

2 December 2018

—Hope Takes Root —

Jeremiah 33:14-16

A woman speaks about her work with a lot of people who are in very serious crisis. “The amazing thing,” she says, “is that when they first come in to meet with me, they sit down and let on that they are every bit as calm as anyone else—while on the inside they are just barely hanging on. There is just this incredible pressure to keep up appearances.”

Some here today are in the same boat. On the outside things may appear to be fine, but on the inside things are just barely holding together—as you wait for test results, face marital uncertainties, family strife, issues with children, unemployment, depression, grief, a loved one with dementia, addiction, struggles with sexuality, the pressure of the Christmas Season, or the worry of a world in so much turmoil. In what W.H. Auden called, “the Age of Anxiety,” many right around us conceal behind calm exteriors a good deal of pain, sorrow and turmoil as they suffer alone.

When Jeremiah originally delivered the words of today’s reading, things for God’s people were in considerable turmoil. It was the time of a great sea-change in the Middle East as one super-power—the Assyrian Empire—fell and the Neo-Babylonian Empire took its place. Crushed in the middle was the nation of Israel that was losing its land and ending its existence as an independent entity until 1948. In the midst of this the prophet, Jeremiah is called to help God’s people understand what it all means. And if you know Jeremiah, you also know how he was much given to doom and gloom about Israel’s constant back sliding and determination to follow their own way instead of taking seriously the will and way of God. According to Jeremiah, God gets to the end of his rope and then breaks out in war against his own people—until their national life is destroyed and only a spread-out remnant remains.

You can well imagine how popular Jeremiah was around Jerusalem—as it endured the most appalling of conditions. Food and water rations were severely taxed. Epidemics and disease swept through the weakened and crowded population. When King Zedekiah had had about all the bad news that he could take—he locked Jeremiah up in hopes of shutting him up—Jeremiah wasn’t good for business. Ironically, it is only then that Jeremiah’s defeat and desolation gives way to the beautiful vision of hope that we hear about in today’s passage. It is from prison that we receive these promising words: *“The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promises I made...I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David; and he shall*

execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” (NRSV)

In the midst of the turmoil and chaos, Jeremiah points to the unexpected and surprising function of promise and hope. Jeremiah reminds the people that even when things are at their worst—when all human possibility and potential has been expended—God has a plan. Chaos and tragedy shall **not** have the last word and shall not ultimately define God’s people. God’s will and way will not be turned back by a bad economy, unemployment, disease, poverty or even death.

It is while Jeremiah is at his lowest darkest point that hope emerges. It’s the same with Jonah who has his moment of transformation while locked up in the belly of the great fish. In the New Testament, the death to life transformation at the centre of our faith happens inside a cold dark tomb. The Apostle Paul, writes some of his most hopeful letters to the church from the confines of a dark prison cell. In dark places of **waiting**, hope can come to light.

There is so much to wait for in life: human development, employment, love, peace in the church and in the world. It can feel like being a trapeze artist, where we are sometimes forced to let go of one swing—while gliding head-long through the air—without being able to see the next swing to grab. In real life the next swing doesn’t suddenly appear, but must be discovered through discernment and struggle. And most of us do not wait well in this place of betwixt and between. We get impatient or we get depressed. We question or we doubt. We argue or we get alienated. Or we look for escape—often in the direction of addictions—alcohol, drugs, pornography, sex...

Yet if you find yourself today in one of those dark waiting places—you could actually be, as Jeremiah, in the very womb of possibility and hope. As one person said to me: “I grew the most through the tricky bits. The tricky bits can deepen us in ways that the easy times never will. The trick is to be willing to **wait** in the tricky bits long enough—without running away.”

Advent nurtures us in learning how to wait in such places of betwixt and between where real transformation can take place. And the reason it happens here is because it’s here that we must rely **on God alone** and his community of grace. Nothing new happens as long as we are inside our self-constructed comfort zone. Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. Much of the work of the Bible, says Spiritual writer, Richard Rhor, is actually to “get people into this betwixt and between/liminal space, and to keep them there long enough so that

they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teachable space.” And when we can stay in this place of betwixt and between long enough beauty emerges—a kind of resurrection.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "Few people are telling us this truth, but there is peace to be found in our own weakness, in those places of our hearts where we feel most broken, most insecure, most in agony, most afraid. In our weakness, our familiar ways of controlling and manipulating our world are being stripped away and we are forced to let go from doing much, thinking much, and relying on our self-sufficiency. Right there, where we are most vulnerable, the peace that is not of this world is mysteriously hidden.... New life is born in the state of total vulnerability--this is the mystery of love. Power kills. Weakness creates. It creates autonomy, self-awareness, and freedom. It creates openness to give and receive in mutuality. And finally it creates the good ground on which new life can come to full development and maturity."

What can keep us in such betwixt and between places long enough for them to help us is a sense of **HOPE!** There are plenty of things in life that legitimately break our hearts and break God's heart. Yet we can adopt an attitude toward life and its circumstances that is neither pollyanna optimism and denies reality, or is controlled and blown by every wind of outside circumstance. Everything in life depends on inner realities and attitudes with which we face the daunting things in life. The trustworthiness of God; the nearness of Christ; the power of the Holy Spirit—on these we can build our lives and count on.

Hope is the antidote to despair. Despair always leads to paralysis. But hope is the precondition for new thinking and new beginnings—for getting the mess of relationships straightened out, for getting our planet back on track, for finding re-newed vision and life in an aging declining church. We will never have a better world if we lose hope that there can be a better world. We will never have a better church if we lose hope that there can be a better church. Hope is the light that allows us to stay in those dark uncertain liminal spaces, without bolting, so that in our deepest vulnerability we finally become open to God in a way like never before. God is in the business of new life—Christ was dead and is now alive and is Lord over all. Because he is, then I am able to lean fully on the reality of his kingdom and its possibility—even in the dark place of waiting.

There's a great story about Gardiner Taylor, an African-American preacher who was preaching one evening in a black church in Louisiana when a violent storm erupted. The rain poured down; the lightning flashed, followed by earthshaking thunder. Then suddenly, right in the middle of Dr Taylor's sermon there was an incredible cracking noise and the whole town was plunged into darkness. The congregation fell silent. The darkness was so thick that Dr. Taylor said he could not see his hand in front of face. Then out of the silence came a voice from the back of the church: Preach on brother, we can see Jesus in the dark.

Hope is the force that is powerful enough to change the future.

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