The Future Is Now
Jeremiah 29:4-9

The continuing rave for television viewing seems to be Reality TV. In the past few years, American viewers have experienced an explosion of such shows as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *Big Brother*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *The Bachelor*, *Shark Tank*, and *The Great British Baking Show*. The draw of Reality TV is the opportunity to experience an aspect of life through someone else. When life seems dull and uneventful, Reality TV brings fantasy and dreams right into your living room. While some of the shows have positive objective, the “reality” is that very few of these programs depict what is truly “real.” But when your life is full of fear and despair, you’ll do anything for a glimpse of hope and possibility.

Last week we learned that God’s desire is that we live with hope and a future – it’s in his plan. For the exiles in Babylon that included the hope of return to the Promised Land. As Christians, we also look forward to a promised land – everlasting life in heaven. Jesus reminds us that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life (Jn.3:16). In our call to worship we voiced the words John heard and shared: “Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4). Now that’s something to look forward to!

It’s with good reason so many songs and hymns remind us of that great and glorious day when we together with all who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior will be received into heaven and live forever with God. Songs like *Soon and Very Soon*, *When We All Get to Heaven*, and *When the Roll Is Called up Yonder* all remind us of the hope and future that God promises in His Word and gives us strength to face each new day.
There is a song that was popular with a lot of Gospel quartets when I was young that goes something like this: *This world is not my home; I’m just a passing through. If heaven’s not my home, then Lord what will I do? The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door. And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.* For those who have “fought the good fight, have finished the race, and have kept the faith” (2Tm.4:7) and are certain their time on earth is almost through, this song is very appropriate. But for the rest of us the lyrics give a false impression of the hope and future God has planned.

The exiled Israelites had become discouraged when the claims of the so-called prophets had not come true. So God wrote them a letter through the prophet Jeremiah to give his people hope and a future. Let’s look at the beginning of the letter, which we skipped last week to understand the context of God’s provision of hope and future (Read Text).

Did you notice how the letter begins? “*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says to all those I carried into exile*” (v.4). That they were in exile was not ultimately the result of Nebuchadnezzar’s policies, but because of God’s purposes. And God’s purposes included the fact that the Israelites were in Babylon. In God’s plan, the exile would be the means by which the Israelites would return to God. The exile was a result of their disobedience and sin - that they could understand. But God also wants to use them to bless the Babylonians. Now that raised some eyebrows. I can just about hear them, “Wait a minute. Pray for peace for the enemy? Work hard so that the enemy will prosper? Why bother? This isn’t our home. Even if we have to be here for seventy years, I’m not putting all my energy to help out old king Nebby. Let’s just do enough to get by until we finally get out of here. Then we’ll have it made in the Promised Land.”

The expectation is that “hope and a future” are – well – off in the future, not for now.
But look again. Does God anywhere say that his plans for hope and a future take effect only after the seventy years are over; that they will not experience prosperity or have any hope until they have returned to a geographic location? As I read this letter, the future is now. “*Build homes, conduct business, get married, and raise families. And, while you’re doing that, pray for the peace of Babylon ... because when it prospers you, too, will prosper. Yes, my plan includes your return in seventy years, but it also includes what’s happening now. Your prosperity, hope, and future are now.*”

Human nature hasn’t changed much, has it? Most of us, when we accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, were told that we would live forever in heaven and that’s true. Then we spend our time on earth waiting, feeling as if we are in exile until we finally leave for heaven. But we forget that believing brought us into a wonderful relationship with God right now. We are no longer enslaved to sin and the trappings of this world; we get to live for God now. Either no one told us or we weren’t paying attention to the fact that the future is now.

Without Christ, we are dead in our sins and life, such as it is, is full of fear and despair. But when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, God makes us alive with Christ (Eph.2:1-4), we become new creations (2Cor.5:17), and have eternal life (Jn5:24); as in, it begins at that moment. That is why Paul tells us, “*To live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Ph.1:21). If we die we will be with Christ – how cool! But while we are alive on this earth we participate with God in bringing others to Christ – equally cool!

Now it is God’s purpose that you are here in Clare – some for a lifetime, others for a portion of their lifetime. You are called to *live* were you are and to “*seek the peace and prosperity of the city into which [God] has carried you. Pray to the Lord for it.*” God says that as Clare prospers so you will prosper.
I like how the RSV renders the verse, “Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Why is praying such a necessary component? Edward Bauman explains in his book *Intercessory Prayer*, “When we pray for others we do not stand with outstretched hands hoping to receive something for ourselves. We stand at God’s side, working together with Him, in the task of redeeming others.” We cannot pray and then stand by idly by. When we pray, God empowers us to action; we become a part of God’s plan.

How do you now live in God’s plan of hope and future? You live as if this is where the Promised Land is, where heaven is, where God is … because it is. Romans 12 tells us how to live into God’s plan. I like how Eugene Petersen paraphrased this text:

> Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

> Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down. Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody. Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. “I’ll do the judging,” says God. “I’ll take care of it.”

> Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he’s thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Reality TV is a big draw because we live in a world that is void of hope and lacking in possibility. We can show them that hope and a future is not only a possibility, it’s a reality. The future is now. It’s yours to have. But more importantly, it’s yours to show and give. “Seek the peace and prosperity of the [Clare area] to which I have carried you. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”