

## **Dare To Believe**

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Confirmation Sermon for June 10, 2012

Jeremiah 29: 11-14: 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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

## **Dare To Believe**

Years ago, a small town in Maine was proposed for the site of a great hydroelectric plant. Since the dam would be built across the river, the entire town would be submerged. When the project was announced, the people were given many months to arrange their affairs and relocate.

During the time before the dam was built, an interesting thing happened. All improvements ceased. No painting was done. No repairs were made on the buildings, roads, and sidewalks. Day by day, the whole town got shabbier and shabbier. A long time before the waters came, the town looked uncared for and abandoned, even though the people had not yet moved away. One citizen said, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power for the present." The town was cursed with hopelessness because it had no future.

When I starting thinking about this year's confirmation sermon I never thought that I would be using words from the Prophet Jeremiah. This major league prophet is not known for his hopeful poetry of encouragement but for his consistent message of doom and gloom, laced with fire and brimstone. Over his long career he berated the Israelites with litanies about their sins and bad behavior. He preached constantly about the divine judgment and destruction that awaited them because of their attitudes. But in the end, he was right.

Granted, his ministry took place during one of the most upsetting times in Israel's history. The Babylonians had invaded the kingdom, killed the last king, destroyed the temple, razed homes, burnt fields, killed life stock, and then taken whole families with them back to Babylon into exile. Those who had survived the ordeal were faced with living as strangers in a strange country with little opportunities, no place to worship, and assumedly no hope for the future.

Into this situation, Jeremiah could have said to the people: "See, told you so. If you would have listened to God, this might not have happened." But he does not. In fact, our fire and brimstone prophet had an unexpected message for the exiled.

First he told them: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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."

Basically, he tells them: "Don't stop living! You'll be here for a while; make the best of it."

And then Jeremiah adds this message from God, "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. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, and I will restore your fortunes, gather you in, and bring you back home."

Jeremiah is telling his audience that even though they are going to be in exile for a long while, they can still trust God because God has plans to prosper them and to give them hope and a future. Although things seem grim now and it appears that all has been lost with the destruction of the temple and their wonderful city, God still has plans for them. This is great news, and yet difficult to believe!

Jeremiah adds that they still will be able to call on God and God will listen, they will be able to seek God and they will find God. For a people who thought that God could only be experienced in the temple, this was exciting and wonderful news.

Now, this confirmation experience you and I just concluded might have started out as bad news when a letter from the minor league prophet's office (that would be me) arrived at your house saying that since you are a 9<sup>th</sup> grader, you are eligible and invited to participate in this year's confirmation experience. I imagine all kinds of thoughts on your part. I like to imagine that a few said, "Great, finally, I am ready for this. Can't wait!" But I imagine that a few said, "Really? You are going to make me do it? Another activity? Does this mean I have to talk about God, Jesus, and faith? Really...?"

And maybe the bad news got worse at our first session when I said to you that confirmation is not a means to an end, but these 12 sessions are only a few steps along your faith journey, a journey that will go on for the rest of your life if you want it to go on. Maybe it was bad news when I told you that I am not going to give you a summary handout of what you should believe about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and what the role of the church is for today but that you have to do the work to find a faith that makes sense to you and gives you meaning, and that it is up to you to deepen your faith wherever you are on life journey. Maybe it was bad news when I told you that there are no easy answers when it comes to faith in God, and that wrestling with some issue of faith as they relate to the world we live in will not always give you peace of heart and mind, but will often make you mad and sometimes even discourage you.

Thank you for making this journey with us, the mentors, your parents, and the whole congregation. And let me tell you the good news: we all have been there or are there and will be sooner or later – searching for faith in God, believing that whatever happens in our lives, God is with us, or a belief system that makes sense, that gives us that extra hope when we need it, and/or the extra kick in the pants when we have gotten too comfortable with who we are and what we are doing.

I am the first to admit: it is not easy to believe in God. It is actually one of the hardest things we will do as people of faith. We cannot prove to you that there is something out

there or in there -some force, some presence, some higher power that is somehow part of everything that is; we cannot prove it, but we believe it.

There have been times in my life...not all the time but important moments when I did sense that there was something more...that God was there with me...guiding me, supporting me, or sometimes hitting me over the head to get my attention. Or times when my heart was full of gratitude or I was stopped in my tracks by beauty. All of that is somehow wrapped up in what I think of when I think of God.

And, not only do I think it is easy NOT to believe in God, I think it is easy to CASUALLY believe in God. To believe in God is a nice idea to hold onto when you need it, because there come times in all our lives when we need an arm to lean on or a shoulder to cry when tragedy strikes or life turns bad. It is nice to think that God is with us in moments like that. But really who needs God in all those other moments? When life is good and times are easy and when we want to do or buy or be what we want?

Today, on your day of confirmation and as you consider where your faith journey might take you I dare you to believe more than that. Actually, we, your mentors, your parents, and I dare you more to believe than that.

About two weeks ago I asked them what they would like to pass on to you about God and faith. These are their words of encouragement and wisdom to you:

I dare you to believe that...

- when you feel alone or sad, to remember God is always with you.

I dare you to believe that ...

-even when life is most tumultuous, God is your traveling companion who will always, always be present.

I dare you to believe that..

- God is ready to write a new covenant into your heart. God will wait patiently until you are ready. Always keep your heart open to the possibilities of faith.

I dare you to believe that ...

-faith is a choice, not an emotion. There will be times in your life when you don't feel God close to you. There might even be times when you are angry at God or God is distant. Faith and belief in God is a choice and a commitment, not a feeling. Feelings come and go, commitment and choices do not.

I dare you to believe that ...

- as the world is open to you, there will be tough times ahead, when things don't work out the way you want them to. It is through these times that your faith will carry you through. With faith, things never look hopeless. There is a comfort in knowing that not everything is in our control, and we can let go and relax, knowing that a higher power looks after us, and loves us infinitely more than we can ever imagine.

I dare you to believe that ...

-faith is not just for the hard times. A lot of people don't think about God and their faith when things are going right and the world looks cheery. This is when you can be God's eyes and ears and hands and heart in the world. To serve others is the highest and best

thing we can do. Service to others is the outward manifestation of faith. It is what we are made to do and what gives us the most pleasure.

I dare you to believe that ...

- in order to experience faith there are times when you need to move away from your areas of comfort and have experiences that will help you understand others cultures and life styles. Jesus was not afraid to reach out to different peoples and ways of life. In his trying to understand others it made it easier for him to accept people and embrace humanity.

I dare you to believe that ...

- God is in us and between us. God's presence helps us to see beyond our physical being and discover our other meanings for which we are created: love, forgiveness, altruism, hope, remorse, courage, kindness, faith. God is the divine spirit or energy that is both our creator and our creation: a wellspring of consciousness.

I dare you to believe that ...

- by attending church regularly it will renew your faith and give you a fresh start for the week;  
- you are a child of God, even when God does not always seem close to you; for God is always present;  
- when you pray to God for strength and courage in times of disappointment, failure and sadness, God will hear your prayers;  
- life is a gift from God.  
- with God's help and presence, all things are possible.

I dare us all to believe that no matter who we are, or who we might become, and wherever we might find ourselves on life's journey, God has a plan for us all - a plan that is marked by hope for a future.

Amen.