**After the Disaster: Week 2 – Cope**

**Preaching Notes for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Year C (October 9, 2016)**

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**[Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=283" \l "hebrew_reading)**

It is ironic to note that it is in the context of a terrible situation that Jeremiah the prophet spoke some of the most hope-filled, inspiring, comforting words in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. These words to which I refer are, in fact, not part of today’s lectionary reading (and indeed, they do not show up in the Revised Common Lectionary anywhere in the three-year cycle), but appear just a few lines after the reading for today comes to an end. These are words that many of us have committed to memory. We have them written on our hearts, if not on our greeting cards, candleholders, picture frames and other decorative items: “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” (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV).

So often when we say those words, we speak them as encouragement to others or to ourselves, or we pray them, or sing them. We don’t often think of them in the context in which they were originally written. When we remove them from their context, it is like looking at a diamond. And no diamond, no matter how beautiful and flawless, is at its best until it is placed in a proper setting. Let us then place these exquisite words in their proper setting, which is in fact, a letter from Jeremiah to the captives in Babylon, a portion of which we read today.

What Jeremiah prophesied has now come to pass. Jerusalem has fallen, and the Jews have been hauled off to Babylon. Their worst fears have become their reality. And so Jeremiah writes a letter to the elders being held by King Nebuchadnezzar. What does he advise?

They should not expect their time of captivity to be short. They will have to not only cope with their present situation, but also keep hope that one day it will get better, even as they wait patiently until that time. They need to prepare themselves to wait for more than a generation. As such, they will have to cope with being captives in a foreign land. They must be careful about to whom they listen and learn to sort out their friends and advocates from those who would do them more harm.

They are going to have to find a way to make a home, a place of comfort and sustenance, in this foreign land for themselves and their loved ones. They can’t wait until they return home to start living again. Instead, they are going to have to live fully with their “new normal”: fall in love, marry, have children and raise them. In fact, they need to have many children because raising a family under these circumstances will not be easy. Some of their children will not make it. If they do not multiply while in captivity, the tribes of Judah and Israel may cease to exist.

Finally, they are to wish goodness upon their captors and pray for them, because if their captors are satisfied, their lives in captivity will be better.

But the letter doesn’t end there. Jeremiah goes on to say that they shouldn’t listen to the naysayers and fear-mongers among them, even if they claim to speak in the name of the LORD. And then he delivers the most crippling news of all: it will be seventy years before the LORD will visit them and lead them back to the land of promise.

Seventy years. A lifetime.

What must they have thought? They couldn’t have been young, and the life expectancy was not what it is today. This means that most of them would, in reality, never return. It would be their children and grandchildren who would make it back. Those receiving Jeremiah’s letter would, in all likelihood, die in captivity.

How do you hang on when you are looking at such a life?

How do people sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole go on? How do people diagnosed with terminal illness go on? How do people living in the midst of natural disaster, war, poverty, or refugee status, and who are losing hope that their circumstances will ever change, go on? How do they live?

It is different for everyone. In some cases, hope for a future is not found in our own lives, but in the lives of our children and our children’s children. It is found in the seeds we plant, but that we may never see grow or harvest.

Recently, I listened to a two-episode podcast about Syrian refugees on *This American Life* radio show. (Listen to part one [here](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/592/are-we-there-yet) and part two [here](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/593/dont-have-to-live-like-a-refugee).) As I listened to story after story about the challenges these people faced, their prospects for the future, the frustratingly slow pace of finding assistance, and their methods for coping as individuals and as families, I was really struck by the amazing strength of the human spirit. The fact is, we CAN cope. Human beings are resilient. People endure and even manage to emerge victorious from some of the most traumatic and difficult circumstances.

One family coped by creating a kind of oasis inside their tent. There were adult sons who made a lengthy trip every day to a call center to try for eight hours to get through to an agent who would put their family on a list for relocation. And there was the story of one agent on the other end who handled all of the calls calls from the country of Greece. One woman, all day, every day, for eight hours. Others were struggling greatly with how to cope, but they were still trying. There was a mother who worried that her young son would never fully recover from the trauma he had experienced in a war zone. People fought. People spread rumors. But people also shared what little they had and gave money and food to those in greater need. People found a way to get on with life in this “new normal.” One story even told of love that had blossomed between two young people that eventually led to marriage.

How do we cope? By trusting in love. By clinging to love like a life raft in the midst of a terrible storm and by believing that no matter what happens, the power of love is always stronger than the power of hate.

For the chosen people, love comes from the very heart of the Lord God. It comes from the secure knowledge that the people of Israel and Judah are never alone in their struggles. Their God has not abandoned them. Even though they will not see God for many years, they can still call upon the Lord and pray. And they know that the Lord will hear them. When they search for the Lord, they will find the Lord. Even though terrible things have happened, they can find comfort in knowing they are the beloved children of a God who loves them. They can depend on that, always.

For Christians, the love of God came to us in the form of a human being. And that love that the world experienced personally is now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, physically present in the form of many human beings living as the body of Christ.

The good news that that we can hold on because we have a coping mechanism that we can count on. We have God’s love in the world, and God will never give up on us. Let us remember this by recalling the promises made by Paul in the letter to the Romans.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
    we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39, NRSV).