

September 29, 2019

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Reading: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

The Message: Hope Floats

At 11.30 am yesterday, long after I finished this message, I received this email from my husband's cousin, whose health is precarious:

"Sorry to bother you, but I wanted to schedule a time we might chat on Facetime. It's not a big deal, just the "elephant in the room," as time passes and I find myself worrying about it NOT passing anymore, a concern that has pestered me since I sat at that kitchen table on Highland you know well and asked Mom if she ever worried about dying (I was 10 or 12, before Dad passed away, and she offered her usual blythe dismissal, "Oh, you'll grow out of that." Thanks, Mom.).

So I know this is sort of your province and you might have a "quick fix" for this sort of fixation, since we don't really do the "church" thing, as you know.

No recent dramatic diagnosis or anything; I just woke up this morning as usual thinking about this and thought of you, thinking you might offer some good spiritual "advice." Elane thinks I'm making "much ado about nothing." "

It's hard to believe this is a coincidence. For young people, this is such an apocalyptic time. Two young couples I know have invested in vasectomies recently because of what they see happening in the planet, so for a 73 year old cousin in poor health, the 'elephant in the room' is in his mind a lot.

It's not just a question of the moment.

MacBeth, having caused the deaths of many on his pursuit of royal power, is on the castle walls, under siege by his enemies. A cry is heard from within the castle, and Macbeth learns that his wife has killed herself.

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death."

If you're not into Shakespeare, Breaking Bad is the story of a good person who feels cheated of success and, finding he is dying, wants to provide for his family and from the choice he makes, a swirling mass of evil is unleashed for six seasons. And few can imagine that it can end with justice, hope or redemption.

The current of despair runs deep in human life. And whether you watch MacBeth or Breaking Bad, you know that disaster befalls and the innocent suffer along with the guilty.

Jeremiah knows the depths of human evil. He has seen his predictions come true; he knows the people deserve the destruction that lies in wait at their doorstep.

With the armies of the evil empire camped around them like a scene from one of the Lord of the Rings movies, the people are starving, and sick, and desperate.

The end is here and there's no going back. Everything in Jeremiah must be screaming: "I told you so!! It's over!"

But is it?

Not in the economy of God's house.

In God's house, despair may be like a current running deep and fast in the river, but hope floats to the surface. And it looks very much like a document stored in a clay jar.

Jeremiah has a premonition -- God inspired -- that his cousin (it seems the moment for cousins!) will come to his prison cell and try to sell him a piece of land in Anathoth. Worthless because it was already overrun by the enemy.

So who would buy land there? Jeremiah. Because "I knew that this was the word of the Lord."

And in great detail we read about how much he paid, how the deed was signed, witnessed and sealed, and the money weighed out. He instructed his aide who likely wrote the book of Jeremiah: "Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time." (this is exactly how the Dead Sea Scrolls were preserved).

Why this detail, do you think? There are so few stories in the Bible with so much detail.

I think it was because Jeremiah wanted there to be a record -- so there would be no doubt even if the deed was lost -- that this piece of worthless land was his, bought, paid for, and stored in a safe place -- a sign in years to come that hope existed in Jeremiah's heart.

"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

No matter how disastrous the present, God has a vision of a future in which houses and fields and vineyards shall again be worth buying.

When banks were closing in the depression, my grandfather in law put all his money in his friends' banks. He lost it all, but rebuilt his economy in later years, at the same time he gave his family a story about values.

God's economy is not about buying low so you can sell high. No, he was paying more than the land was worth, since it was worth less than nothing. The enemy have likely already taken it. They would not see this land again for several generations.

Anathoth overlooked the northern part of the Dead Sea. A place where it is impossible to sink.

Though the current of despair runs deep, hope floats to the surface for Jeremiah because he is rooted in a community of faith.

We do become overwhelmed with our individual anxieties, our own personal tragedies. And they are great. Jeremiah knew that. But when we put our trust in God and turn to God in prayer, hope floats to the surface somewhere. We may have to swim toward it with all our might, against that current, just as Jeremiah did for the years of his life and his people's life represented by the preceding 31 chapters.

Meanwhile, do what Jeremiah did after he bought the land. Pray for understanding, for strength to carry on. Even when you feel that God has abandoned you and those you love, cling to God by clinging to the community of faith.

The current of despair does run deep, but hope floats to the surface despite it.

These chapters of Jeremiah coming up are often referred to as the Book of Comfort. And Jeremiah is such an incredible prophet because, even when his predictions come true (and still he is imprisoned), and all his criticisms of the people's bad behaviour are all too obviously justified, he turns himself inside out to give hope and comfort to his people.

That is what we do as church, as a community of faith: no matter what the circumstances, when tragedy strikes, we are called to turn ourselves inside out and respond with the offer of comfort and hope. The love of Christ is always made tangible in an often cruel world. Our most important work is to magnify the presence of God wherever and whenever possible in the world.

The current of despair does run deep, but hope floats to the surface despite it.
God's whisper through you. I pray that you will feel God's joy and with God, celebrate life!