

WGUMC October 13, 2013 "Welcome the Future"
Jeremiah 29:1, 10-14; Luke 12:32-34

If you remember, it was hard to welcome the future back in December of 2007, when the Great Recession began. At first it seemed like a typical slump. Then it got scary. And we didn't know the half of it.

In 2008, we bailed out the banks but didn't like it. In 2009, we got a stimulus package, but not everyone was feeling it. In 2010, they told us the recession ended, but we didn't believe it. In 2011 and 2012, they kept saying things were getting better, but too many folk were still waiting for it. In 2013, we're breathing a little easier, but we're not sure we can trust it. We don't know about 2014 yet, but we are people of faith, so we can and we will welcome the future for no other reason than because we know God is in it.

The Prophet Jeremiah was trying to get his people to welcome the future. He lived during the time of the Babylonian exile. Talk about an economic crisis. After the Babylonians

invaded Israel, they seized any Jew who had any marketable skill and carted them off to Babylon. The Jews gave up jobs, homes, even their heartland, and went into exile.

You can bet they were pretty discouraged, so Jeremiah wrote a letter to them. Early in that letter, he tells them to stop moping around and start moving: While you're in Babylon, get busy, build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children, and seek the welfare of your new city. In other words, get a life. [Jeremiah 29:5-7]

For years, we were living in a kind of economic exile and we were also desperate to get a life, or at least a living. Many of us had to start over during the Great Recession. It was really hard, and we had to put our heart into it. Despite our efforts, all the economic indicators were telling us that we were going to be in Babylon for a good long while.

Jeremiah tells the people that when 70 years are completed—in other words, in God's good time—their good

fortunes will return: I will visit you; I will fulfill my promise to you; I will bring you back. [Jeremiah 29:10]

And in time the Jews did go back, not all at once, but in several waves. I got to thinking that it's been the same for us. Some of us are feeling as if we are back from economic exile. Some of us are on the way. And some of us are still out there, hoping to catch the next wave.

No matter who we are or where we are, God tells each one of us, "Surely I know the plans that I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." [Jeremiah 29:11]

But how will anyone believe it if no one hears it? And how will anyone hear it if no one proclaims it? Our job in this moment in time, in this place, is to assure all people that God wants to give them a future with hope. We'd better believe it so we can preach it or we'll just have to preach it until we believe it.

Well, I have some good news. It looks like we made it. This church has survived six years of the most severe economic crisis since the 1930's, without losing a pastor, without sacrificing programs, and without selling properties. We've done far better than a lot of nonprofits. And while we're not out of the woods, we're not in exile, either. So I don't have to tell you to build houses and plant gardens in Babylon. Let's rebuild a life here in Willow Glen. And listen while I preach to you a future with hope.

I'm better equipped to do that now than ever before, partly because I've been through my own exile and made it back. But much more so because I'm now pastor of a church that has every reason to hope.

The California-Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church has a strategic plan to turn around decades of denominational decline. By 2020, the Conference plans on having 1 new multicultural congregation of no fewer than

1,000 active participants each week and 5 existing congregations growing to that same size. The Conference also aims to have 20 churches with 500 active participants each week.

I look at this church and our physical resources and think 1,000 is a stretch, but what about 500? I look around at the other churches in the Conference that have the potential for growth, and I wouldn't rather be in any of them. Jeremiah tells us that God has plans for us. Is this one of them? We certainly have the program staff to do it. We have the young families. Their children remind us that we really do have the energy. And despite appearances to the contrary, we have the money. I think enough of us have the understanding that a spiritual life is absolutely necessary. But do we have a sense of urgency? In other words, I think we get it, but do we really want to share it? What I'm trying to figure out is: do you believe that this church has a future with hope?

For if you do, I'm all in. I'll do whatever it takes. If I don't know how to do it, I'll learn. And if you help me do what I can't do, we can't lose. If your gifts make it possible for me to spend less time raising money and more time equipping us for ministry, then I believe we have a future with hope.

I still have to talk about money. Some of the time, yes, because in Silicon Valley, money—the perceived scarcity of it, the time and energy we spend trying to get it and the anxiety we feel about losing it—is the Number One stumbling block to our spiritual growth. Since my first concern is the stewardship of souls, I am compelled to talk about the stewardship of money. Sacrificial giving is essential to spiritual growth. We're not making disciples, if they're not making sacrifices. It's an inconvenient truth: unless it costs you, it won't transform you.

So I'll just say this: we need to raise about \$325,000 or 70% of our budget through pledges. We have about 325 members, including those who are out-of-town and inactive

members, who are teenagers and young adults. You can do the math. You and God know what you can give. If last year you gave the denominational average, which is about 2% of your before-tax income, go for 3%. If you're giving 5%, keep going, keep making sacrifices, until you get to a tithe or to that point where you have identified all the things in your life that are not as important as giving the world a future with hope.

And that's all I'm going to say about money in this sermon, because I want to focus more on the stewardship of souls. Economic crisis or no economic crisis, every one of us has been in exile at some time or other. We've been lost, alone and feeling the utter absence of God and needing someone to steward our soul. Like the young woman I met this last week. She came by and was sitting outside the office when Jane opened the door. For once, the church with the open minds and open hearts actually had an open door! The woman asked to see a pastor. To my surprise, she didn't need gas or

groceries, just a little grace. She asked me if I would pray with her. It was the best thing that happened to me all week. What a privilege to be invited to go into someone else's exile to help them pray their anxiety away. God's Spirit and your support of this church enabled us to open our door that day. Bless you.

And that's exactly what I want us to do for each other and for lots of others: steward their souls. Instead of hounding you for a pledge, I want to pray with you. I want to visit and read the Bible with you, teach you, learn from you, and grow with you. Because, you see, you are my treasures. I couldn't begin to do what God wants me and what you pay me to do without all of you.

We've started talking about the treasures in this church, and over the next several weeks, you'll be hearing more about them: our children's ministry; our family ministry; our youth ministry; our music ministry; our adult studies; our hands-on, hearts-in mission and service; and our participation in the global

ministries of the United Methodist Church. But these treasures wouldn't be worth anything without you. Our program staff is superb, but they couldn't do anything without you. Here are my treasures, and so this is where I put my heart. For 2014, I make that pledge to you. And I ask you to make a pledge and put some of your treasure into this little patch of heaven, too.

Thank you.