring nations. Many if not most of us who have lived through times of war or tragedy or disease, can say that our lives were not derailed by these things. There are exceptions - people who fled New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina can mark that as a turning point in their story. We know our nation is not the same as it was before 9/11. And veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will forever be changed by their service to their nation. As we hear about 'the great resignation' and massive changes in our economy, maybe we'll find out how struggling through a global pandemic has changed our plans for the future.

Again, it's going to take a while. That's okay. We can wait.

This week, we begin the season of Advent, traditionally, the season we come together, not just to eat and celebrate, but to wait and share our longings for our future. Advent is about waiting, watching, listening to hear the story of the savior coming into the world. We watch for Jesus' arrival once again, especially as we hold space for our neighbors who have suffered so much this year. We make lots of plans, but this season is about *God's plan for the world* coming to pass, God's great plan for us *is* the gift of Jesus, our savior.

Jeremiah gave an unpopular message at a difficult time in Israel's history. Some wanted to fight their captors, resist and rebel against Babylonian authority. There were other prophets who advocated for this track. To plan to overthrow the Babylonians would have been to sign their own death warrant. Jeremiah said something else. *Stay, live, pray, persevere - wait on the Lord to act.* Central to staying true to their faith was surviving in captivity, passing on traditions to the next generations, holding closely to God's Word in the Torah. For Israel to remain, they must trust in God's plans, over their own desires and instincts. They had to have hope.

What is hope? Researchers at Arizona State University have studied this.¹ We can cultivate hope and learn it. Hope is different than wishful thinking or blind optimism. Hope comes from setting a goal and working toward it in small steps. When we know what steps to take, we can be hopeful that as each one is accomplished we're moving toward a goal. The next part is checking in with ourselves to see how we are feeling about the steps we are taking. If we do not have energy or enthusiasm about the direction we're taking it will be harder to have hope. Cultural context matters. Different

¹ *The Science of Hope: More than Wishful Thinking*, accessed 11/26/21 at <https://research.asu.edu/science-hope-more-wishful-thinking>

factors in our culture affect our outlook on life and can make us more hopeless. They studied hope among youth who had escaped war in Columbia. They were generally less hopeful about the future. Systemic oppression, violence, racism - things that seem out of our control can eat away at our hope. They learned that hope takes time and practice, and when setbacks occur to reevaluate goals and needs. And that we can foster a culture of hope, when communities support and uplift each other.

Hope is not something we're born with. It's something we can grow in ourselves, in our families, and in our community. Our mission here is to share the heart of Christ in the heart of the city. Together, as a community of faith, we have called that our goal. it's what we're about. To not only speak about Jesus, but to share the heart of Christ. We do that in so many ways, and it has given me hope to see how this church comes together when there is a need, when a family can use some help, when children find a safe place, where neighbors get fed, where people know they are loved and welcome and supported. We are *Living Hope* here every day.

The message of the prophet gave light in the darkness to those who had been shackled and sent away to live in a place that was not their home: Trust that God is good, even when you are far from the temple, even when you don't know what's going to happen next. And he gives them concrete action steps: *Build homes, plant gardens, create families*. This is more than just wishful thinking - He encouraged the people to hope.

We might say the same today: remember who you are. No matter what troubles may come, God's love for you is real, and lasting, and near. Our hope is not in consumerism, or elected officials, buildings or institutions. We hope in the power of

resurrection, the goodness of our Creator, and the lasting love of the Holy Spirit given to us. We are God's beloved, and we know that God's plan for us is good, that we prosper because of the love of Jesus in our lives, and we are called to share that with one another, to support and sustain one another in faith, and to invite others in to know that hope that we have that cannot be dissolved by our tears, or the suffering we face.

We might not be in exile, but we know our world is in distress. Our relationships may be strained, political differences divide us, just when we think the pandemic situation is improving, it seems to worsen and the future can be bleak. But we are here. This is where we find ourselves, and we can stick our heads in the sand, smile and act like we're okay, or we can stand up and praise Jesus, and speak life into the world again. This season is another opportunity to take the small steps that make a difference in the lives of our neighbors, and I love the turkey and the presents and the lights and the music, but this season and this good news we share is not about our plans, but about God's plan for the whole world. Every single one is loved and forgiven and welcomed and renewed through the cross of Christ, who took every failure and fear to the cross and made us one in Him. We are the body of Christ in the world and we have something to share: God is love. Jesus frees us. The Spirit sends us. This is so much more than wishful thinking - this is our *hope*, this is our truth, this is the Advent of our Lord.

Amen.