A Future With Hope:
1. Where Are We Going

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Jeremiah 29:11
Luke 8:26-39

June 23, 2013
Jeremiah 29:11
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.

Luke 8:26-39
Then [Jesus and his disciples] arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— 29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 30 Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. 31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35 Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. 36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

“People learn to love their chains,” said Daenerys Targaryen, from HBO’s Game of Thrones, as she looked over a slave city she was trying to free. “People learn to love their chains.”

So wrote Rick Morley, Episcopal priest and author reflecting on this passage from Luke’s Gospel about Jesus’ encounters with the man from the area of the Gerasenes who was wrestling with a mental illness that had him so out of control that led the community to believe that the only way to control him was to bind him with chains and shackles or let him live out in the wild.


And then the people were scared. The people went out to see what was going on with Jesus and this man. “They found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.” Strange, right? Once the man is in his right state of mind and not acting out of the pain caused by this disease which controlled his life.

“I can understand being scared to death when there’s a naked crazy man living down by the cemetery,” writes Rick Morley, “but being scared when he’s in his right mind again and clothed? Perhaps they were scared by Jesus’ power over such dark forces. But, more likely, they were scared because the delicate balance of their lives, however unbalanced it was, had been disrupted.”

The town is still in chains. The people are still bound up with what has held them back all the years that this man had been struggling. “What to do, what to do?” I can almost imagine them wringing their hands in angst figuring out what to do with this man. They
decide that the best thing to do is to chain him up so he can’t scare them. And then they get so used to having him chained and out of sight that the possibility of having him live among them is unthinkable.

What if suddenly God lets you know that what you have been doing is not the right response? What if God lets you know that the better response is to accept this man as he is and let him be a part of your community? What if God lets you know that the only way to rid your life of the fear is to face it directly and find other solutions? That’s what happened in this story.

Jesus had already rid their town of a legion of demons. But sometimes people learn to love their chains rather than face the work that freedom requires.

Next week, July 1, I start my 6th year as your pastor. And I head in that direction with a sense that big things are about to happen because “God ain’t done with us yet.”

My hope is that this summer we can be thinking out loud about what’s next for Hope and what it is that God has set in front of us for our future. It takes listening for God as much as it does talking about God so I’ve decided we should do both. This past year we kicked-off our “Hope for the Future” capital campaign and we’ve rolled it forward so that we’re halfway toward the financial goal that we’ve set before ourselves. That got me thinking that that title means a lot more than a financial goal and some physical renovations to our facilities.

“Hope for the Future” points to a living reality – goals for the future of this congregation, for our own family life together, for our individual faith-based plans and decisions.

And in it all as I begin year 6 with you and you begin your whatever number year it is for you as a part of this Hope family, I pray that we can let Jeremiah’s words remind us that we are not in this by ourselves.

“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.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

So that we can hear each other and listen for God in what each of us has to say, I’ve asked 7 of us – Joanne Miles, Andy Merrell, Sonja Kerr, Mary Grey Emmett, Donna Wren, Nick Stango, and Alison Bausman – plus 2 of our favorite deacons – Doris Dalton and David Brown – to think aloud as they reflect on where Hope is headed for our future. It is together with God that we design our future and work out where we are going.

Often when we hear the word “plan” – as in God has a plan for us – we get hung up on that word thinking that God has set out a path for each one of us that can’t be changed. But that’s not how best to interpret that. I do not believe that we are predestined along some already defined path and that what happens is already pre-ordained. The problem with that is that it can make us feel like puppets dancing on God’s strings with no ability to control our future. And I think deep down we all know that that’s just wrong.

Decisions – good and bad – change the direction of the journey we’re on all the time. Speed bumps and yield signs are often needed to remind us that there is no need to speed through life.

“But pastor, Jeremiah says God has plans for us so all we have to do is let those plans play out right?” No, I don’t think that’s what we’re talking about here. God has plans for us – for each of us and all of us – and those plans, says Jesus, are to love one another, to treat each other with justice, to reverse the ways if the world so that the first will be last and the last first, to challenge the systems that dominate, and to break the chains that hold us down.
Break the chains. Break the chains that bind up the man with the demons. But then also break the chains that bind up the community which thinks it’s found the solution in those shackles and chains. Break the chains that hold back the community from imagining a different future. Easier said than done maybe.

New things are happening – but only if we throw off those chains that we have learned to love. New things are happening – not just here at Hope but all around the Church. God is ripping off chains all around us – but we’re tempted to leave on the chains that we have learned to love – our fears, our prejudices, our intolerance. The church has forged chains for itself that feel comfortable and we’re hesitant to take them off.

People that don’t look like us or sound like us are a part of us – can the church adapt? People with disabilities have been unshackled and are welcome as our buildings and our attitudes become more accessible – can the church adjust? People with a different sexual orientation than what we’re comfortable with for ourselves are no longer willing to be in the closet we created for them – will the church open its doors more widely? People who have never been to church or haven’t been for a long time are poking their heads in – can the church adapt? People who have different needs than we’ve ever imagined. People who have a desire for different worship styles and different music and different visual cues are clambering for a place to call home – is it here or somewhere else?

Different, different, different. Don’t get me wrong. I said different, not easy.

There’s a piece of art hanging at the bottom of my stairs at home that I have to look at every day as I stumbled down to start my day. “Change of any sort requires courage,” it reads. Change of any sort requires courage.

Let’s do it together. Let’s be faithful to Jeremiah’s reminder that God has a future for us – a future that include “plans for your welfare and not for harm” and “a future with hope.”

The NIV says “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”; CEV reads “plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope;” KJV is “thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.” Prosper, not harm, hope and a future, peace and not disaster or evil but a future filled with hope. With those kinds of promises – if we truly accept as reality what scripture tells us – we can’t go wrong.

This summer as we start year 6 together, as Hope begins year 9 as a merged congregation, as we begin a calming summer respite let’s listen and watch for God among us and together discern what God has in mind for Hope for the future.

Amen.