

“A Future with Hope”
Jeremiah 29:4-7, 10-11
21st Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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In 1973, a photo was taken that won a Pulitzer Prize.

The photo was given the title, “Burst of Joy,” and it shows Col. Robert L. Stirm of the U.S. Air Force returning home after almost 6 years as a POW in Vietnam.

The photo captures Stirm’s family—
two sons, two daughters, and his wife—
as they are running out on the tarmac to greet him.

His eldest daughter has her arms wide open.
The expression on her face is joy--pure and unadulterated joy.¹

It’s a beautiful photo.

It’s a photo that seems to capture the fulfillment of a deep hope.

I can’t even begin to imagine what it would have been like to be Robert Stirm—all those years in a POW camp, a true prison, behind enemy lines, hoping for release, finally gaining release, finally getting to be with his family.

What the photo does not show, what it could not show, is what happened to that family shortly after Bob Stirm returned to this country.

¹ I first saw this photo in *Capture the Moment: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, edited by Cyma Rubin and Eric Newton, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

Sadly, the years that Col. Stirm spent in Vietnam had taken a toll on his marriage, and not too long after he got back to the U.S., he and his wife were divorced.

“All those dreams I had in prison were nothing but dust,” Stirm said one year later.²

Bob Stirm had a hope that going home would mean reunion, celebration, his family would be complete again.

And then...and then he had to give up that hope.

Do you know what that's like?
To have a hope, and then...it disappears...or it changes.
Events happen beyond your control...and you're left trying to figure out what comes next?

This is an experience that the exiles in Babylon would have known very well.

They're far from home.
They're in a foreign land.

In our text for today, Jeremiah proclaims God's word to those exiles, in which God announces God's plans for God's people:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

What do you think those exiles would have been hoping for?
You know what they were hoping for.

² As quoted in “A P.O.W.’s Marriage Ends Bitterly,” by Nancy Faber, in *People*, April 1, 1974.

To leave Babylon.
To return to the Promised Land.

So imagine their surprise when on the one hand God says to them:

“...I know the plans I have for you...to give you a future with hope.”

And on the OTHER HAND, God says:

“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.”

What?!

70 years??!!

That’s a lifetime.

That means most of those exiles will NEVER get to go back home.

Do you see what’s just happened here?

The exiles had a hope...

a hope that life would return to normal,

that they wouldn’t have to be where they were very long...

and when they realize that hope would never come to pass—
what happens next?

Is God just leaving the exiles to suffer there so far away in abandonment for 7 decades?

No, no...

According to Jeremiah, God asks those exiles to REIMAGINE the hope that God has for them:

“Build houses,” [there in Babylon] “and live in them;

plant gardens and eat what they produce.

“Take wives and have 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.”

The Hebrew word that’s used here for “welfare” is “shalom”.
It means wholeness, being complete, being at peace.
It’s what God wants for all of us!

God tells the exiles that their own personal peace is inextricably linked to the peace and justice and wholeness of their new community.

By working for peace in the midst of a foreign land, by working for “shalom” for their neighbors...they will receive “shalom” from God.

I wonder if there is a message in this text for those of us who are walking through what feels like our own time of exile right now. Exile from the life we used to know, exile from what all of us used to define as “normal”.

If only we could get back to normal.
I can’t tell you how often I’ve heard that hope these past 7 months.

But I’ve also wondered, at various times, if “getting back to normal” is the most accurate way of describing God’s hope for all of us.

What if there are parts of “normal” that God would like us to change?

I'm reminded of something that Daniel Jonce Evans, the widower of Rachel Held Evans, wrote back in May.

Many of you have read Rachel Held Evans—wonderful author and writer on various theological topics, and before the age of 40, as a young mother, Rachel Held Evans died suddenly and unexpectedly in May of 2019.

In the ensuing months, her husband, Daniel, was left care for their two young children, and try to keep the family's head above water.

But the medical bills piled up from Rachel's care.

On one occasion, he received a bill for a helicopter ride that transported his wife from one hospital to another. The hospital she was in was in-network. The hospital she went to was in-network. But the helicopter company was not, and the total cost to Daniel's family?

Over \$60,000.

They said it would be taken care of...that he shouldn't have to pay. But it hadn't been taken care of...

And so he writes:

“Occasionally I have small blocks of time between diaper changes, bath times, meal times and story times. In those fleeting minutes, my mind churns away...Rachel shouldn't be dead. Some things are wrong and they won't ever be right.

“I try to find meaning outside of my loss. What can I do now?

“While the pandemic has been a stark reminder of how preposterous and cruel the system can be, it's also shined a light on how heroic some of our fellow humans are.

“We are also learning what shared global grief looks like, and hard as it may be, we should use this moment to fix the broken systems that make heartbreaking situations even more unbearable.

“No one should risk bankruptcy for a trip to the E.R. We shouldn’t need crowdfunding to stay afloat in seas of hospital bills while trying to keep our families’ lives stable.”³

What Evans wrote was a call to action.

What Evans is hoping for is that we’ll use what we’re learning in this pandemic...to work for shalom.

“...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,” God says, “...for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Those must have been startling words to the exiles.
Work for the welfare of this place where I don’t want to be?
In its welfare, I’ll find...shalom?

But that’s how the hope of God often works, I think.
God’s hope is not so much about our dreams getting fulfilled, or our personal happiness being top priority.

God’s hope is most often connected to other people.
Even when, especially when, our neighbors do not look like us,
or vote like us, or come from the same country as us...

According to Jeremiah, the hope of God is found NOT by focusing on ourselves, and not from any kind of self-pity...but by stepping

³ “After My Wife Died I was Consumed by Grief and Paperwork,” by Daniel Jonce Evans, in *Time*, May 20, 2020, found at <https://time.com/5839191/grief-medical-system/>

outside of ourselves...working for someone else's welfare, pouring our energy into the hope of shalom for the world around us.

All of which raises a very important question.

The exiles had to give up something...the hope to return home, they had to give it up...in order to work for the welfare of the world around them.

What are you and I willing to give up...so that our community, so that ALL zip codes in Greenville—can experience shalom?

Let me get at it like this.

There's this wonderful scene in the movie *Field of Dreams*...do you remember that movie?

With Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones...

The character played by Burt Lancaster is a small-town doctor at the end of his career. But early on in his life, he was an aspiring major league baseball player—and he was known as “Moonlight Graham”.

He made it to the big leagues, but he was on the bench.

Then, in the last game of the season, at the END of that last game, Moonlight Graham finally gets to play.

His manager sends him out into the field.

But it's the last inning, and the game ends, the season is over, and so is his baseball career.

So when Kevin Costner asks Burt Lancaster if there was something he wished he could have done in baseball, something he really had hoped for....what would it have been?

And Burt Lancaster replies:

“I wish I could have batted—just once.

Stare down a big-league pitcher.

Feel the tingle as the ball hits the bat...

stretch a double into a triple,

and wrap your arms around the bag.”

Of course, in this movie’s imaginary story-line, such opportunities seem to ABOUND for former baseball players...and a bit later, a young “Moonlight Graham” finds himself at bat against a big league pitcher, in a cornfield in Iowa that Kevin Costner’s character has built.

Chronologically, it’s NONSENSE.

But THEOLOGICALLY, there’s something there.

Moonlight Graham is getting his wish, right?

His hope just might be fulfilled!

He squares off against a big-league pitcher.

And when Moonlight Graham hits the ball, do you remember what happened next?

Was it a double off the wall that he stretches into a triple, wrapping his arms around the bag, just like he had hoped?

No, no...in what is just a fine piece of movie-making, Moonlight Graham’s hit...was a SACRIFICE FLY!

He gave himself up for an out...in order to bring home the runner on third base.

Even when he was living out his hope...

that hope did not come to pass the way he pictured it ought to come to pass...and he gave himself up for the sake of his team—and THAT was his path to shalom.

“...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,” God says, “...for in its shalom you will find your shalom.”

I wonder what you and I are called to give up for the sake of our team?

For the sake of our church?

For the sake of our city?

For those without a home here in Greenville?

For those whose lives have been overturned by the pandemic here in Greenville?

For those who are going hungry or imprisoned here in Greenville?

Commitment Sunday is two weeks from today. What are you and I called to give up in our own lives for the sake of our church, for the community in which we live, so that this community of faith can keep giving generously to the many mission ministries that we support?

What new ways are we being called to spend our time?

A number of years ago, the Presbyterian minister Tom Long had just moved to a new city, and was looking for a new church home with his wife.

They found one, and Long attended the Newcomers' Class.

While he was there, he met another member of the class named Marshall.

Marshall wasn't like the other members of that Newcomers' Class. Marshall, you see, had come through the church's outreach program for men who are homeless.

He had been an addict, and the program helped Marshall get clean.

When everyone went around the room to say why they were joining that church, Marshall stated very firmly:

“Jesus Christ has saved my life through this church!”

So Long was a bit surprised when, shortly after Christmas, he heard in the church's prayer concerns that Marshall was in prison.

Oh no, he thought.
What in the world happened?

Well, they had been in the same Newcomers' class.
Marshall was his brother in Christ.
So Tom Long went to visit.

They were sitting across from one another, during visiting hours, with a window in between them, talking on the phone.

“What happened?” Long asked.

“I was working in the clinic [at the church]” Marshall said, “and I was telling these people that they could do right, just like I had done right...but then I realized I wasn't doing right. I remembered that I had a warrant out for my arrest.

“It was an old warrant, the police would never have caught up with me...but I knew I wasn't doing the right thing, so on Christmas Eve, I turned myself in.”

Then he said:

“Tom, I’m REALLY looking forward to Easter. I’ll be out of here by Easter, and I can come and worship with all of you at Easter.

“But I’ve still got a few months here,
so I’ve started a Bible study.

Me and 5 other inmates read the Bible,
and we pray for everyone here—
for ourselves, the other inmates, even the guards.

“And I’ve got my own ministry. I write letters. Lots of folk here can’t write, so I write their letters home, so that they can tell their loved ones how much they love them.”⁴

May I put it like this?

I think Marshall knew that by working for the welfare, the shalom of others—he would find his shalom...

Do you remember what that word means?
It means wholeness. Being complete. Being at peace.

It’s what God wants and hopes for all of us.
This morning, God told us how to get there.
Do you remember how God says that all of us can get there?

Amen.

⁴ I first heard this story from Tom Long at a Festival of Homiletics preaching conference many years ago.