

Hope for exiles (Easter Day A; Jeremiah 31:1-6)

The idea of preaching from Jeremiah on Easter Sunday scares me.

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The idea of preaching from Jeremiah on Easter Sunday scares me. It seems filled with landmines for the ultimate Christian *faux pas*: carelessly trampling over the Jewish covenant referred to by Jeremiah, announcing a sloppy supersessionist interpretation of his joyful vision of the exile's return.

Caution is appropriate here, but depending on the congregation, we might also need a hearty dose of "Do not be afraid." Jeremiah's vision aligns with the promises of God that lie close to the modern exile's heart and hopes. Easter may be the perfect day to riff on this glad song, sung now in different keys by both Christians and Jews. The old tune was introduced to a new audience in the wake of the resurrection, and for some, it is a favorite—fit for the feast.

I think of my current congregation, filled with immigrants and refugees who yearn for the day Jeremiah describes, when all the families—all the warring and separated families—will be one people, belonging to God and to each other. Some of them have already quite literally "survived the sword" and "found grace in the wilderness"—as Sudanese Lost Boys, as asylum seekers making their way north through Latin America. One widow tells me repeatedly that she has seen "the Lord who appeared to her" during wartime through miraculous sustenance, just like the widow of Zarephath.

I trust her. The United States can be economically and culturally hostile to these souls, so their present good news—their hope—is often rooted in the God who says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” God is faithful to us in many different ways, even as people, places, and peace prove to be reliably inconsistent.

The Jeremiah passage culminates with the glorious vision of rebuilding. This is rooted in the geography of Israel but resonates with the longing God has placed on every human heart for a fruitful and peaceable home. This text is heard and proclaimed by contemporary exiles on two levels: as a word of hope for this life, and as a clear vision of the joy waiting in the age to come.

These two levels collide when the handful of war widows in our church, who have each lost several children, “take [their] tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers” on big feast days—their movements a defiant fulfillment of earthly joy and a practice session for the dancing they plan to do around the throne of God, on the holy mountain. This is a vision of pure Easter joy, a hope for renewal that covers the earth and transcends the grave.

I take courage from Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, who reminded my seminary class that even the vast majority of Jews read the Hebrew Scriptures through a distinctive lens found outside the text (the oral tradition of the midrash and talmud). As Christians, we do come to Jeremiah with Easter eyes, through the lens of the resurrection witness. We do so trusting—and celebrating—that the risen Christ has extended the glorious promise of “the return [home] to exiles” of all sorts, from many nations.