

GOING HOME

SHERARD EDINGTON

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For some months now, we have all been looking forward to the moment when we could bid farewell to the year 2020. A decade ago, that year held so much promise with its tantalizingly symmetrical epithet—20 plus 20. The name itself represents perfect eyesight—20/20 vision. But the year was a disappointment and became the year that we most wanted to see in our rearview mirrors. All Fall, we've wanted to treat 2020 like a guest who has overstayed their welcome and tell it, "Don't let the door hit you where the dog should have bit you." That about sums up our love for 2020.

We will remember 2020 for its contentious political climate. We witnessed widespread civil unrest with a summer marked by protests. There were also the normal weird things about the year—the murder hornets, the Tiger King, Meghan and Harry ditching the royals.

But what will ultimately define the previous twelve months will be the pandemic. It was just a year ago, on December 31, 2019, that the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia which came to be identified as a novel coronavirus, a disease that had not been seen before. It was named COVID-19 because it appeared in the year 2019. On January 13, the disease was discovered in Thailand, the first case outside China. The disease spread quickly and on March 11, the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. On March 15, a few days later, with this pandemic racing across the U.S., this church, like many other churches, chose to cancel worship as we tried to figure out what to do next—how to keep our people safe. Since then, most of you have been worshipping online from your homes.

We spent most of 2020 learning how to live with this pandemic. Thankfully, vaccines against the disease were developed at a record pace and are now rolling out. But it will take time to get everyone inoculated. Meanwhile, we mask and we distance.

All year, the evening news has been focused on COVID reporting on the overrun hospitals and beleaguered staff, the testing, the deaths, the businesses shut down, and students sent home.

And then, when we thought the year was over, on Christmas morning, some guy in Nashville set off a powerful bomb destroying historic Second Avenue.

My favorite story of this year, however, has to be one about Brianna Hill. When COVID hit, Ms Hill was in her final year of law school in Chicago. She was married

and she and her husband were expecting their first child. Ms Hill was scheduled to graduate in May and then sit for her bar exam in July. Her baby wasn't expected until October. She had it all planned out.

Ms Hill did graduate in May, but because of COVID the July bar exam was pushed back to August, and then September. (You can see where this is going.)

Passing the bar exam is required for anyone wanting to become a lawyer in this country. The exam is a grueling two-day ordeal. Normally, test-takers gather in a large classroom and are closely monitored. But gathering like that was clearly unwise in a raging pandemic. Finally, the date for the exam was set for October—just two weeks before Ms Hill's due date. This test would be different. It would be administered online and also tightly monitored by the computer.

The bar exam is six hours long and is given in four ninety-minute sessions. On the first day, you sit for ninety minutes, take a thirty-minute break, and return for the second session. This is repeated the following day. During each session, the takers must remain in front of their computer. There is facial recognition software tracking their movements. The taker must look only at the computer screen. They cannot look up or down or to the side. They cannot move. They are not allowed to speak during the exam.

On the first day of her exam, Ms Hill sat down for the test. But about thirty minutes in, she felt something. And she was pretty sure her water had broken. But she didn't move. To quit would mean waiting until February to retake the test.

At the break, she checked in with her midwife who gave her the go ahead to continue taking the test. Despite contractions, she completed the second session. When she was done, she and her husband raced to the hospital where a few hours later she gave birth to a healthy boy. The next day, she continued with the second half of the exam at the hospital nursing her baby during the break.

The bar exam is a punishing rite of passage. To this day, my wife—an attorney—still has dreams about taking her exam. Ms Hill took this test while in labor, with contractions, gave birth, and then finished the test. If any man wants to argue about how tough he is, then do what she did, and then I will be impressed. Each time I read this story, I feel like it represents what all of us have faced this year—undue stress, plans disrupted, life upended.

Our scripture reading for today is an appropriate post-2020 reading. Here, the prophet Jeremiah reminds us of God's promise to watch over us even in the worst of times.

Most of the book of Jeremiah is filled with words of woe. Jeremiah is renowned as a prophet of doom and gloom. He berates the people for a litany of sins and bad behavior. He preaches constantly about the divine judgment and destruction that awaits them because of their attitudes.

Jeremiah preaches during the time of the Exile after the Babylonians conquered Israel and laid waste to Jerusalem. The Babylonians carried many of the population back to Babylon. For the Jews, it seemed that all was lost. Their capital was destroyed, their government vanquished, their temple leveled, their homes lost. It was about as bad as it could get. Jeremiah's message is that all of this is the result of God's judgment against a sinful people.

However, in the midst of Jeremiah's harangue, his tone shifts. In the middle of the book, we encounter three chapters that scholars refer to as The Book of Consolation. Here, in these chapters, we find words of hope. Here, we catch a glimpse of God's promise for a new beginning for God's people.

This new beginning will start when God leads the scattered exiles back to Jerusalem. All will be welcomed back. Not just the strong and powerful, but the *blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor*. God will gather Israel like a shepherd gathers his flock.

In the first week of this new year—2021—it is a perfect time to reflect on the words of the prophet and his expressions of consolation. 2020 is the year we want to put behind us. It is a year where even at home we felt exiled, discombobulated, out of kilter, even a bit lost. Our routines have been disrupted. We've learned to wear masks. We've learned not to touch one another. Our lack of knowledge of COVID fills us with anxiety. Our futures remain uncertain.

For the exiled Israelites of the eighth century, amid their troubles, their abiding hope was that one day they might return home, back to the land of their ancestors, back to the land God decreed to them. And in time, this becomes reality. The people are allowed to return home. Sadly, Jerusalem was still in ruins, and it would take generations to rebuild. But, in the process, the people discover a new definition of home. Home wasn't where you come from, home is not your native land, home is where you were with God. And the heart of Jeremiah's preaching is that God is always calling us home, God is always calling us to him. No matter where we are—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—God calls to us. God welcomes us.

It is these words of consolation that have strengthened me through this past year of quarantine and distancing as I pastor a congregation that can't congregate, as I preach to a camera, as I am unable to visit with my family during the holidays, as I've lost friends and loved ones. Through all this, I have been buoyed by God's words of promise in our scripture—words like we read today, *I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow*.

That is God's promise. Through thick and thin, God is with us calling us to a place we can call home—a place of joy and comfort and gladness.

Let us now collectively bid farewell to 2020, and let us turn our eyes not to 2021, but to our God. Let us go home.