

Embracing the Hope of a New Year With Bold Faith

1. Warm up: What's a 2026 New Year's resolution (serious or silly) that you've made?
2. In Old Testament times, there came a point when the Israelites, God's chosen people, lost their nation. The Babylonians invaded and forcibly removed many Israelites, carrying them into exile in Babylon. It appeared that their story was over. Their temple was destroyed and they lost their nation – exiled, displaced, grieving the loss of everything that was familiar. They lost their homes, security, and hope. Like the Israelites, we too experience various forms of exile in our lives. It may not be a physical displacement, but often we find ourselves in spiritual or emotional exile, perhaps an unexpected medical diagnosis, being served with divorce papers, being downsized at the job, or the loss of a loved one. For Pastor Robert, it was the emotional devastation of the recent loss of his mother. As you look back over the past year (or beyond), is there something lost or broken that tempts you to despair? If so, what is it and how does it feel?
3. In life, we often find ourselves wondering, “Can God really restore what feels beyond repair?” Our scripture passage on Sunday addresses that question. Although it was God's message to the Israelites in exile, it speaks with equal power and relevance to us today when we face situations that seem beyond repair. Read Jeremiah 31:7-14, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Look again at verse 8, where God says to the despairing Israelites, “See, I will bring [my people] from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return.” What's the significance of that statement? What does it teach us about how God works?
 - b. In our scripture passage, God describes a beautiful vision of what God wants and intends to do for Israel in their future, which raises the question: why would God tell the Israelites what God intended to do instead of just doing it? Robert suggested, “The promise isn't spoken because the people were ready; the promise was spoken *to make them ready*.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree?
 - c. We can't move into God's promise in our life until we're ready, and we won't be ready until hope replaces despair. Romans 15:4 says, “Everything that was written in the past (i.e., Old Testament times) was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” Why is hope so essential to our ability to live into the beautiful future God wants for us in life?
4. Sometimes we are haunted by the shadows of our past. They chase after us and trap us in hopelessness. The Israelites face that same struggle. Israel's mistakes weren't small; they were public, painful, and carried real consequences. Exile became the long shadow of their disobedience, stretching over every hope of returning home. Yet in our scripture passage, God doesn't remind them of their failure, but instead invites them to sing and shout. “Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises

heard, and say, ‘Lord, save your people.’ Jeremiah 31:7. In other words, instead of focusing on their past failures, God was inviting the Israelites to learn from those failures, grow from their experience, and move into a better future. Robert said, **“Hope begins when you realize that your past does not disqualify you from God’s future.”** Share one of your life’s great failures. (We all have them.) Does that failure still haunt you and cause you to doubt that God has great plans for you? If not, what enabled you to move beyond brooding over that failure?

5. Letting go of shame from past failure is the first step toward hope, but not the last. We also have to embrace God’s promise to restore us. God doesn’t just pardon our failures. **Hope grows when we realize that God is determined to grow us into something greater and better.** The scriptures tell us that God’s plan is to “restore everything.” Acts 3:21. Robert said, “God can calm the storms, raise the dead, multiply loaves, and make dry bones dance. . . . What seems impossible to us is nothing to God! God can!”
 - a. Tell us about someone you know (or know of) that God pardoned from great failure and lifted up to be and do beautiful things.
 - b. Philippians 3:13 says, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of [the prize]. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.” What does that verse mean? What do you hear it saying?
6. Hope begins when you realize that your past does not disqualify you from God’s future. Hope grows when you realize that God is determined to grow you into something greater and better. **And hope is rounded out when you realize God promises to sustain you, i.e., to provide for you on an ongoing basis.** Verse 12 in our scripture passage promises the Israelites, “[You] will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord – the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. [You] will be like a well-watered garden.”
 - a. Suppose someone were to ask you, “Why should I believe that God can and will provide for me?” And suppose you were to answer by giving them an example of how God has provided for you. What would you tell them? In your own life, how have you experienced God’s provision?
 - b. We began our conversation tonight by asking whether there is something that was lost or broken in your life during 2025 (or even further back) that tempts you to despair. Suppose God were to speak to you like God spoke to the Israelites in our scripture passage. As we’ve seen, God painted a picture of a bright future for the Israelites and asked them to believe in that bright future, i.e., hope. So now, as an exercise in hope, remind us of that thing you mentioned in response to Question 2 above that tempts you to despair and then describe the picture God might want to paint for you of your bright future. Are you ready to invest yourself in that hopeful vision of what lies ahead.

Remember: With God, the impossible becomes possible!

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.

Make your praises heard, and say,

'LORD, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.

⁹They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel's father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰"Hear the word of the LORD, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:

'The One who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over them like a shepherd watches his flock.'

¹¹For the LORD will deliver Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹²They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

¹³Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,"
declares the LORD.