

A Hope and a Future

Preview Weekend

September 5-6, 2020

Text: Jeremiah 29

In 2020, we can begin to wonder: Where is the hope? Sarah Lipson is a public health researcher at Boston University. Here's what she has discovered about hope in 2020. "The pandemic has unearthed so much uncertainty, and that's what anxiety is all about," she says. Likewise, students in the COVID-19 era might find it especially hard to think about the future, one of the hallmarks of depression. There's a sense of "hopelessness among young people," she says. And so we can wonder, where is the hope?

Hartford Health Care reports on what they call the underlying crisis of COVID-19 -- more than a third of Americans report related depression and anxiety. Dr. James O'Dea of their Behavioral Health Network writes, "We're driven to protect ourselves and loved ones from perceived threats, and the uncertainty surrounding this situation escalates fears." Census Bureau statistics show that 24% of people reported significant symptoms of major depressive disorder and 30% symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and were, in some cases, double those uncovered in 2014. When anxiety and depression have doubled, where is the hope?

Among some populations, it's getting worse. "The New York Times" reported on recent findings by the CDC that the collateral damage from the pandemic continues. Young adults, as well as Black and Latino people of all ages, describe rising levels of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts and increased substance abuse. In a research survey, U.S. residents reported signs of eroding mental health in reaction to the toll of coronavirus illnesses and deaths and to the life-altering restrictions imposed by lockdowns. In an online survey of 5,400 people, the prevalence of anxiety symptoms was three times as high as those reported in 2019. And depression was four times as high. Where is the hope?

Statistics are one thing. Personal experience is another. Although my wife might argue otherwise, I'd like to think I'm a person who is fairly well-balanced emotionally. But I know my own personal experience during the pandemic makes these statistics believable to me. The first week of March, I was at a conference with some other pastors. And that was the last time life seemed pretty normal. Covid was in the news, but it seemed like a distant and contained threat. A couple weeks later, in mid-March, I remember thinking, "15 days to flatten the curve. We can do this!" But then days turned into weeks turned into months. And we all had to adjust to the new reality. For me, the July spike was a time of anxiety. It was a rude shock after going green in June. And I wrestled with anxious thoughts for several days. In that season, I often wondered, "where is the Hope?"

2020 has been a year of anxiety at one level or another for nearly all of us. I know from talking to friends and family that it's been hard. And hope has been in short supply this year. You could say there is a deficit of hope in 2020.

In July, we did a congregational survey at Crossroads to learn more. Here's what you said. Over 40% reported moderate, significant, or overwhelming anxiety. Even though 75% of people reported little or no financial stress. But the answer that really struck me was this -- over 25% of Crossroaders reported a diminished hope for the future. And so we can all wonder, where is the hope?

Fortunately for us, we can find templates for living in turbulent times -- times where hope is at a premium. We can look around the world today where we find people thriving in challenging circumstances. As a church, we have focused on Mozambique for over ten years. When we first engaged there, Mozambique was rated as the fourth poorest country in the world. People lacked the

very basics of life -- clean water, access to healthcare, stable food supplies. And yet we consistently find people who are joyful and thriving despite their circumstances.

Across the Middle East, in Muslim countries, Christianity is growing rapidly through a movement of home churches. In the face of persecution and a genuine threat of torture or death, followers of Jesus continue to find hope and then share that hope at great risk to themselves and their families. And we can look back in history to find people of God who were able to not just survive but even learned to thrive in turbulent times. Their secret? Finding hope.

One historical figure is a man named Jeremiah. And we learn about his life in the Bible in the Book of Jeremiah. He lived about 600 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah lived in a war-torn land. Israel was a divided kingdom at that point. And Jeremiah lived in the southern portion that was called Judah. It was a time of turmoil and upheaval. Not only was Israel divided, but wars raged both all around them and in their territory. At that time, a great shift in world power was taking place. The Assyrian Empire that had dominated the region was fading. The Babylonian Empire was rising and defeated both Assyria and Egypt, another great power of the region. This left Judah and Jerusalem in a precarious position. The people and leaders split into factions -- some pro-Egyptian, some pro-Babylonian. And society was greatly divided about the right course of action. Sounds like some parallels to our country today. Jeremiah was not just an observer but deeply involved in what was happening. He was a prophet, appointed by God as His messenger and representative in a deeply turbulent time. Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. In fact, he is known as the weeping prophet, living in emotional turmoil because he continually wrestled with his role in life and the kingdom of Judah. At times, he is one king's closest adviser. And there are seasons when those in power oppose and threaten him. He is arrested, imprisoned, and left in a cistern to die. But God preserves Jeremiah's life.

As history unfolds, Judah revolts against Babylon. It does not go well. In a series of three invasions and mass deportations, Jerusalem is destroyed. And much of the population is forced to live in exile in Babylon. In **Jeremiah 29** -- you can join me there in your Bible or app -- God gives Jeremiah a message in the form of a letter written down by Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, giving them an answer to the question -- where is the hope?

Imagine for a moment the personal upheaval that they would have experienced. They are uprooted from their homes, separated from their family and friends in many cases, and left to scramble to survive in a hostile land. They are living in desperate circumstances where there is an extreme deficit of hope. **Jeremiah 29:4-6** ***4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.***

The letter begins with some practical advice for living. And in a nutshell, God is encouraging the people to live life. To ***"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce."*** (v 5) This might seem obvious. But really it's not. The people are in exile. And maybe they're hoping it's all over tomorrow. That we can go home next week and get back to life as we know it. To "normal." But God is telling them it's going to be a while. And in this season, they need to create a new normal.

He continues to encourage them to ***"Increase in number there; do not decrease."*** (v 6) God is telling the exiles, "Don't give in." His plan is to expand his people during the exile. Rather than fading away in a foreign land, God is preparing His people for the next part of the story. Because even in exile, God is at work.

Then God provides wisdom. That probably seems counterintuitive. Remember they're refugees in a hostile land. **Jeremiah 29:7** ***Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*** So the message is pray for your community, even when it's a hostile nation. That doesn't seem fair to us. At first blush, it seems like they should pray for peace because their enemies get defeated. But in this

particular time, God is reminding His people that society is interconnected. And when our community has peace and prosperity, that it will overflow to all.

A common business saying is “a rising tide lifts all boats.” And while that’s often used in an economic sense, it applies to peace and prosperity. That’s one of the reasons we invest in our community, why we encourage our local schools with programs like iLead. By investing in the next generation, we’re helping to build a better community, one that benefits everyone as more students learn to lead and make a positive impact. That’s why our staff served the teachers at our local high school, encouraging them on their first in-service day with coffee and donuts to wake up their bodies. And prayer for peace and protection and safety because when our community is well, it overflows into our lives. And it helps grow God’s Kingdom around us.

And then God delivers the core message! **Jeremiah 29:10-14** *This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.^[a] I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”* Wow! What a message of hope. In a hopeless time, God promises hope.

There are two categories of promises of God in the Bible. Specific promises -- those to a specific person or circumstance. And general promises – those that are widely available to God’s people. This promise contains a little of both. The specific aspects of this promise involve time and circumstance. “After 70 years” is a specific promise for that moment in time. “I will bring you back to this place” is a specific promise. But there is a general promise of hope that stands today. And that is God’s promise of hope to us. I believe that God is speaking this over your life today. **Jeremiah 29:11** *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* And it is on that hope of God that we can stand today. That God knows you. That God created you. That God has a plan and a purpose for your life. That God has plans to give you a hope and a future. Let’s take a moment of silence to reflect on that amazing promise.

God’s amazing promise of hope also comes with some principles to practice. God has created us with free will -- the freedom to make choices. And our lives can reflect the consequences of our choices and actions. Here are some principles of the promise because God is for you.

1. Call on God in Prayer. *“Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” (v12)* One part of the promise is that God listens to you. That when you call on God in prayer, you can be assured that your Heavenly Father hears your prayer.

2. Seek God in an Intentional Way. *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (v13)* Seeking God with all your heart is not a trivial matter. It is putting the pursuit of God in first place. Not a casual or flippant request for a favor, but a commitment to seeking God and then responding as He leads.

3. Trust That God Can Overcome Hopeless Situations. *“I will be found by you and will bring you back from captivity.” (v14)* This promise was made to people who had been deported -- separated from the land and society that they knew, living among the enemy as exiles. And into that hopeless situation, God promised hope. Know that no matter how hopeless your situation may seem or how hopeless it seems for someone you love -- physical illness, depression, anxiety, financial hardship, joblessness, feeling adrift -- God’s promise of hope can transcend the illusion of hopelessness. Because the God of all creation created you with a plan and a purpose. And God’s promise comes with unimaginable power to bring breakthrough at the right moment and unquenchable hope while you wait. God makes YOU this promise because He knows that **Hope is Essential to Life.**

Do you want that hope? Maybe for yourself? A friend? A family member? Here's an action plan to build hope in life. Next week we are starting a journey of hope. It's called "A Hope and A Future." I hope by now you know where the name comes from. Focused on building hope for 2020 and beyond. It will be a six-week journey focused on finding faith and building hope in a season where it is critically needed.

There are three parts to "A Hope and a Future." But it only takes a single sign-up to activate all three parts. Simply go to the Crossroads App and tap A Hope and A Future. Sign up at xr.church/hope or text **xr** to **313131** to get a link.

Here's what we'll be doing together:

1. Weekend Worship. Whether you worship online or outdoors in person, prioritize weekend worship during this time. This is the way we seek God intentionally as a large group. I know that it makes a difference in my life and that it sets the tone for my week.

2. Daily Time With God. Remember God's promise in **Verse 12:** *"Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."* Each day you'll get a text message or email with a link to a daily scripture. In the past, we've had printed journals. But in the COVID world that seemed like an unsanitary thing. So there's an online devotional for each day that you can either save or email to yourself. Start your day with God and just see what happens.

3. Try a Small Group for 6 Weeks. Here's why. Finding faith and building hope is a process. And it works best in community. We have multiple new groups starting right now. So you can jump in with others and go to on the journey. My group will be meeting in a park so we can stay outside. Other groups will be meeting via Zoom for those who are more comfortable. And still others will be meeting in homes and backyards.

Some may wonder about whether it's really important to do all three -- weekend worship, daily time with God, and small group. For weekend worship -- either online or outdoors -- we all know that this time together is a spiritual recharge for us. Worship sets the tone for the week!

Here's some data. Remember the Crossroads Survey from July? The one where 25% of people reported diminished hope for the future? Here's a critical thing to know. Engagement with a small group showed a strong correlation with hope. In fact, small groups are critical when it comes to hope. People who are regular attenders at small group, well, they reported their hope for the future was impacted. But get this if you're wondering about the value of small group. Those who do not attend a small group, what would you guess their hope impact was? 5% less hope? 10%? 25% less hope? 33% less? Survey says those who do not attend a small group were 34% -- that is one-third more likely -- to say their hope for the future was diminished.

Let's take a minute to sign up together. Simply go to the Crossroads App and tap **A Hope and A Future**. Sign up at xr.church/hope. Or text **xr** to **313131** to get a link.