**FROM LAMENT TO HOPE: MOVING INTO THE PROMISE**

**Jeremiah 29:1-2, 4-11**

**July 3, 2022**

**Towson Presbyterian Church**

 Welcome to the 4th of July holiday weekend. Those of us sitting in the sanctuary can be very grateful that, among other blessings, we are not trying to fly somewhere right now. That is probably true for those of you who are present with us virtually though, on the off chance you are connecting from an airport our thoughts and prayers are with you, the pilots, flight attendants air traffic controllers and everyone else working diligently to make your trip possible and hopefully on time. We have arrived at this weekend after more than two years of pandemic disruption and it is understandable that the systems are experiencing some bugs as they ramp up at warp speed. But it means that we’re returning to something that feels like normal in quite a few dimensions of our lives while we learn to live in some new ways in others which, let’s face it, is sort of the rhythm of life.

 Despite all the reasons to celebrate this weekend I think we also would all agree that there remains an unsettledness…an anxiety that can keep us up at night despite the Benadryl we take to settle our too active minds. Part of it is just the sheer speed of the changes that are impacting our lives daily. Wasn’t there a simpler time? Was it better? Nostalgia is a powerful force in the unsettled “now” of our lives. But there is so much more about this moment: the polarization, the disregard for truth, the lack of civility, so much that seems to be steadily and persistently eroding the fabric of the larger community. That is on top of the profound losses that each of us knows on a personal level. And human induced climate change is making everything hotter and harder. Grief and loss are part of what it means to be human but when the foundations around us feel shaky, it puts us where we left off last Sunday with the poet of Lamentations letting forth that existential wail of unbearable loss. But then, as we heard at the end, tentatively at first, the poet affirms amid the chaos: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, Gods mercies never come to an end; They are new every morning; Great is God’s faithfulness.”

This is the great underlying truth to which all of Scripture bears witness along with people of faith throughout history who have testified to God’s faithfulness with their lives.

The hope at the end of Lamentations seems tender, fragile…. not unlike the hope Emily Dickenson famously describe as “the thing with feathers that perches in the soul…” a little bird standing firmly and defiantly in the face of the storm. But the awareness that God IS with us is the foundation of a hope that is real and transformative and is in fact, our superpower.

 Today’s reading from Jeremiah is addressed to the same people living in the same moment in time as the poet of Lamentations addressed. Jeremiah writes more directly to those who have been ripped from their homes and dumped mercilessly into enemy territory. But Jeremiah, the sharp-tongued prophet who had warned of the coming disasters doesn’t just wallow in a string of “I told you so’s.” (He does that a little, but he’s earned the right.) He also does what prophets do and brings a “Word from the Lord” to those in exile. A word that is unexpected and challenging.

 Jeremiah says to the people: Your lament if justified and the grief is authentic and necessary. Own it. But hope is not found in the longing for what has been but in what God is helping you to create going forward. So, you must do something counter intuitive: make a home here in Babylon. In this place you never wanted to be, plant gardens, have babies, celebrate weddings. Build houses, hang the pictures, get to know your neighbors. Seek the welfare of this place, this time, these communities, for in their welfare is yours. In other words, Jeremiah told his generation and ours: Do the work of Hope. Put legs on it. Make it come alive in what you do. Hope is not just a state of mind but it is also a commitment. It is not nostalgic. It is visionary.

 Let’s first admit that this is harder than it sounds. When we find ourselves in places, physical, emotionally and every other way, that seem defined by what has been lost, hope is hard, but we hope anyway because in this new, strange, possibly scary place, God’s fresh mercies will be there to greet us and lead us.

 A personal story. When my children were 5 and eleven years old their father and I separated and eventually divorced. That new reality was painful on so many levels. Yet, I had children and a job so I couldn’t just hide under the covers for six months which is what I wanted to do. So, like so many in this situation I sought out a counselor and fortunately I found one who was wise. I don’t know how many sessions I spent complaining, blaming, lamenting. In one session, in a pique of anger, I threw the box of Kleenex across the room. (Not my finest hour). She sat calmly and said, what is it that you want? And through the sniffles I explained I wanted to put everything back the way it was. She looked at me for a moment and then said “well…. that’s not in the cards for you.” LONG PAUSE while I let that sink in. Then she asked, “So NOW what do you want…what do you long for…hope for? And that was when things changed…. That is when I began to change…when I began to move a baby step beyond lament to hope….recognizing that it was a new day and God was present in it and there was a future to be embraced but also shaped even as I learned to cherish what was good about the past.

 Countless books and sermons and stories have been written about the profound transformations in perspective and theology that occurred for our faith ancestors in and beyond the period of Exile. Before that time, for example, they found it comforting to think that their God was to be found in the Tabernacle in the heart of the Jerusalem Temple. And then it was destroyed, and they wondered if God had just taken off. But from the ashes of lament, as they began to follow Jeremiah’s advice and they discovered that God was still there in that new place. It was a watershed moment in the history of faith. It was out of that time of unbearable disruption that the grand creation poem of Genesis 1 was written. “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth….” All of it, including the strange place they now lived populated by people they didn’t understand. It was all God’s they discovered and there was more to God than their small national ambitions. And so, they began to put down roots and care for the strange new world in which they found themselves because God was also at work there.

 We affirmed last week that hope is not wishful thinking nor is it sentimental. And this week Jeremiah reminds us it isn’t passive either. Hope requires work. Hope IS work. The big hopes are not just what we desire for our personal future though the same theology applies to those. The big hopes are grounded in the reality that we live in community and therefore HOPE is communal and must be embraced and nurtured together. God keeps calling us from the future into the future…where human life is lived with justice, mercy, humility…creating a world filled with compassion, beauty and joy, “undimmed by human tears, where all success is nobleness and every gain divine” …not just in our nation but in all nations.

If we did not have it in us, with God’s help, to do this work there would be no ground for hope. But we do. And there is. So, we get to work in this strange new world of now. God’s promise is that we have a future with Hope and God is with us…prodding, challenging, comforting as we move into what we are creating from our best and most Holy dreams. And God’s mercies are new every morning and God’s faithfulness never ceases. Thanks be to God.

Mary D Gaut