



"Hope Will Lead You Home"

Jeremiah 32:1-2a, 6-15

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Between Austria and Italy, there is a section of the Alps called the Semmering. It is an impossibly steep, incredibly high part of the mountains. In 1842, an engineer named Carl Ritter von Ghega began imagining that a railway might one day span that distance, connecting Vienna and Venice directly.

It took 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 20,000 workers, and 12 years before the railway was complete, a railway that was then five times steeper than any other. It was an incredible dream and an even more incredible accomplishment, so much so that in 1998, the Semmering Railway was named a World Heritage Site, recognized for the advanced technology utilized in its creation and for making this vastly beautiful, previously uncharted area accessible to humanity, thereby creating a new cultural landscape.

It is considered a marvel of the modern world. But here is perhaps the most marvelous piece of this story: at the time von Ghega conceived of the idea, and even at the time excavation of the area and construction of the tracks had begun, there was no train in existence that could make the trip. In other words, one of the most ambitious projects in railway history was undertaken with no evidence, but with complete trust, that someday, eventually, the right train would come along, too.

I don't know this for fact, of course, but I like to imagine that if you traced von Ghega's family tree all the way back, branch by branch and perhaps even forest by forest, you'd eventually find the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a prophet, but he was a reluctant prophet. I can't blame him — real prophets are never very popular. He didn't go out seeking the job. The job came to him. He tried to exchange it for one he liked better, but God wasn't interested in negotiating. That left Jeremiah no choice but to reach for an excuse. "I'm just a kid," he says to God. "I'm too young to do what you ask." And God says right back, "Don't you ever say that to me again."

The truth is, I suspect most of us would have been reluctant, as well. Jeremiah lived and prophesied during the worst time in Israel's biblical history. A foreign enemy nation — Babylon was its name, and Nebuchadnezzar was its king — came through with its army and burned down the temple. They destroyed the holy house of God. They left Jerusalem in ruins, and they deported the people. They took them away from their homes and forced them into exile.

Jeremiah is the one tasked with interpreting what has happened to them. And he uses brutal words to do just that for the next 26 solid chapters. It is rough going. It is not a feel-good book, because it is not written during a feel-good time. So in response to all that Jeremiah is saying, some rush in with platitudes and cliches. Tired of Jeremiah's doom and gloom, they fall all over themselves reassuring everyone everything was going to be *just fine, any day now*.

The prophet Hananiah was one of those. We might call him a false prophet. He shows up a few chapters before our reading today, and

says to the people who are hurting and homesick: *Don't worry! The bad days are almost behind you! The Lord will bring you back within two years, he promises. Chin up!*

But Jeremiah, the one God appointed, will have none of it. No, he says, it won't be like that at all. It's a word we don't expect to hear from the Bible very often. *No, the good news you want is not coming. Hananai is full of lies.*

It may seem wrong to squash good news like Jeremiah does, but honestly, I am immensely grateful for Jeremiah's holy "no." Because there are times when it is the ugly, horrible truth. There are times when life falls apart. Times when everything really is worse than you ever imagined possible.

Have you ever lived through a time like that?

It was a handful of years ago now, in the middle of my time at Village, when I woke up sick one day. The problem was, as more and more time passed, I couldn't seem to shake it, and doctors couldn't figure it out. Finally, they said me down for an awful conversation. *We think you have cancer, they said. Everything points in that direction. But we can't find it.*

I'm going to skip to the end of that particular story and I'm going to skip over all the medical jargon and tell you that I didn't have cancer. But it took *months* for them to figure it out. And in the middle of all that, honestly, the very last thing I wanted to hear someone telling me was that everything's going to be okay. Because sometimes, it isn't.

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet because he was also a realistic prophet. He knew what we know: that the ground shakes; that marriages end; cancer appears; children get sick; wars rage; violence erupts; corruption runs rampant; mental illness remains; finances collapse. That's what exile looks like — when you are thrust into the middle of an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place. When the darkness feels far too deep. When you would give anything for just a little bit of peace, or something, anything, that reminds

you of the time or place you call home. In the midst of that kind of experience, *Don't worry, everything's going to be just fine, just you wait and see* — that kind of response can be maddening. It can ring a bit hollow.

In response, Jeremiah speaks another brutally honest word. He tells the exiles, "You know what? It's gonna be awhile. We're in this for the long haul. Might as well settle on in."

"Really," Jeremiah says. "I could not be more serious. Here's what you do: get used to this place. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat from them. Find someone you love and start a family. Look out for those around you. In the midst of this terrible exile of ours — keep living. It's the only thing to do. Because we're going to be here awhile."

And then, as if to prove his point, in our reading today, Jeremiah buys a field. In the middle of being exiled, far from home, Jeremiah purchases property. "This is the word of the Lord," he says, and he puts the deed of purchase in a jar to last for a long time. And then he says. "Thus says the Lord our God: Houses and fields and vineyards shall appear again in this land."

Houses. Fields. Families. Vineyards. Gardens. Every one of those are long-term commitments.

Gardeners are some of the most hopeful people I know. You plant a seed in the dirt and care for it, day after day, for quite some time, never seeing any evidence that anything is happening. Gardening is not for people who like instant gratification. Gardening is for people like Jeremiah, and I bet the engineer von Ghega had a garden too.

Gardening is also for people like my friend Barbara. Barbara was a member of my first church. She had had cancer for longer than I had known her. Whenever I went to visit her, she would ask me to wheel her out to her flower garden. One fall, she worked herself exhausted nearly every day, planting bulbs. We both knew she was nearing the end of her life, and I asked

her, "Barbara, what's it like to spend all your energy planting these bulbs when it's possible you won't get to see them bloom?"

She patted my hand, because she knew more than her pastor, and she said, "Oh honey. You're right. I won't see these bulbs blossom. But someone else will move in here, and they are going to love their new garden."

Build and plant, Jeremiah says. Houses and fields and vineyards.

It was awhile back now that Stephen Colbert spoke to a class of graduating seniors at Knox College.¹ With a lifetime's worth of wisdom to disperse in 15 minutes or less, he chose these words. He said:

"Say 'yes' as often as you can. When I was starting out in Chicago, doing improvisational theatre with Second City, there was really only one rule I was taught. That rule is "yes-and."

"In this case, *yes-and* is a verb. *Yes-anding* means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what's going to happen, maybe with someone you've never met before. To build a scene, you have to accept. To build anything onstage, you have to accept whatever the other improviser initiates. They say you're both doctors? You're doctors. And then — you add to that. We're doctors **AND** we're trapped in an ice cave. That's the *-and*. And hopefully they will *yes-and* you back."

Colbert looked out at the graduates, and he said, "You are about to start the greatest improvisation of all. With no script. No idea what's going to happen, and often with people and places you have never seen before. And you are not in control. So say yes. *Yes-and*."

This is Jeremiah's word to the exiles, and to us. *Yes-and* it.

Now don't miss this: the most profound thing about *yes-and*, at least to me, is that it doesn't take away any of the story that came before. *Yes-anding* our lives never tries to erase or diminish the painful parts that need to be

acknowledged. It does, however, guarantee that those painful parts never get the last word.

Yes-and let's buy a field. Yes-and let's plant a garden.

If gardeners are some of the most hopeful people I know, then gardens are some of the most hopeful places I know. I think the same was true for Jeremiah. Because surely he would have remembered another garden, at the very beginning of scripture, in Genesis, when God shows us God's most remarkable, persistent skill: creation.

It was in the Garden of Eden that life as we know it came into being. It was there that God formed us out of the dust and breathed air into our lungs. It was there that God first loved us and named us. It was there that God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky. It was in the garden that God blessed all of creation.

And while this one wouldn't have been Jeremiah's story to tell, it certainly is ours: How it was in another garden that life emerged yet again..It was in the garden that hope sparked in the face of death on Easter morning. It was in the garden that resurrection became real. It was in the garden that the resurrected Christ is first mistaken to be, of course, the gardener himself. Because it is in the garden that life comes to us.

The prophets, everyone from Jeremiah to Jesus, they point out that life is one giant composite of beauty and brokenness, joy and despair, darkness and light, exile and homecoming, death and resurrection, all stitched together. If we pretend otherwise, we deceive ourselves and everyone else.

Now, there's two ways to look at this. One is to say, there is exile everywhere. We cannot escape it. **Exile exists** (even) within the grace and mercy of God.

The other way is to say, exile exists **within the grace and mercy of God**. That no matter how long the exile or how painful its

¹ Stephen Colbert at Knox College, http://deptorg.knox.edu/newsarchive/news_events/2006/x12547.html.

circumstances, the grace and mercy of God will encompass it and outlast it.

Those are the two ways to look at it, but the truth is, we don't have to choose between the two. Sometimes, all we can do is embrace that tension. And sometimes, that is exactly where Good will find us — in the strange, complex, bewildering, blessed mess of living.

That realization, and the permission it affords us, may be the greatest gift, the greatest harvest that Jeremiah and his field can offer us.