

"One Step at a Time"

OT: Jeremiah 29:11-14a

There is a hilarious cartoon picture of woman standing with her hair all frizzled like being shocked by electricity, her eyes droopy with bags and wrinkles, her shoulders slumped over in defeat and weakness, and a dress straight out of a Flintstones episode and the caption reads: "I try to take just one day at a time... but lately several days have attacked me at once." Anyone else ever feel that way?

Jeremiah 29: 11-14a... ¹¹ **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.** ¹² **Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.** ¹³ **When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,** ¹⁴ **I will let you find me, says the LORD,**

This passage in Jeremiah is absolutely something we need to know and hold dear to us! Why? Because the book of Jeremiah is no ordinary book and Jeremiah's life was no ordinary life. The book of Jeremiah is known as a book that sears the soul, challenges the conscience, and promises hope to the wounded in body and spirit. Historically set, the book tries to come to terms with and move beyond destruction wrought by Babylon's three invasions of Judah and its chief city, Jerusalem. Even though leading up to this time we read about God delivering the Israelites out of the hands of slavery in Egypt, providing manna and quail in the wilderness when they were hangry and desperate for food, giving them the law and commandments for guidance and direction on how to live in a civil community with God and each other, and leading them to the Promised Land, this era in the life of the Israelites was filled with turmoil and upheaval. Above all, the nation's collapse put into question Judah's relationship with God.

Not only was the fabric of daily life in the community destroyed, but the symbolic world that supported life collapsed as well. History, traditions, and theology, lead us to a series of questions they likely asked:

- Did the nation's political and military collapse mean that God had forgotten the chosen people?
- How could God allow their devastation?
- Had God turned away from the covenant made at Sinai?
- Was God powerless compared to the more powerful Babylonian deities who has won the war?
- How could the community survive the disaster that had befallen them?
- Did the survivors have a future?
- As the future approached, who would have power in a restored community?

In the heart of this turmoil, upheaval, and question, is Jeremiah. Throughout this book, Jeremiah's life serves as a representation of the demise and restoration of God's people.

Jeremiah was an unmarried man and bore no children. This symbolized an end of life in the land.

Jeremiah was arrested, imprisoned, and left in a cistern to die, BUT narrowly escapes with his life.

Jeremiah loses everything, BUT he survives.

In the trenches of his survival, with his small glimmer of hope and barely beating heart, Jeremiah takes one step. His one step to acquire some land, which was a cultural symbol of opportunity, purpose, and belonging, is a hopeful step leading to other steps. This one step was a symbol of the renewed life that he believed would come in the future. This one step, partnered with God's power and strength, gives birth and opportunity to God bringing the people into a future full of promise.

Hear God's words to Jeremiah again. These words are placed in the heart of the book as a turning point of hope. As they were for Jeremiah and so many others, I pray they can serve to feed us and fuel us today. **"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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD..."**

Did you hear that? God is a God of knowledge and welfare and hope, not harm. God hears when we call to God and pray to God. God is visible and present, ready to be found.

The book that follows behind Jeremiah in the Old Testament of the Bible is Lamentations. Lamentations is not a book we turn to often, but its presence has great meaning. Lamentations is a book of laments, wailings, and prayers offered to God asking for help, guidance, and deliverance. It is a book of prayers asking God for answers in a world full of questions. It is a real sad section of the Bible to say the least, but these books are full of God's promises available to us amid our sadness and struggles; when we feel like several days have attacked us at once.

Lamentations 3:22-23 says, **"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases** (the word in Hebrew is *hesed*- an enduring, rooted, love); **God's mercies never come to an end; they**

are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Another translation reads, **“Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for God’s compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”** What a declaration? What a belief? What a foundation to build a life on?

Each new day is a gift. Each new day God gives. Each new day God looks out for us. Each new day God listens. Each new day God is visible and present, ready to be found.

I encountered a quote this week that really hit home. The quote reads, “Ask yourself if what you are doing today is getting you closer to where you want to be tomorrow.” What I get out of it is the call to be better today in what you can do today (and with what is within your control), so that tomorrow, when it should come, you will be prepared to go one step further. In reflecting, two other quotes rose to the surface of my recollection, one from Muhammad Ali and the other from Michael Jordan.

Muhammad Ali once said, “I have learned to live my life one step, one breath, and one moment at a time, but it was a long road. I set out on a journey of love, seeking truth, peace, and understanding. I am still learning.” Aren’t we all still learning?

Michael Jordan, arguably the most successful basketball player in history, said, “One step at a time. I can’t imagine any other way of accomplishing anything.”

I believe this is true. We can laugh through the movie, “What about Bob?” and his baby steps through life. Baby steps to the garage. Baby Steps to the bathroom. Baby Steps to the lake. Baby Steps to a more positive attitude. Baby Steps to recovery and renewal. Baby Steps through change and transformation. Baby Steps... Bill Murray makes the process of taking one step at a time a humorous journey, even if the circumstances we are in are anything but humorous.

Writer Bob Stoess offers his thoughts on “Baby Steps,”

Success doesn't begin until you commence the walk down the pathway towards your goals. And, your walk always begins first with a baby step. Why do we call them baby steps? Are they really anything more than our next step down life's pathway?

Baby steps are the first steps we take as an act of faith. We see others stepping out and we claim our ability to walk by following them. As we grow, we continue our development by taking additional baby steps. Sometimes we fall; sometimes we fail. Thereafter, all steps become an act of faith; we just become more practiced. If you say to yourself, "I don't want to make a fool of myself" or "I'd

better be good at this," you'll probably never take the baby steps towards your goals and end up wallowing in your own self-pity.

As a culture, we focus on results. We contemplate every risk that must be taken to reach our rewards. There are few people who are accomplished performers of any tasks the first time they try them. They fail and succeed. Then, they build upon their abilities learned each successive time. They practice their skills and utilize their talents through baby steps before they are ready to showcase them to the world.

So, learn to take those baby steps to accomplish the goals before you. Know that you can lean on God to show you the way. As you become more proficient, your baby steps become a walk, then a trot, and finally a sprint. That's how our baby steps lead us through the marathon of life.

For someone who is in recovery, the next step may seem simple and small, but from their perspective, taking that step is like climbing a mountain. For someone who is struggling and suffering and doing everything they can to simply survive another day- a mother with little children who are potty training or teething, parents with older children and teenagers who are facing far more in life than they need to so early, a coach who believes in the team but just isn't seeing the progress needed, a teacher who has worked for hours on a lesson plan has it derailed because of variables way out of her control, a parent or grandparent who waits anxiously for a doctor to appear with good news of healing and recovery for the child they hold so dear- one step (all be it a physical step forward like standing after a month of laying, a mental step like seeing the positive in a sea of negativity, an emotional step like learning to cope with a relentless pressure, or a spiritual step like prayer), one step partnered with God's power and strength gives birth and opportunity to a future full of welfare and hope.

I began today with a comic, and I will end with one as well.

The top picture in the comic illustrates a man trying to pull a stack of bricks in a net. He is straining, sweating, leaning, and is just not able to move the whole pile of bricks. The bottom picture illustrates the same man, the same pile of bricks, and the same net. This time, the net is cut, and the man is stepping forward with one brick in hand at a time.

In the sure and certain hope of God's steadfast love that never ceases, God's mercies which never come to an end and are new every morning, let us all take one step at a time, however baby step or monumental mountain it may be. For we know in faith that we have a future full of promise and hope.

Let us pray together...