



The Most Fascinating People: Jeremiah

TEXT
Jeremiah 29:1–14

August 16, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

I think I've only met a few prophets in my lifetime. One of them lives in Chicago. Earlier this year, I was visiting the Windy City with some friends. We went to the Bean, walked the Magnificent Mile, ate good food and caught up with one another's lives. Our last day together, we decided to worship where another friend, Shannon, is the pastor. As the service began, a woman on the row behind us began rocking back and forth and arguing under her breath with everything the worship leaders said. I confess to being more than a little frustrated. I was there to worship, and she was interfering.

The opening hymn was *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*. It's a beautiful hymn. *There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.* It's a beautiful hymn, which was why my frustration only grew as this woman instead chanted, over and over again, "There's a *wilderness* within God's mercy." She went on to mumble that phrase for the rest of the worship service, taking us clear through the confession, assurance, scripture,

sermon, offering, benediction and postlude. "There's a *wilderness* within God's mercy."

Later that day at brunch, one of my friends said, "At first, I kept wanting to turn around and say to her, 'That's not even how the hymn goes!' But then," she said, "I realized that's not how the hymn goes, but that's almost always how life goes."

Was the woman really a prophet?

Now Jeremiah? Jeremiah was a prophet. And anytime we talk about prophets, there's an important clarification to make. Earlier this summer, Tom Are preached beautifully about the prophet Amos, and he reminded us what a prophet's gift really is. "We have assumed," he said, "and in many cases we have been taught, that the gift the prophets had was a gift to know the future. That's not right. The prophets were not gifted with the ability to see the *future*. They were gifted with the ability to see the *present*. That sounds somewhat silly," he went on to say, "being able to see the present. But it's not as easy as it sounds. To know what is really going on in the present is more difficult than we might imagine. The prophets saw the

present differently than others; and because they saw the present differently, they often anticipated a different future than the rest, as well."¹

Jeremiah was a prophet, but he was a little bit reluctant. I can't blame him — prophets aren't very popular. He didn't go out seeking the job. The job came to him. He tried to exchange this gift for one he liked better. But God wasn't interested in negotiating. That left Jeremiah with no choice but to reach for an excuse. "I'm just a kid," he says to God. "I'm too young to do what you ask." And God says right back, "Don't ever say that again."

The truth is, any of us of any age would have been overwhelmed too. Jeremiah lived and prophesied during the worst time in Israel's biblical history. You see, a foreign enemy nation — Babylon was its name, and Nebuchadnezzar was its king — came through with its army and burned down the temple. They destroyed the holy house of God. They left Jerusalem in ruins, and they deported the people. They took them away from their homes and put them into exile.

Jeremiah is the one tasked with interpreting all this to his

exiled people. And he uses brutal words for the next 26 solid chapters. It is rough going. It is not a feel-good book. In response to all of that, there were some others who rushed in with platitudes and clichés. There were others who were maybe a little tired of Jeremiah's doom and gloom. There were some others who said it would *all* get better *real* soon.

The prophet Hananiah was one of those. We should maybe call him a false prophet. He shows up in the chapter before our reading today. And he says to these exiles who are hurting and homesick: "Don't worry! The bad days are almost all behind you! The Lord will bring you back within two years," he promises. "No sweat."

But Jeremiah, the one God appointed, will have none of it. "No," he says. "It won't be like that at all." It's a word we don't expect to hear from the Bible very often: "No, the good news you want is not coming. Hananiah," he says, "is full of lies."

It may seem wrong to squash good news like he does; but honestly, I'm immensely grateful for Jeremiah's holy "no" in this moment — because there are times when that is just the ugly, horrible truth. There are times when life falls apart; times when everything is worse than you ever imagined possible.

Have you ever had a moment like that? I suspect you have. Actually, I know many of you have. I have, too. And in those moments, sometimes

the last thing I want to hear is someone telling me, "It's going to be OK." Because you know what? Sometimes it won't be.

Jeremiah may have been a reluctant prophet, but even more importantly, he was a realistic prophet. He knew what we know: that the ground shakes; marriages end; cancer appears; children get sick; wars rage; violence erupts; mental illness remains; finances collapse. That's what exile looks like: when you are thrust into the middle of an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place; when the darkness seems far too deep; when you would give anything for just a little bit of peace.

Jeremiah uses the word *exile*. My strange acquaintance in Chicago would use the word *wilderness*. The Bible uses both of those words, at different times. Whatever you want to call it, it's being stuck in a place when you'd rather be anywhere else. Whatever you want to call it, it feels downright terrifying.

In the face of that kind of experience — "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine, just you wait and see" — that kind of response is maddening. It rings a little bit hollow.

So Jeremiah speaks another brutal word. He tells the exiles: "You know what? It's gonna be awhile. We're in this for the long haul. Might as well settle on in."

"Really," Jeremiah says, "here's what you do: Get used to this place. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat from them. Find some-

one you love. Start a family. Look out for those around you. In the midst of this terrible mess, keep living — because we're gonna be here awhile." None of the things he asks his people to do are short-term tasks.

"Plant gardens," Jeremiah says. Gardeners are some of the most hopeful people I know. You plant a seed in the dirt and care for it, day after day, for quite some time, never seeing any evidence that anything is happening. Gardening is not for people who like instant gratification. Gardening is for people like the prophet Jeremiah and my friend Barbara.

Barbara was a member of my first church. She had had cancer for longer than I had known her. When I would go to visit her, she would ask me to wheel her out to her flower garden. She lived in an assisted living apartment, but she had her own patio and garden. One fall, she worked herself exhausted nearly every day planting bulbs. We both knew she was nearing the end of her life. We had gotten to know each other pretty well by then, so I said, "Barbara, what's it like to spend all your energy planting these bulbs, when it's possible you won't get to see them bloom?"

She patted my hand and said, "Oh, honey. You're right. I won't see these bulbs blossom. But someone else will move in here, and they are going to love their new garden."

Build and plant, Jeremiah says. The circumstances are

what they are, and they are not changing any time soon; but even still: build and plant.

It was awhile back now, probably almost 10 years ago, when Stephen Colbert spoke to a class of graduating seniors. We've spoken of this in worship before. This is what he said: *Say "yes." In fact, say "yes" as often as you can. When I was starting out in Chicago, doing improvisational theatre with Second City and other places, there was really only one rule I was taught about improv. That was, "yes-and." In this case, "yes-and" is a verb. To "yes-and." I yes-and, you yes-and, he, she or it yes-ands. Yes-anding means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what's going to happen, maybe with someone you've never met before. To build a scene, you have to accept. To build anything onstage, you have to accept what the other improviser initiates. They say you're doctors — you're doctors. And then you add to that. We're doctors and we're trapped in an ice cave. That's the "-and." And then hopefully they "yes-and" you back. ... You graduates are about to start the greatest improvisation of all. With no script. No idea what's going to happen, often with people and places you have never seen before. And you are not in control. So say "yes."*²

That is Jeremiah's advice to the exiles — to all of us. Yes-and it. And here's what's one of what is, to me, the most

profound things about yes-and: It doesn't ever take away any of the story that came before. Yes-anding our lives will never try and take away the painful parts that need to be acknowledged. But it will also never let those painful parts get the final word.

Yes, and let's build houses. Yes, and let's plant gardens.

If gardeners are some of the most hopeful people I know, then gardens are some of the most hopeful places I know. I think the same was true for Jeremiah. Surely he would have remembered another garden, at the beginning of scripture, in Genesis, where God shows us God's most remarkable, persistent skill: creation.

It was in the Garden of Eden that life as we know it came into being. It was there that God formed us out of the dust and breathed air into our lungs. There that God first loved us and named us. There that God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky. It was in the garden that God blessed all of creation.

And while this one wouldn't have been Jeremiah's story to tell, it is certainly ours: how it was in another garden that life emerged yet again. It was in that garden that hope sparked in the face of death on Easter morning. There that resurrection became real. There that the resurrected Christ is first mistaken to be, of course, the gardener himself.

Because it is in the garden that life comes to us.

The poet Christian Wiman does right in pointing toward

one more. Jesus, he reminds us, sat and wept in the Garden of Gethsemane, and said, "Not my will, Lord, but yours." And the way Wiman sees it, "This was in no way resignation, for Christ still had to act. We all have to act," he says, "whether it's against the fears of our daily life, or against the fear that life itself is in danger of being destroyed. And when we act in the will of God, we express hope in its purest and most powerful form, for hope is a condition of our soul, not a response to our circumstance. Hope is what Christ had in that garden, though he had no reason for it in terms of events, and hope is what he has right now, with us in the garden of our grief."³

Somehow, even if your garden is nothing less than Gethsemane right now; somehow, even if it surely seems like the most unlikely of places or moments, where nothing is OK, and we don't have to pretend it is — life still comes to us.

Build houses. Plant gardens, Jeremiah says. Along the way, you will find hope again.

I can't help but think of the woman who was, for me, something of a prophet in the heart of Chicago. "There's a wilderness within God's mercy." I think she and Jeremiah might have been good friends. To hear either of them tell it, life is one giant composite of beauty and brokenness, joy and despair, darkness and light, death and resurrection, all stitched together. To pretend otherwise is to deceive ourselves and others.

There are two ways to look at this. One is to say, there is wilderness everywhere. We cannot escape the exile. Even as people of God, that is our everyday reality. *There is a wilderness* within God's mercy. The other is to say, there is wilderness *within God's mercy* — that no matter how big the wilderness, God's mercy still encompasses it; that no matter how long the exile, God's mercy still outlasts it.

The truth is, we don't have to choose between the two. Because sometimes, all we can do is embrace that tension. And sometimes, that is exactly where God will find us — in the strange, complex, bewildering, blessed mess of living.

That realization, and the permission it affords us, may be the greatest gift Jeremiah gives us.

¹From Tom Are's sermon on June 14, 2015, at Village Presbyterian Church.

²Stephen Colbert at Knox College, http://deptorg.knox.edu/newsarchive/news_events/2006/x12547.html. With thanks to Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin for reminding me of this story.

³Christian Wiman in "My Bright Abyss."

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.