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SERMON TITLE: Wonderful News: *The Life & Times of Jeremiah*
SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31:1-11
DATE: December 1, 2019
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Advent One

Jeremiah prophesied for forty years before Judah went into captivity and Jerusalem was destroyed. His was a voice of warning because the people needed it. But all those years the people ignored him. It didn't seem like his concerns were real. But things were happening. Throughout the forty years their enemy, Babylon, grew stronger, first defeating Assyria then defeating the Egyptians. Judah, due to its geographical location, was caught in the middle of the warfare.

Only then did Jeremiah's warning became reality. Babylon's King, Nebuchadnezzar attacked and laid siege to Jerusalem, captured the city, and burned it to the ground. He desecrated Israel's temple by pillaging its holy vessels. Most of its citizens were carried away into exile. They lost everything—their homes, their livelihoods, their church, their city, their land, their neighbors, their shopping centers—everything familiar was gone.

Jeremiah's predictions came true.

But throughout the forty years and even after Judah was conquered there were other prophets who publicly disagreed with Jeremiah. They declared quite the opposite from him. They stirred up animosity toward him.

It is kind of like the two factions of television news stations that exist in 2019—quite the opposite from each other; each one denying the claims of the other.

So Jeremiah declared one point of view.

The other prophets refuted his prophecies with their own projections.

You understand how that can happen. Like journalists in 2019, each unswervingly believes his or her own point of view.

Jeremiah's opposers disagreed so strongly they wanted to kill him. (Jer 26:11) But, governmental officials defended Jeremiah and protected him from being put to death. (Jer 26:26, 24)

Well, much to the opposers' disappointment, Jeremiah's original predictions came true.

Even after the nation was conquered, though, the opposition began prophesying, "Those temple vessels will soon be back (Jer 27:18) and our people will return in two years." (Jer 29:11)

Jeremiah reiterated God's declaration, "It will be seventy years, not two." (Jer 29:10. See also 25:11-12)

These two political factions locked horns throughout this period of time in which Israel lost her land and her identity as a nation.

Times were very dark. What happened to God? What happened to God's protection? What's happened to us? What will our future be like?

Can you imagine the distress?

And yet the tug and pull among Jeremiah and the false prophets goes on chapter after chapter.¹

And then something special happens. Let's read it. READ Jeremiah 31:1-11 (NLT)

Suddenly Jeremiah proclaims wonderful news. Jeremiah says something comforting. Jeremiah begins shining a light on God's people.

Jeremiah begins with a promise. This promise was there from the beginning but was long forgotten because we tend to forget God's promises.

Have you had a downturn in life that seems that all is lost? Have you ever had to wait on God? Have things seemed dark for you? Everyone goes through this and if you haven't had downturns in life, you will.

But there is purpose in the downturn.

Paul tells us in Romans:

"We can rejoice . . . when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance.

¹ You can tell a false prophet by whether his predictions come true or not.

And endurance develops character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment (5:3-5).

Having faith means growing in faith, and faith in God grows in hardship. And you must stay strong.

Jeremiah was giving hope in the downturn. Hope that has to do with God never leads to disappointment.

Here's the hope:
God still loves you.

These were people who had failed God miserably. They had not listened; they had not succeeded; they had lost faith.

Here's God's offer of hope:
I will rebuild you.

Do you remember Jeremiah's first words from God? Turn back to chapter one and you will read, "Jeremiah, you will pluck up and pull down . . . to build and to plant." (see Jer 1:10)

Here's the happy fulfillment for God's people:
You are going to plant vineyards and eat the produce from your garden. You will go home with joy!

It did not matter whether they were young or old, capable or handicapped. God loved them all. It was wonderful news.

Think of it as this. Envision a huge, long-lasting, beautiful, shining, light-filled, glowing mansion versus a poorly constructed small, crooked, unpainted shack made from rotting wood. It takes great dependency on God to move out of the shack and into the presence represented in the luminous, pristine, strong, other worldly building God wants to make of you.

Does it surprise you that God has this good in mind for you—after all this long period of waiting?

All of the correction and punishment that we resist in the first thirty chapters of Jeremiah was so that Israel (and all the surrounding nations—and us!) would know that God is the Lord and he has the power to do this for you.

Those who survive have a future. They gain the promises.
Those who turn to the Lord survive and thrive.

This is a PROMISE.

It is as sure as your birthday coming around each year. Have you ever watched how a child anticipates his or her birthday? I was told by a child over the holiday, "My birthday is coming in four months." Her anticipation is filled with promise of not just good but GREAT things. I will probably be reminded of the coming promise over the course of each and every week

until its fulfillment. Wouldn't it be great for us to approach God's promises this way?

But this is what we need to understand about ourselves. We domesticate God's promises. We make them small. We tend to generalize or explain promises away. We call it "pie in the sky." We trivialize them into only what is humanly possible until they disappear into what we can accomplish for ourselves—the little shack rather than the luminous mansion.

However, we diminish God's promises to our own detriment. God still gives them and they are **promissory notes**. That is "a written promise to do or provide something, usually presented as a gift and *claimable [when or] however the recipient chooses.*"²

Often we don't even want to share our stories of God's realized promises for fear of being laughed at or looked down on. Or perhaps we don't share them because we do not believe God will do them for somebody else, like our loved ones. Nevertheless, God is a God of promise. God is a God who can do more than you can even imagine or ask—for you and for those you love. God is a God of light and hope and newness and building something beautiful, when you believe.

The Lord says, "Buckle down, take the discipline I have brought you, draw close to me, lift up your head. In my time I will fulfill to you my promise. Believe this wonderful news!"

"For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. *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*" (Jer 29:10-11).

Advent is a time of waiting but it is also a time of great hope. Are you anticipating God's promise with hope? It is wonderful news, far beyond what you can imagine.

Listen to this message from the LORD, and proclaim it to everyone around you. It is a sure promise.

AMEN

² This definition from dictionary.com has its theological limitations because God in wisdom chooses the timing of the promises given to us for our fullest benefit.