



November 26, 2017

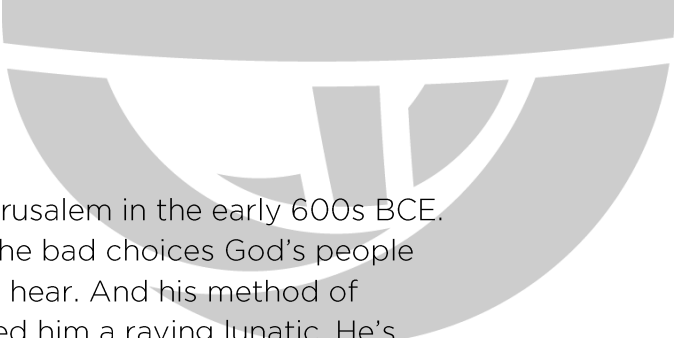
FINDING HOPE IN OUR FUTURE
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-14 NRSV

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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. ⁸For 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, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

¹⁰For 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. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Who would you rather have around you when times get tough: yes-men, or truth-tellers? This isn't as obvious a question as it sounds. Truth-tellers can seem relentlessly negative. They don't always make you feel good. They can definitely suck all the fun out of everything. Yes-men, on the other hand, are positive, encouraging, and 100% on your side. So again, I ask: If your life was falling apart, which would you choose?




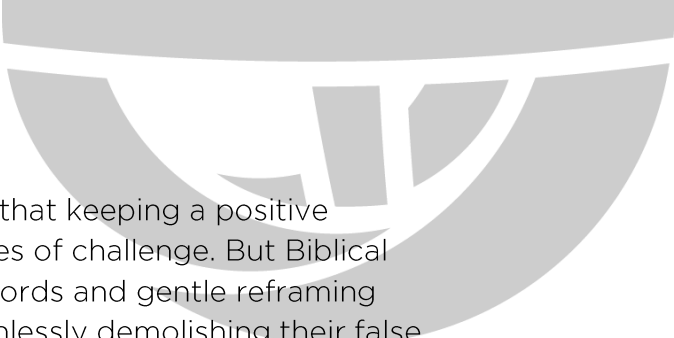
Jeremiah was a truth-teller. He was the prophet in Jerusalem in the early 600s BCE. Jeremiah had this annoying tendency to rant about the bad choices God's people were making. It certainly wasn't what they wanted to hear. And his method of delivery ... let's just say even his friends probably called him a raving lunatic. He's the root of the excellent vocabulary word *jeremiad*. (You can look it up after church.) Then again, Jeremiah probably felt as if he had little choice. His country was falling apart. No one seemed to be doing anything about it. And all around him he saw yes-men - false prophets like Hanniniah - telling people things were going to be just fine. Go figure why Jeremiah comes across as a little testy.

Part of being a truth-teller is helping others confront the brutal facts. This concept comes from business researcher Jim Collins in his excellent book *Good to Great*. Confronting the brutal facts means taking off your rose-colored glasses and taking a hard look at what's really happening right in front of you - no matter how painful it may be.

For Jeremiah, the brutal facts were that the people had brought this suffering on themselves. They worshipped false idols. They relied on their own strength instead of trusting the Lord. Yahweh was angry. More than a century earlier the Assyrians had vanquished the northern kingdom of Israel. The people were scattered; the cities, ruined. Now the Babylonians were laying siege to the southern kingdom of Judah. They looted and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, then took the political and religious elites into exile. Some prophets claimed the Babylonian conquest and exile would be a short-lived situation. But Jeremiah begged to differ. *You're not going anywhere*, Jeremiah declared. *This punishment is the result of your own unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Indeed, not one of you will get to come back home to Jerusalem.* This was a hard word. If the Jews were looking for hope, they weren't going to hear it from Jeremiah's lips - at least, not in ways we might expect.

You see, the funny thing about hope is that it has to be grounded in reality. If your eyes and ears and heart are telling you that you're on the wrong path, all the yes-men in the world won't do you a bit of good. That's why being a truth-teller also involves helping reframe one's perspective. There was a great example of this in the comics from last weekend's Post Bulletin. Peppermint Patty and Charlie Brown are watching a beauty contest on TV. Peppermint Patty is going on and on about how pretty and happy the winner looks. "For someone like me, this is really depressing," she says. "Say something to cheer me up, Chuck." "Well ..." Charlie Brown begins. Should he confront the brutal facts? As he struggles to find the right words, Snoopy walks in. He snaps off the TV and gives Peppermint Patty a kiss on the cheek. With one click, he's reframed her perspective.





Now don't get me wrong: There's certainly evidence that keeping a positive outlook can be incredibly important when facing times of challenge. But Biblical historian John Bright says that the prophet's harsh words and gentle reframing probably saved God's people from extinction. By ruthlessly demolishing their false hope, Bright writes, he drove the truly faithful to search their own hearts, to repent, and to recommit themselves to the Lord.

That's why, despite his rants and bad news, Jeremiah is often seen as one of the most hopeful prophets. He told the people to stop wishing and start doing. Yes, the future looked bleak. That's why they needed to make the most of their present. Build a life, he says. Plant crops. Get married. Have children. Be the best residents of Babylon you can be. Take each day as it comes and seek God in it.

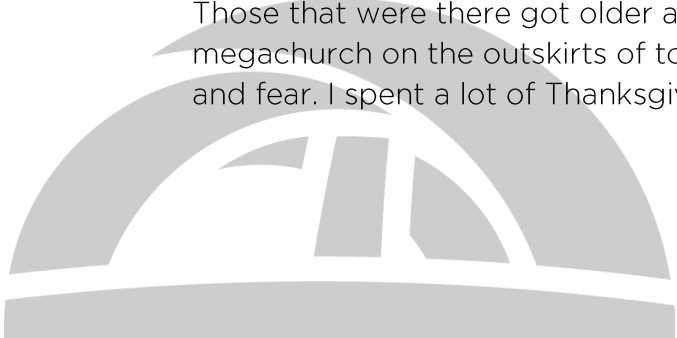
Finding hope in our future means resisting the urge to give up and go back to bed. Instead of letting the brutal facts defeat you, let them motivate you to dig deep, make adjustments, and persevere. A quote often attributed to Martin Luther captures this idea: "If I knew the world would end tomorrow," Luther is credited with saying, "I would still plant my apple tree today." Sometimes the most hopeful thing we can do is fully participate in the little acts of humanity that make up our lives: cook a good meal; hug a child; turn a stranger into a friend. They may seem like small things. But they acknowledge that God is still present in our world, and is still worth trusting.

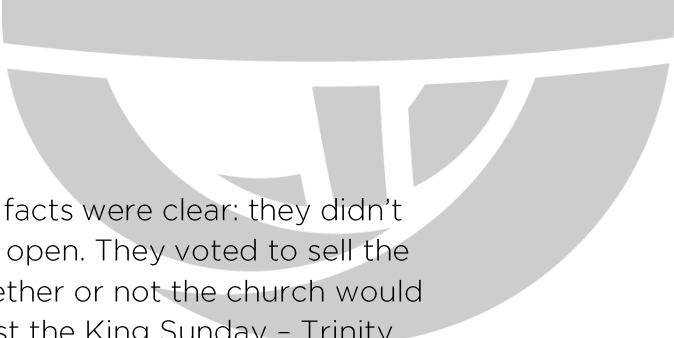
In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins wrote, confront the brutal facts was only half of the equation. The other half: yet never lose faith. Resist despair. Hold on. Things will get better.

Doesn't that sound a lot like Jeremiah? "'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord. 'Plans for your welfare and not harm, plans to give you a future with hope.'"

But here's the thing: the 'you' here is not singular, but plural. It's not a personal word. It's a corporate one. Does that change the way you hear this verse? It does for me. It's a reminder that God's plans are bigger than mine. Finding a way into the future has to involve others. We need the strength that comes from community, from people who can reframe our perspective and dry our tears and walk with us on the journey. Not as yes-men, but as fellow sojourners.

My Aunt Mitzi goes to Trinity Lutheran Church in Appleton, Wisconsin. For many years, Trinity was the flagship downtown church. But as the town changed, the church didn't. You know the narrative: Fewer and fewer people filled the pews. Those that were there got older and older. Most of the families left for the megachurch on the outskirts of town. The folks who were left were captive to grief and fear. I spent a lot of Thanksgiving dinners listening to Aunt Mitzi talk about how





bad things were, how sad she was. Finally, the brutal facts were clear: they didn't have enough money to keep the doors of the church open. They voted to sell the building and spend the following year discerning whether or not the church would continue to exist at all. One year ago today - on Christ the King Sunday - Trinity held their last worship service in the old sanctuary. It was, as you can imagine, a day of heavy hearts.

When I saw Aunt Mitzi at Thanksgiving dinner a few days ago, I asked for an update. She told me they've been worshipping in the chapel at a local funeral home. Seems fitting, right? But then she said something that surprised me: "I never thought I would say this," she said, "but I'm 84 years old, and I'm looking forward to going to church for the first time in years." What's different, I asked. "Well," she said, "in the old sanctuary everyone sat in their own usual pew, so there was a lot of space between them. Nobody liked to sing because you couldn't hear anyone but yourself. It was like we were surrounded by the ghosts of the past. Now, we're the same 100 people that we were before, but because it's a smaller space we're smushed up right next to each other. People are talking to each other right up until when the service starts. And everyone sticks around afterwards and keeps talking. Because we're in a new space we're trying some new things. We turned the old communion rail into a cross so we've got a piece of the old church with us and it doesn't feel like we're abandoning our past. I don't know what's going to happen with the church in the future. But for now at least it feels like we haven't given up on God. And God hasn't given up on us either."

Friends, if you're looking for hope for your future, find a truth-teller who can help reframe your perspective. Make the most of the tasks at hand so you can keep moving forward. Invest fully in a community that can be on the journey with you. And never give up on God. Because our search for gratitude begins and ends with the God who comforts us in our losses, who gives us meaning in our work, who makes us generous as we share what we have, and who gives us a future with hope. Amen.

