



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater
Text: Jeremiah 29:1,4-14

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A Future with Hope

I've long been fascinated by tales about time travel. As a child, I was drawn to any story or movie about a time machine, particularly stories about going back in time, perhaps that interest fostered my love of history. The future, particularly as I get older, has somehow felt less alluring to me, perhaps because by its very nature we know much less about it! We can only imagine what the future will bring.

Last week I attended a national retreat for the Just Power Alliance with other leaders and staff from our local broad-based community organizing affiliate, Common Ground. The five of us from Milwaukee gathered with about fifty other leaders from eight sibling affiliates from around the country to talk about our shared organizing goals, where we might work together, and how we can support one another during this current season in our American life. And so, we spent a morning together learning about and discussing the concept of "futures thinking" and how it might help both our alliance and our individual affiliates consider our work together. According to Stanford's *Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society*, contemporary "futures thinking" has its roots in the seminal book, "Future Shock" published in 1970 by Alvin Toffler. In the wake of the rapid cultural change of the 1960's, Toffler proposed that our present lives could be enriched by a deeper understanding and awareness of our shared future. Compared to "culture shock suffered by travelers to foreign countries ... similarly," Toffler argued, "people are likely to experience shock as things around them change so much that they feel like strangers in what used to be familiar environments. The result of such future shock can be mass disorientation, irrationality, and widespread malaise."¹ The remedy proposed by Toffler and advocated for by contemporary futurists is to develop and teach strategies to help people and organizations to consider how their planning for the future can also help them today. Much more than simply strategic planning, though, "futures thinking" helps people to learn to scan the horizon to spot signals of change around us, to analyze trends, and to identify large underlying patterns at work in our society.² In our world of increasing polarities and extremes, I personally love how "futures thinking" encourages us to expand our perspective, revealing multiple possible paths – not a single predetermined outcome; how it helps us to imagine diverse scenarios and understand how today's choices – the choices we make – will shape tomorrow's world.³

On an organizational level, our national alliance really resonated with the learning and activities we experienced last week and how they encouraged us to think in new ways about our aspirations for the future, the trends and drivers that push us – many outside

our control, and the things that hold us back, weigh us down, constrain us, or get in the way. We learned four key principles of “futures thinking” from our trainer, Amalia Deloney:

- 1) That the future is not a distant place but something shaped by our actions, ideas, and commitments today.
- 2) That the impact of our work extends beyond the current moment – beyond this project, team, or organization – into a world that will continue to evolve long after we are gone.
- 3) In our “futures work,” we hold space for future generations – for the people, animals, plants, and lands that will inherit the world we shape, recognizing our responsibility to consider their well-being and right to thrive.
- 4) As we engage this work, we do so with intention and responsibility, knowing that the futures we help shape must be just, inclusive, and regenerative – where all living systems have the opportunity to flourish.⁴

Amalia’s reminder to us that “our present was someone else’s future,” helped me to clarify that an important reason these ideas are so resonant for me and for all of us I hope, is that they’re deeply relational, they imply a responsibility between generations. That shared responsibility is something that we articulate so beautifully in our Immanuel mission statement, “that the church does not live for itself ... and that ‘new occasions teach new duties’, that we embrace change and commit ourselves to discerning the responsibilities and opportunities to which God calls us in each new day.”⁵ As we lean into these values that we affirm, in this season of change and transition in our own life together at Immanuel, perhaps an invitation to thinking about the future will help us on our way today.

As I’ve been contemplating the future anew in the last ten days or so, I immediately thought of one of my favorite texts, part of our scripture reading for today: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Part of my love for this text, beyond its encouraging message, is that a dear friend gave me a tile with these words engraved on it for my ordination some 20+ years ago and it’s been sitting on a shelf in my office, encouraging me ever since! The tile is replicated on the bulletin cover and also on display in the Great Hall today!

Not unlike contemporary “futures thinking,” the mission of the prophet Jeremiah was all about the future, too. His whole book was one big invitation to the Israelites to think in new ways about the future. In the context of their lives in exile in Babylon, the Israelites are in “future shock,” times ten, enduring the horrific experience of having been deported from their homeland and forced to make do in a new place. Some have even said that, “Jeremiah [himself] talks like someone who has awakened from a nightmare, convinced that the nightmare is coming true.”⁶ And so called by God, to speak the truth to God’s people as he understood it, Jeremiah spoke up and spoke out,

for and to his people. Today's text comes from a letter that was written by Jeremiah to the leaders, priests, prophets, and people in exile in Babylon.

First and foremost, Jeremiah reminds them that God is with them; that God's divine blessing can reach them wherever they are. For a people who greatly valued place, the promise that God is with them no matter where they are was so important. They are also reminded that even though God offers welfare and care, they should be cautious about expecting that on their own terms and timeline.

Secondly, Jeremiah urges the exiles to do the best they can to make lives in this new place: build homes, plant gardens, make families. He encourages that, unlike what other prophets and diviners might be saying, that their exile may be generational, that it could last many years. That generational context, Jeremiah argues, is all the more reason why the people should invest in sustaining their communal life in this new place. He encourages them not to keep to themselves, but to seek the welfare of the city and the context where they find themselves. Although it's not their homeland, a healthy and improved Babylon will provide a better home for them and their future generations. It's in their best interest to make the best of it.

And finally, we turn to our special verse for today, the promise of a future with hope, beautifully summarized by Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker from Luther Seminary. "This is such a beautiful [and beloved] passage," she says, "and even better when you realize the context in which it's said, to people in Babylon, in the capital city of the enemy empire, wondering what in the world they're supposed to do there and wondering why they're there. They're afraid that God has no presence there or no power. ... But ... In that context God says, 'I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' These people didn't have a future," she continues, "they didn't trust that there would be a future, they were captives, they were prisoners of war, you might say, in this enemy land ... and God promises them a future. God promises them a future that is guided by God and held in God's hands that includes the promise of going home again. When the time is fulfilled, in God's future, in God's promised time, despite all appearances to the contrary, God will give them a future with hope and will bring them home again." ⁷

Just a few chapters earlier, Jeremiah sets the stage for this promise by offering the amazing and beautiful affirmation that the exiles themselves are the carriers of God's future, of God's hope: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." God was with the Israelites and God is with us as we look to the future and help to make the future for the next generation, with intention and responsibility, so that all may flourish.

So through the lens of Jeremiah's good news for the Israelites, I wonder what we might hear as we consider our own context and our feelings about the future. For surely the deep sense of dislocation the Israelites felt transcends the centuries, from their past to our future. Perhaps we haven't actually left our homes, but we may have our own sense of dislocation that can be as much social or economic or "fill in the blank" as it is geographical. Jeremiah helps us to consider our own experience of being dislocated or disconnected, out of sorts, that something's been disrupted in our lives, that has called into question all the old familiar patterns and has placed us in a new situation where the outlook is precarious at best.⁸ Whatever our struggles and worries, whatever our own contemporary experiences of exile might be, my hope and my prayer today as we continue to move into our future together in this community of faith, is that we'll find our own good news in the promises made by Jeremiah to all the exiles: that God is with us, that we're called to invest and build community together, and that there is a future with hope for each one of us and for all of us!

As I was picking hymns for today, I turned to an old favorite, *The God of Abraham Praise*, often a good choice to pair with a text like today's from the Old Testament. I was surprised and pleased to learn something new about this hymn as I read the footnote at the bottom of the page and discovered that both the text and the tune have roots in an ancient Hebrew prayer, the Yigdal, still often said or sung at the end of a Friday night Jewish Shabbat service, sometimes back and forth by a cantor and congregation. The prayer includes thirteen principles of faith about the nature of God and God's steadfast presence in the lives of God's people. So, as we close our service today singing our own version of this ancient prayer, may we each one of us and all of us, be encouraged by the promise that God is with us, and always will be, as we make the future, together. AMEN.

¹ Gorbis, Marina, *Using Strategic Foresight to Create the Future We Want*, Stanford Social Innovation Review, accessed at: <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/futures-thinking-nonprofit-strategy>

² Ibid.

³ Deloney, Amalia. Point A Studio (<https://www.point-a.studio/>). Slides from presentation to *The Just Power Alliance*, 6 February 2025.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mission Statement of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, accessed at: <https://www.immanuelwi.org/missionstatement>

⁶ Yancey, Philip and Tim Stafford. *The Student Bible (NIV)*, Zondervan, 1986, p. 660.

⁷ Working Preacher, Narrative Lectionary 101: Jeremiah, accessed at:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/narrative-lectionary-101-jeremiah>

⁸ Ibid.