

A Future with Hope (Jeremiah 29:11)  
Lent 2018 Sermon Series:  
Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket  
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Our series for Lent, “Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket,” continues with this verse from the Book of Jeremiah. For this sermon series, Todd and I wanted to focus in on short, digestible pieces of scripture that pack a punch, both in and out of context. We wanted to give you something you could carry around with you, in your literal pocket or simply in the back of your mind, to ground you, anchor you during this season of Lent when we strive to focus ourselves, prepare ourselves, to clear away some room inside ourselves for the miracle of Easter.

When we came up with this idea for the series, I knew right away that I had to preach on this verse, because it’s actually one of my favorite biblical verses ever. And I’m going to tell you why.

But first I have to set the scene. Like so many good things, it begins in a library. In this case, it was the Andover-Newton Theological Library at Harvard Divinity School, over ten years ago. I was a 24-year-old graduate student studying the intersection of American public education and religion, and I was—quite simply—a mess. I was beginning to reluctantly admit to myself that I was in a program I didn’t want to be in, on an academic course that didn’t really make sense for me—even though I had worked really hard to gain admittance there. As an early twenty-something living in a recession, I felt trapped, dependent on meager student loans grants.

But more urgently, there was the fact that my father had recently died, my oldest sister was dying, and grief had me in its grip and was shaking me, violently, every day.

I felt like my life was changing without me, without my input, and all I could do was just watch it happen and try not to get left behind. I spent a lot of time going through the motions.

One of my regular motions was to work as a student assistant in the library. I spent hours in the stacks, reshelving carts and carts of books and periodicals. I knew the Library of Congress cataloguing system *intimately*. Class B - Philosophy, Psychology, Religion. Subclass BM - Judaism. Subclass BP - Islam. BR - Christianity. The Bible was BS, which I always thought was funny.

One day, I was shelving an old and dusty volume, probably from the 40s. The original binding had been replaced by a buckram cover, with dry and yellowed pages within. And as I went to replace that book in its proper place on the shelf, a single index card fell out.

I picked it up and took a look. The index card seemed to be of the same vintage as the book itself. It was discolored by time and what might've been coffee stains. And it had writing on it, the penmanship so elegant that it could only have been put there a long time ago.

This is what it said:

"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."

There was no scriptural reference, no commentary, nothing else. Just those words. I stared at them. I wish I could tell you that I said, "Aha, of course, it's Jeremiah 29:11!" But I did not. At the time, I was biblically literate enough to guess that I was reading something out of the Hebrew Bible, but a long way from having any greater frame of reference than that.

Without even thinking twice about it, I put the index card in my pocket and continued with my shelving.

Over the next several weeks, I would take out the card and look at it. I studied the way that the ink absorbed into the cardstock, the gentle loops of the lettering. I read the lines over and over again, letting the ancient poetry sink into me, until the words began to lose their meaning and I would have to step away. I would tuck the card in the corner of my desk while working on a paper, or use it as a bookmark while doing reading assignments.

At first, I couldn't figure out my fascination with the card. I wasn't sure I bought the sentiment behind the verse, after all. I was deeply suspicious of this God who made plans, even if the plans were supposed to be benevolent. It smacked too much of "Everything happens for a reason" or "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." Well-meaning people had said things like to me after my father died suddenly. Instead of giving me comfort, words like that filled me with outrage. "Don't you dare tell me what my pain means or doesn't mean," I'd think. "What do you know about me, and what I can handle?"

But the words on the index card didn't fill me with defensiveness. Quite the opposite, in fact. They cooled my anger. Maybe it was the phrasing, the gentle cadence, the promises rooted not in specific outcomes but in an open-ended sense of possibility. Maybe it was the fact that the words appeared out of nowhere, dropping quite literally into my life, for me to take them or leave them, no harm, no foul.

Maybe it was also the fact that some anonymous soul had taken the time to write down these words. Decades earlier, someone had felt moved to pull out an index card, take a pen, and write down an ancient line of Holy Scripture. I was drawn to the unknowability of that person. I liked imagining their circumstances. Maybe this was their favorite verse. Maybe they'd been preparing for a Bible quiz. Maybe the card had been given to them by someone else, as a reminder. Whatever had led to the creation of that card, they never could've imagined me finding it, in 2006. A long thread was stretched between me and this person, a thread that neither of us could really see or understand but that connected us.

I realized that the thread went back even further. Because of course, whoever wrote the card hadn't made those words up. They were biblical. They were from a tradition. They were from a much larger story, a story that had been told for generations and generations and generations.

So I finally did my homework and figured out where this verse came from and its larger context. It's the prophet Jeremiah, of course, speaking to Israelites during one of the most traumatic events in their history, the Babylonian Exile. All they want to do is return to Israel, but they have no idea when or how or even if that will ever happen. Now remember, they believe that God resides in the Temple in Jerusalem, the very place they've been forced to leave behind. So when they feel themselves to be abandoned, without hope, without a future, *they mean it*.

So in other words, it is no small thing for Jeremiah to promise, on God's behalf, that the people will have a future with hope. It's a very big deal. It's audacious. It's unreasonable. It's counter-factual.

It's faith! From my point of view, faith is not "Everything happens for a reason." Faith is "Things happen sometimes without any good reason, but we continue to hope anyway." I learned that, thanks to an index card.

Now, I'm not saying an index card is *the* reason I switched programs and became a pastor, but it certainly didn't hurt. I experienced an act of grace, one of those extraordinary moments when the universe provides that which you most need, even though I never would've guessed it would take that form.

As I said, when I discovered that index card, I discovered a thread. A thread that connected me not only to a past library patron, but to generations of faithful people who have heard the promises of God and trusted in them, for the long haul. Faith isn't in the business of

instant gratification, although sometimes, trusting that God is working in the long-term does help ease the burden in the short-term, as we face the traumas of *this* moment in history.

And part of what we also try to trust is that the same sacred thread that stretches backwards through time stretches *forward* as well; that there are people in the future, people waiting to inherit these same promises, people waiting to be sustained by these same hopes. We don't know who all of them are, but they are there, waiting for us to nurture this gift, and pass it on.

May it be so. Amen.