



Messy hope

by ThePerennialGen | Aug 10, 2020 | Spiritual Formation | 8 comments



by Christine Langford

People describe hope like a pretty post on Instagram—shiny, untouchable upon its pedestal. Smiling, they quote, “For I know the plans I have for you saith the Lord, plans to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

My hope is much messier. Like our newly planted garden, where the green bean sprouts with the weeds, my hope sprouts with doubt, anger, and sadness.

In addition to the health toll, Covid-19 has destroyed businesses and an untold number of personal plans. Many of us struggle with missing our church families.

I miss holding hands with my prayer circle. I miss the sweet aroma of fried chicken and green bean casserole at Sunday afternoon pot-lucks. I miss rowdy children playing tag. I miss singing at the top of my lungs without worrying whether or not aerosol droplets will infect someone.

I hope that church life will return to normal.

But it is a messy hope.

The reality of the actual time needed to find and test vaccines and treatments, as well as warnings of another wave in the fall threaten to choke out the fragile seedling. I doubt God's plans.

If we look at that verse from Jeremiah in context, though, he describes that kind of messy hope. In Chapter 29 Jeremiah transcribes a letter from God to the people of Israel living in exile in Babylon. They wanted to go home. They prayed desperately for deliverance.

Yet, God told the Israelites,

"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."

Wait a minute. They wanted to be rescued. They wanted to go home, but God said build a house? This was not going to be a short stay.

I struggle with depression at the thought that it may take years for the virus to either run its course or for us to figure out how to live with it. I have sung in church choirs for 40 years. The thought of not being able to do so for the foreseeable future causes despair to fill my soul. I don't want to build a house here.

However, I force myself to tend my garden in this “new normal.” I call a grieving widow that needs a listening ear. I write an encouraging note. I wear a mask in socially-distanced church service and wave at my friends. I log into my computer for ZOOM Sunday school and prayer group meetings.

God also warned the Israelites in Jeremiah 29 not to be deceived by people who tell them they will get to go home soon:

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.”

The Lord is more than capable of healing people immediately. He could speak a word and Covid-19 would disappear. Yet, life seldom looks like what those who preach a prosperity gospel say it should look like. Christians face troubled marriages, financial set-backs, and the loss of loved ones. We will not be able to have “normal” church next month. I find myself getting angry.

The Lord could have immediately taken the captives back to Israel. But he didn't. Instead, he said, *“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.”* (Jeremiah 29:10)

70 years! Now comes the verse we all know and love: *“For I know what I have planned for you,” says the Lord. “I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you. I have plans to give you a future filled with hope.”* (Jeremiah 29:11)

In the context of that verse, they would wait 70 years to see that hope fulfilled. Now, I am not prophesying that it will take 70 years to find an effective vaccine or treatment for Covid-19! Nor am I saying we just throw our hands up and say, “There’s nothing we can do. That’s just the way life is.” We search for good treatments. We water our gardens.

However, we will never completely eradicate sickness and disease. New weeds will always appear. This chapter in Jeremiah shows us what hope looks like when the

world doesn't operate as it should. If not Covid-19, it will be something else: a natural disaster or a chronic health problem.

We live in the messy. However, God's presence lives in the messy as well. In fact, Jeremiah tells them the first thing they need to do is to seek God: *"When you call out to me and come to me in prayer, I will hear your prayers. When you seek me in prayer and worship, you will find me available to you. If you seek me with all your heart and soul."* (Jeremiah 29:12-13)

So, I call out to him in my despair and ask him how to serve others in the midst of Covid-19. In my doubt, I ask for his wisdom. I try to enjoy his presence both when I pull weeds and when I harvest my vegetables.

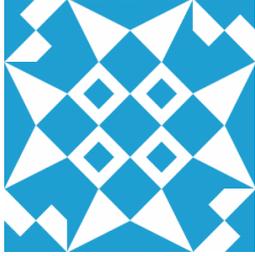
We tend our gardens, weeds and all. We live our messy lives. Messy hope may not look good on an Instagram Feed, but we do it anyway. We hope, even when the world feels hopeless. Because our hope is not in a virus-free life or in gardens with no weeds, but in our God, who loves us and provides for our future.



After a teaching career in public, private, and home schools, Christine is currently pursuing a Master's in Media and Worship at Dallas Theological Seminary. Her blog [Traveling with the Father](#) encourages Christians to grow closer to God and serve others as

they travel. She and her husband Mike have three adult children and enjoy serving together in overseas missions in Honduras.

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Barbara Harper on August 10, 2020 at 5:46 pm

Thanks for bringing out the context of this oft-quoted verse. We're pretty impatient, but some of God's trials are long. It may seem reasonable to us that God would answer or deliver NOW, but He has His reasons for His timing. I agree, sometimes hope is messy.



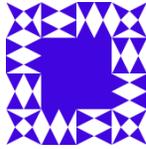
Christine Langford on August 10, 2020 at 6:00 pm

Yes, society has definitely conditioned us to expect instant answers, hasn't it? Too often I want answers NOW!



Sue on August 10, 2020 at 5:51 pm

Christine, I love this gentle reminder to lean into messy hope.



Christine on August 10, 2020 at 6:02 pm

Thanks, Sue. I'm preaching to myself as much as anyone else!



Mary Strew on August 10, 2020 at 7:19 pm

Christine, Really liked this piece. Messy is a reality for all of us and the garden theme makes it stand out. Have always loved the Jeremiah verses, so that ties it all together so well Thanks, Mary Strew



Christine on August 11, 2020 at 11:17 am

Yes, messy is our reality. I try way too much to fight against that reality! Thanks, Mary!



Peggi Tustan on August 26, 2020 at 7:03 pm

This is such a good word for today. Life and hope are messy right now! Thank you.

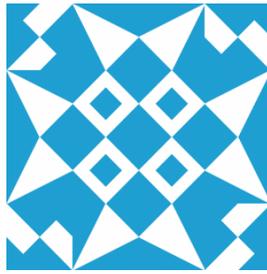


Christine on September 1, 2020 at 9:39 pm

Peggi,

Yes it is! Thanks for reading.

Author



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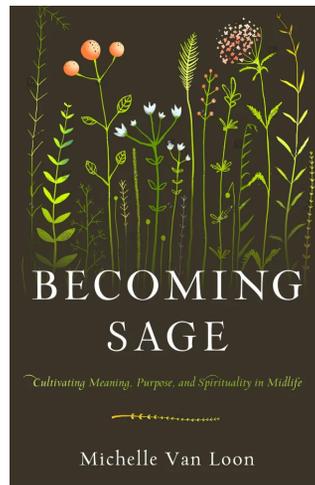
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