

Story and Meditation: From the Shadows

March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

by *Eric Anderson*

A storm on the mountain slopes can be pretty distressing to fledgling 'apapane, as we heard in last week's story. It can also be very hard on the adult birds of the ohī'a, mamane, and koa forest, which is what happens in this story.

All through the forest, i'iwi, 'apapane, 'amakihi, and 'alawi had been industriously building nests. They'd retrieved twigs and grasses and mosses. They'd woven or piled them or laced them together. Sometimes they'd added some of their own feather down to them.

When the storm blew through, it literally threw everything into chaos. A lot of finished nests were damaged, and some were destroyed. Unfinished nests cascaded to the forest floor in showers of grass and twigs that fell with the pounding rain. Some nests crashed down with broken branches. Others sailed away on the wind.

The birds themselves just hung on.

When the storm passed, different birds had different ideas of what to do next. A few of them simply abandoned the idea of building a new nest. Most of these were birds that had nested early, and their fledglings were already accustomed to perching overnight. Some – not very many – didn't construct a nest at all that year.

By far, most birds returned to the site of their nest, where some parts of it remained or where at least the branches remained, and began to repair it or start over again. Even those whose nests had suffered from broken branches found a new spot as close to the old one as they could. Once more the forest hummed with wings as they sorted through twigs and grass and lichens to find new materials. They were determined to build it just like it had been before.

One 'amakihi couple, however, did something completely different. Their nest site was still there, and even had some stems clinging to it. The two of them flew about the forest as if they were hunting for a nest site for the first time. At forking branch after forking branch, she pushed a blade of grass upon it to see if it would hold.

Her husband followed along without saying anything.

It was an i'iwi that finally asked the question that many birds in the forest wanted to ask: "What are you doing? Your nest site is over there," she said, pointing rather awkwardly with her curved beak, but the 'amakihi knew what she was saying.

“I’m rebuilding our nest,” said the ‘amakihi.

“It was over there,” said the i’iwi.

“It was over there,” admitted the ‘amakihi. “But why should I build it in the same place?”

“So it will be like it was,” said the i’iwi.

“I don’t want it like it was,” said the ‘amakihi. “I want it better.”

In the Hoyt Axton song, Jeremiah was a bullfrog, but in the Scriptures, Jeremiah was a prickly, gloomy prophet with a talent for annoying powerful people and a relentless energy for doing just that. He lived through some of the most terrifying upheavals in the history of the Hebrew people. He began his prophetic activity under the reign of the great reformer, King Josiah of Judah, and lived through a series of monarchs who undid that reformer’s efforts and earned Jeremiah’s scorn, rebuke, warning, and condemnation.

He may not have been a bullfrog, but I suspect he would have been a difficult friend of mine.

Jeremiah’s warnings – warnings about routine injustice against the poor, warnings about worship of foreign gods, warnings against entanglements in alliances against the major powers of the area – went unheeded. The folly of the nation’s rulers ended when the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah’s capital city of Jerusalem not once but twice, and ended the independent existence of the nation.

It is out of this great catastrophe that Jeremiah wrote, “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

Kelly J. Murphy writes at Working Preacher, “The book of Jeremiah was written in a specific place and context, offering hope to the exiled Judeans that the covenant with their God would continue in a new fashion, mended after the disaster of 587 BCE. Yet the book of Jeremiah also transcends its context. The words of comfort in Jeremiah 31:31-34 can speak to all of us who are suffering in the world now, to all of us who might feel like Rembrandt’s Jeremiah. After all, no matter how broken the world might seem, ‘the days are surely coming, says the LORD ...’”

Restoration from exile. Return from exile. Reunion with loved ones. These were Jeremiah’s words of promise, encouragement, and hope.

But... like the ‘amakihi, it would not be the same. It would be better.

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...” Then Jeremiah repeated the foundation of the long-time covenant: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

It’s the old covenant. But better.

As we emerge from the suffering of this pandemic, from the upheaval, from the isolation, from the exile, from the loss and grief and fear, our instinct will be to rebuild our nests as they were, where they were, in the familiar and comforting ways. I’m here to tell you that that’s not good enough. It’s not good enough for us, and it’s not good enough for the rest of the world.

One of the lesser-known statistics about 2020 is that there were more mass shootings last year than in 2019. By the end of last November, according to reporting by Craig Jackson at [theconversation.com](#) based on data from the Gun Violence archive, there were 578 incidents where four or more people were shot, as compared to 417 in 2019. Experts predicted a rise in domestic violence with abusers and abused restricted to their homes, and they were right. According to reporting by Jeffrey Kluger at *Time* magazine, police have reported increases of complaints by “18% in San Antonio, 22% in Portland, Ore.; and 10% in New York City.” Kluger writes, “One [study in the journal Radiology](#) reports that at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, radiology scans and superficial wounds consistent with domestic abuse from March 11 to May 3 of this year exceeded the totals for the same period in 2018 and 2019 combined.”

We don’t want to return to the 2018 or 2019 conditions. Those were horrifying enough. We want better.

We want better than the higher rates of illness and death due to COVID-19 experienced by African Americans across the country and by Micronesians and Hawaiians here. We want better than the correspondingly low rates of vaccination in Micronesians and Hawaiians despite the fact that many of them work the high exposure, high-risk of infection jobs that were supposed to be vaccinated early. We want better than eight dead people in a day, seven of them women, six of them Asian American women, and to hear from authorities that their killer was having a bad day and actually supporting a defense against a hate crime charge because the defendant claimed it wasn’t about race.

Just out of curiosity, when did authorities start taking the word of the people they accused of crimes?

We want better. We want better than people of color around the nation wondering once more why the white murderer of eight was apprehended unharmed after a high speed chase while African Americans have died unarmed. We want better than police officers in Rochester escaping criminal consequences for pushing a kupuna to the ground and causing a brain injury.

We want better than a third of our homeless neighbors on this island being children. Not a third of them families with children – a third of all of them children. We want better than hearing over and over again that the minimum wage was never intended for “introductory” jobs.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a different opinion. "It seems to me to be equally plain that no business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country," he wrote in 1933. "By 'business' I mean the whole of commerce as well as the whole of industry; by workers I mean all workers, the white collar class as well as the men in overalls; and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level - I mean the wages of decent living."

We want better than inadequate wages for some and skyrocketing income for others.

We have been living in the shadows. We have been beneath the thunderous wings of the storm. We have been in exile. We have seen our nests blown away. We have yearned to return to what has been.

But what was was not so good. What was was not good enough.

We want better. Let's make better.

Amen.