

What a beautiful description the prophet Jeremiah gives of what awaits the exiles who have been living in Babylon - a wonderful, lush, extravagant return for exiles who have drifted away from God. That kind of splendor is not what we expect from prophets - prophets are individuals who are in close communion with God and are tasked with bringing God's thoughts to the people; and they usually aren't compliments "good job, folks" - they are more often scolding and threatening. Cartoons almost always have a prophet standing on a soapbox with a sign saying, "Repent, the end is near". Open the book of Jeremiah almost anywhere and you can find an example of that; which is what I did and the first place my eyes landed was in Chapter 2, verses 12 and 13 "Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked. Be utterly desolate, says the Lord. For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Hellfire and brimstone is everywhere - Your wickedness will punish; in vain I struck down your children; they accepted no correction; you have polluted the land with your wickedness; I am bringing evil from the north and a great destruction; the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned away from us. This is your doom.

I could go on but I won't because as I've read Jeremiah this time, I've discovered something different, something that Bruce read just now. The prophet does do a lot of yelling and telling - but not at us as people - it is not correction and criticism - stand up straight, are you going to wear that? Are you going to eat that? Your report card came.

The words God is asking Jeremiah to unleash on the people of Judah are not about how clean their houses are or how they roasted the lamb wrong. All of what God asks Jeremiah to tell the people is about their drifting from God. It is about how they have put themselves in danger - that's what all the hellfire and brimstone is - it is the risk the people of Judah are taking; it is about the trap they are walking into as they walk away from God. It is all in the service of hope.

It is like haranguing your best friend to quit smoking after they've smoked for 35 years. You've been harping on this with them for many of those 35 years. You keep trying - you tell them about an early death, about how their children will be left, you send pictures of what your friend's lungs look like. You're up the ante believing that there is a way to shock them into quitting. You can't give up - they are walking toward a steep cliff and won't redirect their course. But until the last step is taken, you don't give up. It is about hope.

Hope, 2021! I've never been too excited about the New Year - couldn't imagine what those people were doing in Times Square - but this year I think I get it, not just for this moment in history, but all those other years with people in funny hats and blowing horns and jumping for joy. An arbitrary moment when we cross some kind of border creates a moment that doesn't feel arbitrary - it feels significant. And boy does this one feel significant.

2020 is behind us even if it is only by a matter of days. And 2021 has begun, the human spirit arises in the form of hope. 2021 will be better! We know what we're dealing with, we've miraculously rolled out several vaccines, we won't be enduring a Presidential election, we are beginning to face the racial divide for real this time. 2021

In Jeremiah's world, we might be on the verge of a return from exile. In Jeremiah's words: The Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for

him. Chapter after chapter of haranguing the Jewish people for their faithlessness, the exiles have turned back to the Lord. And the words of the prophet reflect the heart and meaning of prophecy - Hope! Even in the most threatening words of the prophet, the goal, the message has always been hope. You've left the Lord for other Gods; you will not find peace or contentment there; return, return. And when they do their lives shall become like a watered garden; and they shall never languish again. The sweet and welcoming words are what scholars call an Oracle of Salvation.

We hunger for our own Oracle of Salvation - words of promise, of return; words of hope - a new normal, to a full sanctuary.

As different as they sound, the gospel words - the gospel Word that became flesh and lived among us mirrors the route of Jeremiah's prophecy. The world came into being through Jesus - the word of God - and yet when Jesus came to what was his own, his own people did not accept him. But those who do recognize him, they become Children of God; Those who accepted him - had grace and truth. Referring back to Moses where it was made clear that no one has seen God, John tells us we won't see God but we will know God, Jesus, the only son, will make God known to us.

As with Jeremiah, ultimately Jesus came to show us God, to show us the unlimited love God has for us. Jesus came like a prophet, the living Oracle of Salvation, willing to die for us. Jesus showed us the borderless nature of God's love. As through Jeremiah, God welcomed the people back to Jerusalem; in Jesus God shows us that the welcome extends beyond the Jewish people, the welcome is to all creation.

So - 2020 - has taught us a lot about who we are. It has tested faith, it has tried patience, it has revealed reality. We have discovered much about ourselves; well, I discovered a lot about myself. I knew I wasn't a solitary contemplative, but I hadn't realized how many THINGS I depend upon to distract me from myself and my God. The number of times when I decide I need to go somewhere; the number of things I decide I need to buy; the variety and quantity of food I think I need; how important clothes are for me - I sometimes open my closet in a gesture of apology; The realization of how many things I do because other people will see them or hear them. My attachment to being SEEN; my need to be busy - but apparently not with things that involve vacuum cleaners and silver polish. There's a long list for me, maybe there's a shorter one for you. So, 2020, you've taught me, us, a lot. You've given us the gift of self-examination.

So, 2021, will we use you as an opportunity to re-engage in all those things we thought we needed? Or will we take whatever freedom comes our way as an opportunity to remain open, to allow what we've learned about ourselves and God to steer us in the year ahead.

I feel like 2020 was the prophet haranguing us. Pointing out who we - let me remind you that I can only preach from my own experience and I don't for a minute think all of you are plagued by my demons but I use the collective - we, us, in the ever so slight chance there's another sinner out there. Pointing out who we are. 2020 revealed the many **ways** we avoid God, the life we've created that takes us further away from the life God calls us to, to serve the secular, not even missing the Oracle of Salvation because we think it's ours to create.

But now it's 2021, and the prophet speaks a word of hope to us. Will we walk back out and be the same person we've always been or will we turn toward God saying: "Oh Mother, Oh father, Oh parent - I didn't realize I have been so many miles away. Let me fall into your arms; let me back into the flock. Help me."

And we know, from the glimpse we get of God from Jesus, we will be welcomed back. We know from the prophet that God's promise is a joyous one: then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. You can enter into this joy today, right now, you don't have to make the beds or wash the car first, right now, you can decide what 2021 will be like.

Before us is the Oracle of Salvation told in story and remembrance; Before us is the Oracle of Salvation in bread and juice; the bread of life, the saving cup.

This is the table, not of the church, but of the Lord. It is to be made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more.

So, come, you who have much faith and you who have little, and you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time, and you who have tried to follow and you who have failed.

Come, not because it is I who invite you: it is our Lord. It is his will that those who want him should meet him here at this table. Come for all things are ready.