

Why Remember?
Jeremiah 29:4-14
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It is a Christian practice to pause and remember. Every month, we pause, and remember that our lives are possible because Jesus died and rose again from the dead. Once a year, we similarly stop everything, and remember that our way of life is built on freedom that was paid for by men and women who would never know the profound effects that their sacrifice would have on the shape of generations to follow them. Why do we do this? Why do we stop to remember the hardness, the brokenness, the worst parts of our story?

I want to suggest this: We must remember, because in doing so, we are reminded of who we are.

That is the big question for today. Who are we? We are people of hope.

We begin in Jeremiah 29: 4-14:

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: **5** “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. **6** Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. **7** Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” **8** Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. **9** They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. **11** For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. **14** I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

On the first of September 1939, German forces invaded Poland. This was the opening move in a conflict that would span the globe, drawing men and women from around the world into a desperate, mortal struggle that would span the next 6 years.

Canada received notification that Great Britain had declared war on September 3rd, 1939. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King called parliament into session to debate whether Canada would follow suit.

This gives us reason to pause, and to reflect. Initially thousands, eventually millions of people find themselves hopelessly trapped. How were we, Canadians, across the Atlantic, to respond to this news? What was our responsibility to those people?

After the horrors of the Great War, Canadians were hesitant to become embroiled in yet another European War. We were a small country, large in size, yet small in population. We had only recently emerged on the world stage. Our armed forces were small, underfunded, and poorly equipped.

The question was, who should we be?

In the same way, the Israelites in exile are facing a similar choice. They are living in the midst of the worst news they could imagine, and are faced with conflicting choices for the path ahead.

In Jeremiah 29, we read part of a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah. Israel is living in a land not their own, among people who have forced the resettlement of the royalty, politicians, soldiers, and wealthy merchants. For people so completely connected to the city of Jerusalem as the centre of their life, their religion, their government, and their identity, things cannot get much worse.

But there are some people who are saying that there is reason for hope. It isn't all that bad. Right before this letter is recorded, we can read about another prophet named Hananiah who was saying that their captivity would last only two years before God would break the yoke of Babylonian dominion, and the people of God would march triumphantly back to Jerusalem. The hated enemy would be crushed, and Israel would be restored to her rightful place.

There was only one problem.

He was lying. He was not speaking the words of God. Instead, he was telling the people what they wanted to hear: You are innocent, they are guilty. They will be crushed, you will be exalted. This is not bad news. Put your head down and watch! This was false hope.

Oh how tempting it must have been to listen to that message! Now there is a hard choice to be made. One that reinforces what I want to be true, and one that reinforces what I don't want to hear, but suspect to be true. It is easy to want easy hope!

That is not what Jeremiah offers, though.

He says that they should settle in, and get cozy. Build houses. Plant gardens! These are not short term endeavours. Have children, get them married, and see your grandchildren born in a foreign land. The third generation. 70 years of captivity.

You will die here. When your children's' children return to Jerusalem, it will be as strangers, returning "home" to a land that they have never known.

This does not mean, though, that Israel is without hope! Far from it.

In fact, this letter points out the exact opposite. They are a people of hope, just not the way that they want it to be.

The first thing is that they are people of hope, because God is still sovereign. It is not as though the Babylonians conquered God when they conquered Israel. In fact, God says that he is the one, not the Babylonians, who led the people away. The Babylonians are simply a tool that God used for his own purposes. So, if God is still sovereign, then the people of Israel are still his people. They have hope, and more importantly, they have hope because God still is.

Second, the Israelites give hope to their children. They look to the third generation of Israelites, who will return to Jerusalem, and rebuild the nation. They need to teach their children to remember who they are. How will they do this? How will their grandchildren know what it means, then, to be an Israelite, chosen of God to be a kingdom of priests to the nations? Well, by watching their grandparents and parents live out the story of the people of God. The children watch them be priests in the harshest of circumstances. The parents, the grandparents, need to act, today, to shape the best tomorrow for the third generation.

How should they do this? God says it specifically in verse 7:

Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Act as a kingdom of God's priests to the community that they find themselves in. Do not shrivel up, but expand. Population, for sure. But also in ministry. Remember that priests bring a message of hope, encouragement, and repentance to those around them. They intercede for the people around them. They look out for those around them, for their best interests. Not just among their own, but for all those around them. Especially those who don't know any better!

As a people of hope, the people of God, the Israelites are tasked with sharing that hope with the people around them.

This is actually a fantastic strategy of God's. The chosen people act as priests instead of isolating and exalting themselves. They look out for the needs and the security of their neighbours, even if they are the oppressive nation.

The exiles remain a people of hope, but it won't arrive in their lifetime. In the meantime, God says that their hope lies in the job he has for them, a job that will teach them, train them, that will raise up a new generation of the people of God who will be ready to seek

after God with their whole heart. This task lays the foundation for the hope, the future, the prosperity that they long for.

Their fate is your fate. So, consider well how you act while you are here. The blessing of God, through us, to them. As people of hope, share it with others.

Think with me, what happened to Joseph in Egypt: he was taken captive, forcibly relocated to Egypt, and thrown into prison unjustly. He worked for the prosperity of his captors not once, but twice! Scripture tells us in Genesis that he continued to do good work, work that advanced the interests of first Potiphar's household where he was a slave, and then in the prison where he was held. The result? By the end of the story, the efforts of one person acting for the benefit of his captors had elevated him to a position where he affected the course of nations, saving people from starvation, and showing Pharaoh that YHWH is God. Wow! This from one man of hope!

Imagine the impact that could be had if ten thousand exiles followed this lead! How much easier would the lives of their children and grandchildren be if they establish that they are willing participants in life in their new place? Imagine what happens when the people of God call out to God, not in their own interests, but in the interests of others. Just a hint, the story of Esther is part of how this plays out!

Who will Israel be during her exile? The choice that exiled Israel faces is stark: decrease, or increase. Isolate, or unite. Wait, or act? Jeremiah is startlingly clear in stating what God wants them to do: God knows what his plan is. God's plan is to prosper Israel, but also to use Israel to provide hope to the Babylonians. As Anna reminded us a few weeks ago, for us to hope, their hope must also be fulfilled.

These same questions that Israel faced, that faced our nation in the early 20th century, face us today. Who will we be?

I am the third generation, the grandchild of people who fought and sacrificed in World War 2. I didn't live their lives, but I've heard the stories. And whenever I remember what they did, I learn what it means to give myself for another person. I learn, just like exiled Israelites, what it means to do the hard work of lifting up someone else, even someone not yet known. I learn who I am.

I am a person of hope, because God is. This is the foundation of life itself. Before all else, I have hope because Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sin, but he didn't end there. His resurrection means life for us.

I am a person of hope because it was taught to me, by my parents and grandparents, by my community, Sunday school teachers, pastors, missionaries, friends, by the people of God. They showed me the way.

What will I do with that now? As a person of hope?

We need to remember who we are, because so many distractions cause us to forget our purpose. We think in the now, live for the day. Our long-range plan involves supper. We need the regular reminder that the foundation of tomorrow rests on the actions of today, that we have a task today to bring hope to those around us. Are we making those same decisions today? This sounds like the very definition of a Christian life to me. Our tools are grace and mercy, strength and courage, justice and redemption.

It is for this very reason that we take shifts at the Soup Kitchen. This is why we fill our box for Project Connect. It is why we go to be with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba. It is why we pursue justice and reconciliation with our First Nations neighbours, even to acknowledging that we are settlers on treaty land. If we work for those around us, then our whole community wins.

Look around you. Listed on our website are over 20 local ministries that we are involved in as a church. This is who we are, both in legacy as Canadians, and in identity as the people of God. Isn't it good news that we have today? That today, we are the people of God, the people with hope to share? What amazing news! What is God inviting you to do with the hope that you have?

We all know how those Canadians answered that question.

On September 9th, 1939, his Excellency, the Governor General Lord Tweedsmuir said,

. . . all efforts to maintain the peace of Europe have failed. The United Kingdom, in honouring pledges given as a means of avoiding hostilities, has become engaged in war with Germany. You have been summoned at the earliest moment in order that the government may seek authority for the measures necessary for the defense of Canada, . . .

I need not speak of the extreme gravity of this hour . . . The people of Canada are facing the crisis with the same fortitude that today supports the peoples of the United Kingdom and other of the nations of the British Commonwealth. My Ministers are convinced that Canada is prepared to unite in a national effort to defend the utmost liberties and institutions which are a common heritage.

Of all of the options for response that could have been made, Canada chose to fight. With this statement, Canada took the hard road, and entered into what was seen as a foreign war, one which would eventually see 1.1 million Canadian men and women serve in uniform, of which over 44,000 would give their lives. Canadians would fight in every major theatre of the conflict. By the end, the war would have reached into every Canadian home in some way. We could have tried to avoid it. We had plenty of reasons not to fight.

But we could not ignore the call to be people of hope, even on the other side of the world. We could not ignore the shape of the world to be left to our children's children.

Today we pause and remember our reason for hope. We are people of hope, first and foremost because of Jesus, and his death on the cross. This gives us unlimited access to the living God! We are people of hope again because of those who confronted evil, and fought for people unknown. And continually, by those who hold the line today.

One minute per year to pause, and remember why we have hope. And then a lifetime of freedom to pay it forward in Jesus name!