

January 15, 2017
Jeremiah 29:10-11

A Hopeful Future Requires a Hopeful Imagination

I ran into someone recently that I knew from high school and he started telling stories about this person and that person and “Remember when we went here?” And “Remember when this happened, or when that happened?” With each new story the excitement level grew bigger and bigger for him, but for me I couldn’t help thinking that was years ago which led me to think this friend was still living “BACK THEN” like he had never left that period of time. I even wondered, were those the best years of my friend’s life?

All of us know people like my friend, don’t we? But don’t get me wrong, a little reminiscing is wonderful, necessary, even healthy. Yet there is a huge difference between discovery, learning or reminiscing and being stuck. As wonderful, necessary and healthy as reminiscing can be, the destructive nature of a life stuck in the past is devastating. At its worst, being stuck in the past robs us of hope for our future. You might say it strips us of imagination. You see, if your sole focus is your past life and past experiences you never have to imagine what your future might look like. You never have to concern yourself with the places you will go, or the places to which God is calling you.

As Pastor Rob Bell says, “There is a certain kind of despair that sets in when we believe that things were better back then. When we’re stuck back there. When we’re not fully present. When we’re still holding on to how things were, our arms aren’t free to embrace today.”

God’s Hope-Filled Dreams *During Jeremiah’s Day*

It is precisely this mindset that Jeremiah was dealing with and like all biblical stories, Jeremiah 29:10-11 has a context, and like I have said before, it is very important and helpful to know the context. Knowing the scenario in which these words were spoken makes them and the promise even more powerful.

Jeremiah, as you might recall, was a prophet to the major historical crisis of the last days of God's people in Judah. Jeremiah's life and message coincided with the destruction of Jerusalem and the devastation of the temple in 587 BC. As theologian Walter Brueggemann, says, "this crisis – the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 587 – is the dominant and shaping event in the entire OT. It is precisely in here, after the worst catastrophe in the entire history of God's people: 1) the holy city has been reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians; 2) the people barely existing after a forced march into exile, feeling pretty sure God had abandoned them forever, where God's people are reminded of the promises of a hope-filled future. Precisely when they were unable, or unwilling to imagine a future of hope for themselves, Jeremiah is there with this powerful reminder.

[Jeremiah 29:11] "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." These words come at a time and in a context of extreme hopelessness. Some have said, if we want to know the good news of God, the gospel message, there is no better summary.

During Our Day

What about us today? Are we able to see ourselves in Jeremiah's audience? Don't we sometimes wonder if our government can function with any credibility and effectiveness. We might wonder what is happening with the decline of the mainline church: is faith still relevant? Is the desire to follow Christ still relevant? We might see changes and challenges in our lives that rob us of our hope. We might be totally perplexed and sad about what is happening in and around our small part of the world, or even the world at large. We might even have major doubts about what God is doing.

Yet when Jeremiah was writing all of this is happening – and more - at the same time: the city of Jerusalem – so long the treasure of God's care – has been sacked. The king – long the embodiment of God's leadership and care – has been overthrown. The people – in lasting covenant with God – had been carried away in exile. The future – seemingly once secure in God's hands – is absolutely uncertain and frightening as exile looms.

And it is precisely in this place where we hear about God's plans for our welfare and future full of hope.

MLK Jr. Celebration

Tomorrow is a very special day of remembrance and celebration as this is the day our country has set aside to remember and celebrate Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For me, tomorrow represents a first, as I have been invited to stand with other Triad area Clergy at 3 annual events commemorating and celebrating the life and legacy of this remarkable child of God. Not only am I honored to be a part of this diverse group of Clergy, I am honored to represent our Church within this diverse community. It is important to me and I hope it is for you that FBCJ be included and present in this way. In fact, I can think of no better way to live out God's plans of a future full of hope than by participating in events that remember, honor and celebrate the life of someone who himself hoped for and dreamed about a future in which **justice for all of God's children became a reality!**

While tomorrow's celebration is about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., other names come to my mind too. Names like, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa. All of these people imagined a future reality through **HOPE FILLED** eyes. And whether or not you subscribe to the transformative power of **HOPE**, there is no doubt **HOPE** dominated the way in which these particular world changers saw the future for all of God's children, and it seems to me, at least, that their hopeful imagination became the driving force toward monumental change. Each, in their own way, dreamed of a world in which all people were treated fairly and respectfully. Where everyone knew the identity of their neighbor, because their neighbor was everyone else. How else can we explain why these people made the decision to pursue the radical change they did. These world changers imagined a hopeful future, not only for themselves, but for everyone. There is no doubt that their **HOPEFUL IMAGINATION** was their reason for continuing their journey.

You and I may not have their particular battle to fight, but we should always seek to discover who we are and who God is calling us to be. The journey, whether for an individual or an organization, is always about discovery of true self. This is one reason the journey forward becomes so difficult, and makes us believe it is just easier to walk the path of others, or stay stuck in the past.

What Life Has been Like for Me the past couple of weeks

- Sleepless
- Mind in overdrive about our church and the hopes and dreams I see when I close my eyes and I want to share some of that with you.

When I close my eyes:

- I see our parking lot buzzing with activity, not just on Sunday from 10 to 11, but everyday.
- I see people all about taking part in, and being a part of our lively growing community.
- I see the footprint of FBCJ expanding far beyond the corner of Forestdale Drive and Guilford Road in Jamestown
- I see a community that understands just what it means to love your neighbor and care for the widow, the orphan and the least of these. This community I see is different though because they are actually willing to pursue it, and willing to be transformed in the process.
- I see a community passionate about loving people, not shaming them.
- I see a community opening itself up fully so that God's plans, you know the plans for our welfare, not harm and the plans for a future filled with hope, become the communities plans for itself.

- I see a community that takes seriously the call to be the hands and feet of Christ because this community understands that it was FIRST created in the image of God. And even though each of every member of this community falls, it is ok because the other members are always there beside, behind or in front to catch them as they fall.
- I see a community that lives into its Hope-Filled Future because as Theologian N.T. Wright says, “Hope is about what lies ahead and is promised by a God who loves to bring hope to each one of us. It is also about the kingdom of God breaking into our present-day realities and hope spilling into the world today. These two ideas and realities are bound together and can’t be separated, as hard as some might try.”
- I see a community that has become the **DISPENSERS OF GRACE** that this world needs and as a result lives are being transformed.

Friends these are the images I have been seeing for the past couple of weeks each and every time I close my eyes and think about God’s hope-filled plans for FBCJ’s future.

These have been my dreams for the past couple of weeks and it seems these dreams have two things in common. They are all Jesus kind of dreams...and they all serve to create an environment where people can find hope and meaning and purpose for their lives. But that is not just in our projects or our buildings...it needs to be in each one of us.

This future is not just mine, it is our together. So what do you see because you can rest assured **IF YOU BELIEVE THAT FBCJ’S BEST DAYS ARE IN YOUR PAST, THEY ARE. BUT IF YOU BELIEVE OUR BEST DAYS ARE AHEAD OF YOU, THAT IS POSSIBLE IF WE ARE FULLY OPEN TO GOD’S VISION FOR US. IF WE ARE WE WILL LIVE INTO OUR FUTURE WITH BOTH HOPE AND IMAGINATION.**

My father-in-law once shared with me that the most important thing God will ever tell you is the next thing. Like he did as Senior Pastor of FBC Wilmington, I wonder and pray a lot about what the next thing is for us at FBCJ.

With both hope and imagination, my prayer is that we will all be faithful in our church and in our own lives to God's call ...to the next thing...because it...whatever it may be...is the most important thing God has for us to do.

In Jesus' name...Amen.