

In last week's biblical story in the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet articulated hope in the present time- where people found themselves in exile. It's now been ten years since the leaders of Judah were taken into exile in Babylon. This week Jeremiah, who has been a prophet for forty plus years, remains in Jerusalem with the others, and he demonstrates a hope for God's future- even in the harsh reality of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. He challenges soon-to-be and already exiled peoples to imagine hopeful action. In other words, Jeremiah offers both a short-term and long-term understanding of hope. Today's story demonstrates that God's grace occurs in unusual places and sometimes in ways that go against popular opinion. Jeremiah is in jail under the King of Judah's watch. You remember? The king who has been nothing but a puppet for Babylon's king. But now the puppet king, Zedekiah, is rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's king. Jeremiah repeatedly has been warning Zedekiah that he needs to surrender because he is going to lose the war. Naturally Zedekiah doesn't want to hear that so he arrests Jeremiah and has him thrown into jail for treason. He's hoping that Egypt will be his ally against Babylon. As expected, Nebuchadnezzar is not pleased, and his Babylonian army surrounds the city waiting for Jerusalem's inevitable surrender. These are the conditions under which today's story takes place. **PRAY. READ. Jeremiah 32:1-3a; 6-15.**

Some would say there's a lot to hope about the future these days. People are starting to regather after a year and a half of the pandemic, even though the virus is still around, and the vaccines seem to be working (thus far). Some have discovered something new about themselves- new hobbies, new direction in life- ready to get serious about living life. Any yet, others say it's hard to have hope

these days. Gas prices are going back up. There are possible wars brewing. There's an ongoing war of poverty and other injustices going on all over the world. Our economy has yet to recover and people are being evicted from their homes. Peace in our divisive country often feels nowhere in sight. Restoration- what is that? Where does our hope lie? In whom does our hope lie? I think in today's world, we get easily confused with these questions. Or...quite the opposite- we're very confident that one person or political party or lottery win is going to save us. "It is of course, far easier to languish in despair than to live in hope, for when we live in despair we don't have to do anything or risk anything. And if we live in hope, we go against the stream" (Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses*). What would you say if I told you that there are few more hopeful passages in the Bible than this strange, yet very compelling, story of land purchase in the midst of enemy siege?

The poet and farmer, Wendell Berry, has a poem entitled, *Below*, which is more about the physical land on which he stands but on a deeper level, it also reminds me about faith which eventually leads to not an "everything turns out all right" kind of hope but rather a 'hard headed hope.' "A hope that relies on the certainties of the power and presence of God in the affairs of the human story" (John C. Holbert, *The Peripatetic Preacher*). **A tangible hope for the future.**

*Above trees and rooftops is the range of symbols: banner, cross and star; air war, the mode of those who live by symbols; the pure abstraction of travel by air. Here a spire holds up an angel with trump and wings; he's in his element. Another lifts a hand with forefinger pointing up to admonish that all's not here. All's not. But I aspire downward. Flyers embrace the air, and I'm a man who needs something to hug. All my dawns cross the horizon and rise, from underfoot. What I stand for is what I stand on.*

While Jeremiah can't physically stand on the land he has just purchased, he is grounded in his seemingly impractical decision- he has something to stand for because he has something to stand on- his faith and a hard headed hope that God, though judging is also very compassionate. A hope that regardless of whether or not Jeremiah lives to see this land again someone else will benefit from it. Yes, Jeremiah- once again- looks like a fool here. Who would make a real estate deal in a bad market when the very property they are buying is occupied by another country? To top that off, Jeremiah is buying said real estate from prison. Let's back up here. We're told that Jeremiah received a word from the Lord that his cousin, Hanamel, would be stopping by to sell the family land to him. The Lord told him to buy the property. And then shortly after, God's word is confirmed as Hanamel shows up with this request. Jeremiah is in his later part of life and must be the next in line in his family because in ancient Judah you had to sell property to the next closest relative. We aren't told why Hanamel is needing to sell the land. We only know that he is selling it, and Jeremiah is to buy it. We can pretty much guarantee that this land is worthless, as it is about to be taken over by Babylon. Jeremiah- from prison- buys the land and makes a big display of signing the deed over to his scribe, Baruch, and storing it in a clay container so that it will be preserved for the future of God's people. God declares that the "houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought in this land" (v. 15) as the people will return to Jerusalem. Through Jeremiah's act, God promises hope in the face of perceived disaster: when it appears as if all hope is gone. Jeremiah put his money where his mouth his. He trusted that God is the God of all creation and

transcends all our imaginings. This is an act of generosity as well as a prophetic word of hope for the future- maybe a future that Jeremiah won't live to see?!

She was in her 90s, and she confessed of a time when she had to eat crow. Obviously that is an expression of being humiliated and having to admit one is wrong. During a visit, she told the story of being good friends with the mayor of Greenville, Knox White, and upon hearing the news that he wanted to tear down the Camperdown Bridge in 2002, which obstructed the view of the falls, and build a park, she told him to his face that that was the most absurd thing she had ever heard. "It'll never work," she told him. "You'll always be known as a fool in this town." What had once been a thriving mill community- processing textiles, paper, wood, iron, corn, and more- had become run down, polluted and for many an eyesore. A few years into the Falls Park project, this friend of the mayor's admitted to him that she was wrong and apologized. Upon remembering this story, I asked a native Greenvillian this week what he thought when this happened, and he said, "It never crossed my mind to do that." Another native friend said, "My parents thought they had lost their minds. Who wants to spend leisure time there?" Have you had times when you saw something that most people didn't see or when you did something in faith and in hope for the future? If so, what was it?

It is often said that theologian Martin Luther when asked what he would do if the world were coming to an end tomorrow, he replied that he would "plant a tree." Whether or not he really said it, that is what it looks like to live in hope. Buying the land in Anathoth is Jeremiah's tree planting. "Buying that field was a

deliberate act of hope. All acts of hope expose themselves to ridicule because they seem impractical, failing to conform to visible reality” (Peterson). Jeremiah’s act was “a token of confidence in the future. And that requires faith- not the faith that flees the world, but the faith that endures in the world and loves and remains true regardless of the hardships it brings” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Love Letter From Cell*). We must pray daily for this kind of faith- a faith that enacts hope God’s future. A faith that even if we don’t live to see it come to pass, we know without a doubt that it will be.

In his poem, *The Bridge Builder*, Will Dromgoole, illustrates well this idea of looking like a fool for another’s future and a faith that enacts hope.

*An old man, going a lone highway, Came at the evening cold and gray- to a chasm vast and deep and wide through which was flowing a swollen tide. The old man crossed in the twilight dim; the rapids held no fears for him. But he turned when safe on the other side and built a bridge to span the tide. “Old man,” cried a fellow pilgrim near, “You’re wasting your time in building here. Your journey will end with the closing day; You never again will pass this way. You have crossed the chasm deep and wide; Why build you this bridge at even-tide?” The builder lifted his old gray head. “Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said, “There follows after me today a youth whose feet must pass this way. This stream, which has been as naught to me, to that fair youth may a pitfall be. He too must cross in the twilight dim —Good friend, I am building this bridge for him.”*

What do we do in our faith to enact hope for others- to show our trust in God’s promise? What are things the world might call impractical or foolish that we practice as followers of Christ? Whenever we gather at a funeral or memorial service to celebrate a life and to give witness to the Resurrection, we all enact a hard headed hope. A “hope that relies upon grace in the face of death and acts

on the conviction that God will complete the work that God has begun even when the appearances, especially when the appearances, oppose it” (Peterson). A hope that in life and in death, we belong to God. A hope that through Christ’s death and resurrection, there is victory over evil and death. A hope in the already but not yet.

“The good news of the Gospel is that God is intending to make the future work-our job is to sign on with God’s readiness to create a workable future. Jeremiah has been living out that mission from the beginning of his ministry. This is an earnest down payment on hope. How are you going to make a generous down payment on the future for the work God is continuing to do?” (Brueggemann, Working Preacher podcast). What metaphorical bridges are you helping to build-even if you don’t live to see the fruit of your labor? As followers of Christ, we’re a people who enact hope for one another. That can look like checking in on your neighbors or sending encouraging notes to those going through a difficult time. That can look like surrendering and giving up an addiction through the hard work of recovery or actively praying for someone in recovery, trusting that God is at work even in the most challenging times. Or looking at someone’s long wrap sheet and saying, “I’ll be here with you along the way- if you decide to jump each hoop- trusting that nothing is too hard for God.” Or it can look like buying some land to house folks who can’t afford it. May we all do impractical things in the name of the Lord, having faith in God’s future, living into this hard headed, relentless, radical hope, which allows us to see the world differently. And may we commit ourselves to enacting this hope daily: buying land, planting trees, building

bridges or enacting whatever analogies that speak the hope of redemption and resurrection in unpromising places and times. Amen.