

**“Hope with a future in it”
Rev. Maeve Hammond
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Today’s reading comes from the Prophet Jeremiah, who is also known as one of the main three prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah’s book is sandwiched between Isaiah and Ezekiel. The prophetic literature, especially in the Hebrew Bible, is some of the most profound and nuanced and challenging texts that our sacred text has to offer. Why is this? In part, prophets during the time of the Hebrew Bible were “preachers rather than writers, and the nature of prophecy is generally that of an orally proclaimed message to a circle of listeners,” according to scholar Ronald Clements’ commentary on Jeremiah (*Interpretations*). You may imagine, then, Jeremiah surrounded by an intimate group of listeners, taking in his prophetic message, feeling the Spirit move through them with every word he preached. As per most prophetic literature, Jeremiah takes a wide view of the Hebrew people within the scope of external forces and internal belonging. Clements writes, “the earliest prophetic records in the [Hebrew Bible] are found in narratives dealing with matters of wide national and political character” (*Interpretations*). Jeremiah’s book falls in the period of “Babylonian control at the close of the seventh century and the first half of the sixth century B.C.E.,” and relates the state of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah at that time (*Interpretations*). Jeremiah documents the internal, political unrest among the Hebrew people as imperial forces enclosed on their united monarchy. “Jeremiah,” says Clements, “lived through the time when Assyrian control over Judah fell into decline and eventually collapsed...[and his] book is a commentary upon the most disastrous episodes of Judah’s history to which the Old Testament bears witness, both in their religious and political consequences” (*Interpretations*).

Jeremiah has often been known as the “weeping prophet,” and, as you can imagine, for good reason. His message focuses on the grief of his people who have been brought into exile. His grief may be just as powerful and relatable now as it was thousands of years ago. In 2023,

we have witnessed, and experienced, a sense of displacement in our sense of home on earth. We are no strangers to disruption of life and estrangement from home when our siblings become exiled from their home due to political unrest, climate change, war, violence, and unsafe or insecure living conditions. We, too, are not strangers to the disruption of our internal lives when someone we love gets sick or leaves our world, or when we ourselves face a mental or physical illness, a financial difficulty, or a challenging relationship. There is good reason for us, too, to be weeping prophets today.

Is it possible, though, that commentators haven't done Jeremiah total justice by understanding him as just the "weeping prophet?" Is there good news under the surface of his frustrated, grief-stricken, and anguished tears? As Ronald Clements argues, Jeremiah is not just the "weeping prophet," but he is also the "prophet of hope." Here's what he says: "Predominantly...Jeremiah's book contains a message of hope. This message of hope, set against the background of political disaster and intense human suffering that accompanied it, gives the book its essential character" (*Interpretations*). This is God's promise in Jeremiah's book: "I alone know my purpose for you, says God, my purpose for your prosperity and my purpose not to harm you, my purpose to give you hope with a future in it" (Jer. 29:11). Despite the conditions Jeremiah found himself in, and the conditions we find ourselves in as individuals and as a collective being, God's promise is one of hope, never one of enduring or deliberate harm. We must walk beside the reality of pain and grief, *and* we must hold onto hope.

I had a mentor in divinity school who believed hope was dangerous. I believed her then, but I can now say with certainty that this sentiment is far from the truth. Without hope, I fear there is little to believe in but the worst case scenario. Without hope, I fear our resilience shrinks in the face of oppressive forces that exacerbate climate change, war, and violence. Without hope, I fear we turn inward, scared to trust our siblings and join them in radical love.

Just yesterday, I was watching a video about setting goals by YouTuber and author Jessica McCabe. The approach she described truly blew my mind. Here's what she suggested:

instead of creating goals with the end product in mind, base your goal on the feeling it'll give you. For instance, as some of you know, I've taken up knitting the past few months. My goal for 2024, using Jessica's approach, is *not* to commit myself to knitting an entire sweater within the calendar year...or else. No, my goal is feelings-forward. I hope to commit myself to a relaxing and immersive activity this year, regardless of the product or the outcome. I want to remove the weight of productivity and aesthetic success and perfection and anything else that trips me up and *just focus* on how I feel when I come home and hold my knitting needles in my hands.

I mention this video because I believe Jessica's feelings-forward approach to goals reminds me of the Prophet Jeremiah's message of hope within weeping. Jeremiah weeps out of grief for his community. His feelings-forward goal is not to prolong grief, but rather to find God's hope within himself and engender God's hope in his community. Jeremiah asks his listeners, "how can we find the spark of hope, and how do we keep this hope alive, to return us back to God? How can hope be transformed into justice and healing?"

In the spirit of Jeremiah, I ask you: This year, how can *you* find the spark of hope inside you? How can your goals be feelings-forward, guiding your actions toward justice and healing?

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers - that perches in the soul - and sings the tune without words - and never stops - at all." Hope asks nothing from us but simply to notice it—its details, its delicacy, its beauty—and take it in.

Friends, may our hope be ever-abundant, and may it never stop - at all. When we are overwhelmed and struggling, may we turn to God's promise of hope. May our collective chorus of love and liberation echo the message of the Prophet Jeremiah. May we remember that there is no joy without sorrow, and there is no weeping prophet without the prophet of hope. Amen!