

The Race That Is Set Before Us

Jeremiah 29:4-11; Hebrews 12:1-2

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Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Jeremiah 29:4-11 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take 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. But 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. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For 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.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

I love these two scripture passages. I find them beautiful. They are both about how we are to live faithfully in difficult times.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel who are in exile. Jerusalem and Solomon's great temple have been destroyed by the Babylonian empire, and all the leaders of the nation – from the king right down to the artisans – are carted off to exile in Babylon by the victors. Those who remain in Judah are ruled by Babylonian deputies. The Promised Land, the land promised to the people by God's own voice, is no longer theirs. The temple where the Spirit of God resided has been destroyed. It is an excruciating loss. And in this wonderful passage, the prophet Jeremiah writes to the exiles, "Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters.... Multiply there, and do not decrease. 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.... For 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." In other words, bloom where you are planted. This is a difficult time in your life, a difficult time for the whole nation of Israel. Bloom anyway. Bloom right there in Babylon. God has plans for your future, a future with hope. For now, bloom where you are planted."

Our New Testament reading has a similar message. The author of Hebrews is writing to early Christian churches in crisis. They are subject to various forms of persecution. It is not safe to be Christian, and some are beginning to fall away from the faith. And so, the author reminds these Christians of all those in the history of Israel who have demonstrated faith in times of adversity, calling all of these ancestors of faith "witnesses" – witnesses to how we respond to the adversities in our own lives. And then, this beautiful exhortation: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...." Run the race that is set before us, this scripture proclaims. Others have lived in hard times, and they remained faithful. Jesus is our pioneer; he didn't shirk. No matter how difficult our path is, this scripture reminds us that all we have to do is keep putting one foot in front of the other in faith.

I chose these two passages today, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, as a context for this special day. You see, one year ago, we came together in the meadow for our first in-person worship since the pandemic lockdown. It was our first time to see one another in person in many months, and my first Sunday in our ministry together. Do you remember it? Everyone wore masks, of course, but we took them off for just a brief moment to wave at each other and smile. Early in the service a bug dropped from the tree limb above onto the back of my neck and

crawled down inside my robe and then inside my dress. Nancy played some lovely music for a few minutes while Dave and I ran into Gilpatric Hall to remove the offender. Then, as I was beginning my sermon, I heard some gasps and laughter as a red squirrel darted between the feet of the congregation and ran up the tree beside me. I learned later that she had sat on the limb above me through the rest of the service. Even in the midst of the pandemic, before vaccines were on the horizon, that service was a joy-filled way to return to one another and to worshipping God.

So, here we are a year later, and it is fitting to take a brief look back at the past year. I would say that we have done a really good job of blooming where we are planted, as Jeremiah advised. We managed to worship together safely, after months of being apart. We have figured out how to worship anywhere – in the meadow, on Zoom – and we learned again that however we worship, God will show up with us. We have stretched ourselves and learned some new things in this past year. We have increased our technical skills. We have learned patience. We have learned to care for one another even in difficult times. And we even made some progress on the area of our strategic plan that calls for improved communication and engaging worship with a mix of musical styles. This past year has been an awful one in many ways. It is not the desert we would ever want to find ourselves in. But we bloomed nevertheless, and I am grateful to God and to all of you that we came through this year so successfully.

But what of the year ahead? What is the race that is set before us? There are actually several goals from our strategic plan that we need to tackle this year, in order to continue to bloom. The most crucial goal for the life and health of this church is to build a vibrant Christian Education program for our kids. Like many churches, we were unable to offer a Christian Ed program in this past year. That is a whole year without hearing Bible stories. A year with no Sunday School songs. A year in which waking up on Sunday morning is no longer connected to going to church for our kids. It is a year we cannot get back. But in this coming year – no matter what happens with the pandemic – our top priority MUST be to build a Christian Ed program that our kids will want to come to. For this fall, we have a plan for a hybrid model – traditional Sunday School after the children’s sermon every Sunday morning, and then intergenerational stories and songs and activities on Sunday late afternoon once a month. We’ve got to step up for this. We made promises when we baptized these children. It is time to keep them. And we will need some volunteers. I have written about this in more detail in the August newsletter. Please prayerfully consider volunteering once a month this fall to make this happen. We need teachers and assistant teachers and activity leaders and song leaders and sandwich makers. We will not leave you alone in this. If we build a good enough program, we may be able to attract new families with kids to our church. For sure they WON’T come if we don’t offer a program for their kids. But we shouldn’t create a Christian Ed program for the purpose of attracting new families. We should do it for the children who are already here, because we promised to help them grow in the Christian faith. Michael deserves this. Jasmine deserves this. Emma deserves this. Eric deserves it. Let’s do it for them.

In the past year we have found ourselves unexpectedly in exile in a pandemic desert. It rocked our world. Like the people of Israel, living in Babylon, we hardly knew which way was up and for a while all we could think of was how to get back to the way things used to be. We still wish for that. Yet we managed to bloom even this past year. We deserve to congratulate ourselves for that, to give ourselves credit for finding this strength and building these new skills.

But here we still are. The pandemic has abated here, it seems, but there is no guarantee that it won’t return, even in rural New Hampshire. And so, we have to find a faithful way forward. But we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – those who built this church, the pastors and members who devoted themselves to this community of faith over the generations, and those so recently lost to us. They are watching how we run this race. Our children are witnesses, too. So, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. May they find us faithful.

Amen