

January 10, 2020

“Starting Over”

How many people did you hear yearning for 2021 as if it were a sure bet? What they really meant is, **“I can’t wait for 2020 to be over!”** It isn’t unusual for people to greet the new year with the back handed comment: *“It has to be better than last year!”* But this year there is a weight and universal seriousness that’s new. This past year really was rough and challenging – pretty much everywhere. It has been easy at points to wonder *how on earth we got here – and why in heaven’s name it isn’t better.* When we start over, there is usually an experience or someone we are leaving behind. Hopefully, we have the sense that God is involved. Sometimes we imagine it wouldn’t be quite so bad if God were more obviously involved.

Jeremiah speaks to the exiles as they *gather far from home* – having lost the life they knew *without any sense of what life would be.* **Lots of people are having that experience as we enter 2021.** We haven’t been carried off in exile – but there are plenty of *exile experiences* to go around. The good news here is that while world-wide pandemic may be new to all of us, the exile experiences of life are not new in either the world or among God’s people.

Jeremiah had his work cut out for him. He had two challenging and opposite groups of people to **whom he was seeking to bring God’s presence and word.** The first group we might call, “the *Eeyore* group.*” To be fair they had been through some hard days...*but they were so overwhelmed they could see nothing other than hardship and sorrow, forever.* The unknown was terrifying...and *what is ahead is always unknown.* They wore t-shirts that said, **“Don’t try to happy me up!”** on the front. On the back it said, **“things are bad”.** The other group pulling hard on people’s hearts and minds were the **“positive at all costs group.”** You know, the people who, when you break your leg, say, **“Why so glum?! You have one good one left! You are so lucky!”** So the two obvious choices one heard were, *“There is no hope,* and *“nothing is wrong.”* That’s living between a rock and a hard place. And the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and said, “Jeremiah, neither of these messages are sufficient.

Humans don't know the future...but I do, says the Lord. And my plans for you are the *kind you want to stick around for*...but they are also the kind of plans you can't assume you know. The best-case scenario is that *we embrace the lives we have to both give and receive blessing*. When we live out the grace God has given us – we bless those around us...and that leads to better places indeed.

Whether talking disease or politics there is hope. There is always hope. As Jeremiah said, ***our hope is in blessing those with whom we live – making life better for everyone as we discover the future God will build along the way.***

You may have seen the movie entitled, “*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*” from a few years ago about a group of retirees from England who go to India to try and make the most of their retirement. The hotel turned out to be less exotic than hoped and one by one their dreams of what *they thought would be* began to come apart. At the end, one of those hopeful retirees played by Judy Densch sat down to write in her journal – and, reflecting on their experiences wrote this:

(The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel Ending Clip)

This year, **it turns out we are all starting over**. God tells us through Jeremiah that *if we seek God, we will be found*. Let's find the courage to give and receive blessing. Getting up every day – doing our best for God who loves us. And it can turn out that starting over is a hopeful enterprise in the economy of grace.

* Eeyore is a character in the Winnie-the-Pooh books by A. A. Milne. He is generally characterized as a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, anhedonic, old grey stuffed donkey who is a friend of the title character, Winnie-the-Pooh.