

Rekindling Life, Igniting Hope

Kathleen M. O'Connor

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

It is paradoxical that at the point of life's end, at the heart of death, inexplicably—sometimes unbidden, always by the power of God—comes life, and, slowly or quickly, the universe expands in unthinkable ways. This opening out to reality, more spacious and love-filled than our tunnel vision can conceive, Christians name the Paschal mystery. During the season of Lent we commemorate and renew our hope in God's inbreaking life in the midst of death. Such hope is more than a mental trick we play upon ourselves. It cannot be willed or coerced into existence. It cannot be conjured or controlled or created. Genuine hope can only be received, discovered, revealed.

The book of Jeremiah devotes itself to creating hope in a community that confronts death in every sphere of its existence. It addresses a community that has disintegrated and is futureless. The Old Testament does not speak much about resurrection from the dead, at least not of individuals, and then only in hints in the book of Daniel. But the first testament does testify again and again to the God who rekindles the life of the community in the throes of death.

No book reveals this mystery more dramatically than the book of Jeremiah. For all its fire and brimstone, its blaming rhetoric and its portraits of suffering and misery, the book of Jeremiah exists to call the people of Judah back to life, to rekindle its hope in God and its own future. In this way, it does what preaching must do. It searches for potent words to name the world of its audience. It revisits the ancient traditions to retell them and reshape them for the survival of the Judean community in the midst of disaster.

The Disaster

In the sixth century, B. C. E., the Babylonian army devastated Judah and Jerusalem. It invaded Jerusalem three times, it occupied the land, and it deported leading citizens to Babylon. The nation of Judah faced extinction. The people underwent traumatic violence in a series of disasters, after which lingered theological and emotional layers of harm for decades.

One layer of harm involves traumatic memories of violence. Violence overwhelms its victims, leaving them with memories of the traumatic blows that cannot be incorporated into their daily lives, into their sense of themselves. Often memories haunt victims like a ghost who takes up residence in the mind to disturb and interfere with life. Because the experience overwhelms the psyche, victims usually cannot find language adequate to their experience of the violence. Without the ability to speak about it, community shatters and its members often feel isolated and unmoored from their world. Accompanying these effects is the loss of confidence and trust in the world, in other people, and of most significance for preachers and believers, survivors of disasters lose trust in God.

From this point of view, the book of Jeremiah is a quest for language to name this world of catastrophe and misery. Its wide, chaotic collection of poems, stories, and sermons over and over again depicts a shattered world, usually in symbolic form as,

for example, in the ruin of Jeremiah's buried loincloth (13:1-11), the destruction of the pot by the divine Potter (18:1-12), the breaking of the vase (19:1-15). For the book's audience, these and other symbolic events retell what happened to them. They do so indirectly in symbolic form so as to help them reenter the experience but not re-traumatize them by literal renderings.

In this way, even Jeremiah's most horrifying imagery helps survivors of the disaster to come to grips with it, to grieve it, to understand how God was present through its many manifestations. Only then is it possible to believe in God's intervention, to make room for hope and to rebuild community. The violence of passages in the book reflects back to the community all that was destroyed and lost; in horrendous scenes it give them their story of terror and destruction. Against common perception, by re-immersing them in the calamity, Jeremiah creates words that are a healing balm for wounds without words.

The book's retelling of the destruction and its aftermath, sometimes told as future events and sometimes as a *fait accompli*, makes space for hope. It cuts through the blockages: the numbness, the memories of violence and loss, the bitter realization that life will never recover its previous shape. It acknowledges the people's loss of confidence in the covenanting God whose promises now seem as ephemeral as will-o'-the-wisps. By plunging its readers deep into memories of disaster, it acknowledges them and brings them into the light. Hope, then, can be more than wishful thinking, more than another form of denial or a naive dream. Like some preaching, these hard words make room for hope to reside, to set up house and do its work of rebuilding.

Much of the book of Jeremiah promises its readers little more than survival; they will "gain their lives as the prize of war," that is, they will come away with only their lives. But at the glowing center of the book is a book within the book, known as the "little book of consolation" (chaps. 30-33). Here Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet," erupts forth in lyric poetry about a world still to be born, about the new life just over the horizon. Yet even here the poetry reminds the community of the devastation they have experienced. Jeremiah ties hope to suffering with unbreakable threads because the latter could not exist without the former. "The Little Book of Consolation" sits in the midst of gloom and suffering. It is like a radiant center, a brief interlude that makes endurance possible, and revives confidence in God who heals, revivifies, and stands by the covenant people. It is a book within a book, a separate scroll inserted into the larger work, as if hope is threatened at every turn, yet remains the compact seed of the future.

But even here, Jeremiah keeps hope attached to the community's suffering. Rather than depicting the bright world of the future, the first poem recalls the terrors of the past:

We have heard a cry of panic, of terror and no peace.
Ask now and see, can a man bear a child?
Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins like
a woman in labor?
Why has every face turned pale?
Alas, that day is so great there is none like it;
It is a time of distress for Jacob. (Jer 30:4-7)

Terror and war name reality. It is a place of turmoil, repeating memories of panicked cries, of fear and awed shock accompanying invasion. The poem draws readers in, commanding them to ask and see, to analyze the sounds, first by the contrary to fact question: "Can a man bear a child?" Of course not! The cries of fear and pain, then, are not of birth. Every man is, instead, enacting pain like a woman in labor, overwhelmed by physical and emotional struggles of giving birth but yielding death not life. The men of the community turn pale with fright and distress, impotent as they are before the terror of the Babylonian invaders.

Hope Reborn

But after this poetic confrontation with disaster transposed into a symbolic world, expectations are abruptly upended. God promises to "break the yoke" from their neck and "burst the bonds" of their captivity. It is only then that "strangers shall no more make a servant of him" (30:8). Like the good preacher he is, Jeremiah insists that people face reality. No whitewashing of sorrow and disaster can help, only preaching about what still haunts the community in its desolation, mourning, and doubt. That is why the book of Jeremiah is painful, so filled with violent imagery, with words of an angry God who punishes and attacks the people. That has been their experience and the experience must be told; language must be found for it; the people must reclaim their story in all its horrible truthfulness.

Jeremiah's words of comfort and hope may seem as unbelievable as his words of devastation and disaster may have seemed before they were realized. One of the most certain consequences of trauma and disaster is loss of faith and hope. People who previously had strong belief confront the collapse of the very traditions that gave them hope in God. The people of Judah lost land, life, governmental structures, and religious leadership. The covenant had collapsed, the temple was destroyed, the land of promise was in the hands of the Babylonians, and the promise that David would reside on Judah's throne forever was contradicted by the king's imprisonment in Babylon. Jeremiah's words of consolation break in upon the community and assert a new reality already in the making.

Thus says the Lord:

I am going to restore the fortunes of the tent of Jacob and have compassion on his dwellings;

The city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the citadel on its rightful site.

Out of them shall come thanksgiving and the sound of merry-makers,

I will make them many and not few;

I will make them honored and they shall not be disdained.

Their children shall be as of old,

Their congregation shall be as before me;

And I will punish those who oppress them

Their prince will be one of the own

Their ruler shall come from their midst

And you shall be my people and I will be your God. (30:18-22)

Words of comfort aim to penetrate the fog of emptiness, doubt, and despair that so often accompany disasters, great or small. They imagine the community rebuilt like

the ancient family of Jacob. The image of the Jacob's tents embraces them all, those in Judah and those scattered abroad. The ancestral traditions of Jacob and his expansive family have been washed away by the Babylonian triumph over Judah. But the poem revisits traditions of origins and reasserts their common identity in that family's struggles. Upon this family's dwellings, God will show compassion.

God is the initiator and agent of this new beginning. The poem's first person active verbs hammer this home:

I am going to restore the fortunes,
I will make you many,
I will make you honored,
I will punish your oppressors,
I will be your God.

The poem restores divine-human relationship with its repetitive and linked pronouns; it joins the "I/me" of God with the broken "you/your" (second person plural) of the people.

The direct objects of the verbs acknowledge the people's losses and reverse them one by one. God will rebuild the beloved city on its rightful site, the holy place on Mount Zion. Like an imagined, rebuilt, and remembered New Orleans, the city will be a place of joy, of singing, and of merrymaking. And those who went away, who were displaced, or deported will return to beautiful life, not just a small scraggly group of them but there will be many. The community has a future because God's compassion overturns their ruined world; it opens wide the universe sealed shut by despair.

Jeremiah tries to draw the people toward this future by enflaming expectation, by creating meaning and giving hope to the despondent and despairing. They will not disappear or be assimilated into the dominant and dominating empire of Babylon, nor will they be worshipers of Marduk. Judah, instead, will again become a "congregation," a community of worshipers "before me." With this promise, Jeremiah reclaims their old broken traditions and reclaims their identity. They are a worshipping people, God's holy priestly people, re-gathered before God in the restored city. And their ruler, their prince, will come from among them, from their midst, a man of the people, neither a puppet governor of the Babylonians nor an arrogant king like some of the past monarchs of Judah.

The poem concludes with the most extraordinary words of all. The God whom the survivors of the disaster believed had broken covenant with them, reestablishes it, reversing the usual covenant formula. "You will be my people" comes first here, and "I will be your God" follows (30:22). The reversal of the traditional pattern places emphasis on the people's connection to God. As the first partners mentioned, they have a place of honor in a relationship made new. They, in turn, have done nothing to bring about this restored covenant. It flows from divine compassion alone.

The compassionate, seeking, covenanting God of Jeremiah's book of consolation vastly alters the community's perception. This God whom the book defends at every turn as not inept, not defeated by Marduk the God of Babylon, not indifferent to human behavior and human fate but active in punishing them, now appears as fiercely compassionate, ready to restore life, to make it even better than before. The One who seeks the people names them again in covenant terms as God's own. God, the powerful

general of the army who sent the foe from the north, God the destroyer of city and punisher of the adulterous family, remains their God from of old, now imaged as life restoring and community gathering.

Social renewal emerges in Jeremiah's vision of hope in a manner typical of utopian thinking. For a people of grievous wounds and incurable pain, any future at all is a surprise, of course, let alone the possibility they will be healed and rebuilt. But the greatest social upheaval is that the ones leading the procession home from exile further invert social expectations.

See I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
And gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
Among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor,
together, a great company they shall come. (31:8)

This great company identifies the returnees as the weak, the wounded, and the vulnerable. The blind and the lame are disabled and perhaps despised; the women are lowly of public stature and holders of little political power. But they have the critical and astonishing power to give birth and to make a future people for those who thought they were doomed. How can the blind and the vulnerable lead? How can those giving birth march? Both groups—not kings, queens or warriors, but wounded survivors—are the new community, limping homeward. Broken yet fertile, they carry the future. In Jeremiah's hope-filled future, survivors will live together in safety, merriment, and thanksgiving (30:18-20). Grace and joy, prosperity and fertility will overtake their present barren world.

Utopian visions like this one are always critiques of the present, not blueprints for the future. They proclaim a world that upsets the current one by a vision of society based on justice and well-being. Even though utopias use the past to construct visions of a new society, the future does not emerge from the past or continue it. Neither past nor present causes the future. A yawning gap exists between them because the future society does not evolve from what has gone before. Instead, it bursts into history and interrupts the present weariness and despair without causal explanation.

God is the interrupting energy who will transform the survivors and overthrow the reigning logic of hopelessness. The family of Jacob cannot achieve its promised, incandescent future on its own. Only the God of the ancestors can bring it to birth in explosive new life. Only God satisfies the weary and nourishes the faint (31:25), ransoms Jacob and redeems him "from hands too strong for him" (31:11). Only God recreates the covenant and makes new faithful creatures by writing Torah in their hearts (31:31). Only God promises fidelity until all the mysteries of cosmos are revealed (31:35-37).

Jeremiah's vision enflames possibility and awakens emotional yearning for a better world. It challenges the present reality by insisting on divine power as the enacting agent of return, by organizing a society inexplicably led by the weak and vulnerable, and by creating a communal vision of mutual sustenance where old and young, laity and priests rejoice and dance together in a watered garden, the bucolic paradise that is Zion. This vision is both a critique of the hopelessness of the present and a work of fiery transformation that unleashes energy for new forms of life.