

## Giving Hope a Place

Jeremiah 32:1–3, 6–15

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 28) 2025

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*It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old  
for hope must not depend upon feeling good...  
Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet  
Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground  
underfoot.*

-Wendell Berry (*Leavings*, 92-93)

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 4 about Abraham, “Hoping against hope, he believed...” (Rom. 4:18). Or as *The Message* translates it, “When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he *couldn't* do but on the basis of what God said he *would* do.”

What does it mean to hope against hope? What does it look like “when everything was hopeless,” to believe anyway?

The prophet Jeremiah shows us.

Chapter 32 begins, “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah.” Jerusalem was a war zone. It says, “The army of the king of Babylon was then besieging Jerusalem.” What that means is that Nebuchadnezzar and the massive imperial army of Babylon had Jerusalem surrounded. Indeed, we know the siege had been in effect for about six months and

would last roughly another year before the city's walls would be breached and the city, the king's palace, and most of all, the Temple that had been built by Solomon some four centuries earlier would all be destroyed, burned, and completely demolished.

Have you ever felt yourself surrounded? Perhaps on verge of feeling like you're overwhelmed and helpless? Maybe you'd like to find someplace else to live but you can't. Every day you get up knowing what hopelessness feels like. Welcome to Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The small kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem had found itself caught between the falling and rising and conflict between three empires. Assyria, the old and ruthless empire in the east, was on the decline and the new, fast rising, and powerful empire of Babylon rose in the midst of the Assyrians and overcame them. At the same, over in the west, was a new Egyptian empire. As the Egyptians spread to the east, the Babylonians spread to the west, caught in between was Judah. At first, Judah thought they could survive by playing Egypt off against Babylon. Then they decided to cast their lot with Egypt against Babylon. It was a bad choice when they were no good choices. First, Egypt dominated them and wanted more and more tribute from Judah, until Judah said, "No more!" Then Egypt sent their army and defeated Judah. If that wasn't enough, then came a vindictive Babylon, angry that Judah had originally sided with Egypt. Judah called to Egypt for help and Egypt said, "Tough. You're on your own."

Jerusalem and the king knew what was coming. Wherever Babylon went – and they went wherever they wanted – they destroyed everything and killed or enslaved everyone. We know what happened to Jerusalem: They executed government officials and plundered Jerusalem's national treasures, and everything

of any value, both sacred and secular. Furthermore, dead bodies littered the streets and there was no place and no one to bury them. The book of Lamentations describes children begging for bread, and even cannibalism. The intellectual elite, the skilled workers, and artisans were deported to Babylon. The poor “who owned nothing” were either killed or left to fend for themselves amidst disease and famine.

King Zedekiah didn’t know what to do. He was only in his early twenties. A few of his advisors said, “We’re all going to die! We must surrender and learn to speak Babylonian, dress Babylonian, worship the Babylonian gods, and become Babylonian.” But other advisors said, “This is the time to be patriotic and stand up and be counted for God and country. God will deliver us! Let’s fight! Fight! Fight!”

In the midst of all of this is the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah says, “God is using Babylon to judge us. Our problem is that we forgot and gave up on living God’s Way – we quit caring for the poor, we gave up on justice and gave-in to injustice.” He went on, “We’re simply reaping what we sowed. What God wants is for us to surrender before it’s too late. But here’s the thing, our calling is to trust God and stay faithful to God even after Babylon takes over everything. Our hope is in God. Not Egypt. Not Babylon. Not in our own might.”

In chapter 29, Jeremiah wrote a famous letter to the exiles in Babylon, detailing the implications of how God wants them to live in the midst of the empire. “Pray for God’s peace and shalom and work for it. Trust God, hope in God, keep your identity in God but that means seeking peace and justice and right relationship even with the pagan Babylonians. Raise your children and grandchildren knowing and practicing shalom and God’s Way. But do not fight.

Do not take up arms. Seek shalom.”

Well, big surprise, young King Zedekiah didn't like the unpatriotic message from Jeremiah. You see when the king and the elite leaders of Judah all stepped forward with the flag, Jeremiah did not step forward. Not because he was contrary but because he was loyal to a higher law – the law of God, the law of justice, the law of shalom – which means peace and just relationship with God, with each other, and with all creation. The king and the powerful elite saw Jeremiah, and five centuries later, Jesus, as subversives. Well, as a result the king had Jeremiah arrested. Some say it was for Jeremiah's own protection, given his treasonous message, and others say it was to keep Jeremiah's mouth shut. Nevertheless, when his arrest didn't keep him quiet, they threw him down a muddy cistern and hoped he would die.

Meanwhile Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel sent word that he had lost the family farm located at a village just outside Jerusalem, in Anathoth, and asked if Jeremiah would exercise God's law (see Lev. 25:25) and redeem the land. As I mentioned before, over the past few centuries, Israel and Judah's agricultural and land tenure had shifted from small family farms to large-scaled agricultural conglomerates. The corporations took over the farms when the small farmers couldn't pay the taxes or owed money on loans they couldn't pay. Then the corporations came in, and turned the small farm that grew food for people into commodity producing agri-conglomerates that grew large-scale vineyards or olive trees for trade in the Mediterranean merchant business. And all of this big commodities globalization produced extraordinary wealth for the king and the elite in Jerusalem. Business was good while people starved.

Except the law of God said that the land belonged to God and could not be

bought and sold as a commodity. And God's land was to be held in trust by families over time, to care for, tend, and grow food in ways that cared for the land. To protect this, God's law said that if a family land was about to be lost, then the extended family members had first choice in paying off the bills and making sure the land stayed in the family. This was called "redeeming" the land. If that did not work, then once every 50 years, during the Jubilee, the land automatically reverted back to the original family trust.

So, in the middle of a war zone, with the Babylonian army just down the road, Jeremiah redeemed the land, essentially saying, "This land belongs to God and to God's people. Come armies and destruction or not, God is in this for the long haul with God's people. God will not give up on us and God will not give up on the land. Empires come and go and long after Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians are gone, God will still be standing and because of that, so will we."

What the Jewish and Christian faiths have remembered is that Jeremiah acted out one of the most dramatic embodiments of hope in the Bible up to that time. Whenever anyone talked about faith, Jeremiah asked, "What does faith look like here, on the ground?" Or when they talked about shalom, Jeremiah responded, "What does shalom look like today, among us, in flesh and blood?" Or "What does hope look like on the ground?" When the writer of Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," it is an affirmation of a transcendent faith and hope. But Jeremiah (and Jesus) said the hope that transcends is always lived out in the practical, mundane, fleshly, nitty-gritty world of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Jeremiah's hope in God was placed here. What does hope look like here when everyone is hopeless? It was not hope of pie-in-the-sky, in the sweet-by-and-by. It was hope that you could drive by and look at it.

Wendell Berry wrote:

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for hope must not depend upon feeling good.../  
Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet/  
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underfoot. - (Leavings, p. 92-93).*

Biblical hope is not based upon the circumstances of the moment. And it is not mere optimism, seeing the glass half-full instead of half-empty. For Jeremiah the glass was not half-full. For him, the glass was totally empty, and the Babylonians were about to shatter the glass. Biblical hope is deeper and much more profound. It is hope in what God says more than what is happening around us.

Biblical hope is tenacious, persevering, dogged, and tough. This is the reference of Paul about Abraham in Romans 4 that I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. Hoping against hope, is what Paul says. When everything is hopeless, to hope anyway. This means that hope is an act of faith.

Wendell Berry's best friend, the plant scientist Wes Jackson says, "Pessimism and optimism are both forms of arrogance. We have no right to stop hoping" (see Ellen Davis, *Interpretation: Biblical Prophecy*, p. 143). Pessimism and optimism are both based upon how we see things, and our arrogance that assumes we see correctly. Jeremiah's hope was grounded (literally and figuratively) much deeper.

What I'm asking us this morning, more – what I think Jeremiah is asking us this morning is, can you hope like that? Can you root your lives in the God we

know in Jesus so deeply that you can embody dogged, persevering, hard-nosed hope? And it must be a hope that is placed, incarnated. When the world around us is in despair and full of fear, can we embody and practice hope?

The call of Jeremiah and Jesus is for a hope that perseveres but is also prophetic. It must be more than “Well, I hope that Democrats get elected.” And more than, “I hope that MAGA Republicans are not elected.” You’d better root your hope deeper than that! Jesus and Jeremiah’s kind of hope says no matter who is elected, no matter what kind of politics we have, we’re going to persevere for something better, something more just, we’re going to be prophetic in working for it right here in this place, in this town.

Interestingly enough, I think one of the places where hope is on the ground here in Nacogdoches is Helping Other People Eat (H.O.P.E.). Many of you work with HOPE now or have in the past (Deidra is the current board chair). This past Friday I sat in on a meeting with HOPE and Dr. Jeremy Everett of Baylor University’s Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. Now there is a lot that disappoints me about my alma mater, Baylor, but there are times and places when they get their act together and the Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty is one of those. The Baylor Collaborative is looking to use significant grant money, Baylor’s Collaborative help and support, and the Baylor brand, to bring together various and diverse groups and organizations together to feed people in this town. Along with such groups like Better Together, initially organized by our own Steve Cooper and which held its inaugural meeting right here in this room in 2018, and now headed by our own Catie Mungia, and other groups, I think this is a serious and important opportunity to put hope (and HOPE) on the ground here in Nacogdoches.

Cornel West famously said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” So,

what does hope look like in public?

According to the Apostle Paul hope and patience are connected (see Romans 8:22-25). We are patient because we hope that God is at work in ways beyond our understanding. Patience keeps on keeping on without becoming demoralized or giving into despair and patience gives up the notion that we must control things through violence and coercion.

The kind of patience I'm talking about is not the patience Martin Luther King heard when he said that well-meaning white people told him to "wait" and "wait" most always meant "never." No, the patience I'm talking about is when we give up control and say, "We must listen and learn and see where this takes us even if it is not where we like or where we expected."

This is why Sunday and worship is so essential. We re-gather in communal worship of the true and living God we know in Jesus Christ, who nurtures and restores our hope and engenders the patience that comes from trusting this God. We do this over and over again – together. And Sunday or Sabbath rest teach us to practice that patience. We trust God to be in charge of the world and we learn and re-learn that it is not all up to us to frantically make it come out the way we think it should. We are to be involved and we are to work, but our hope is in God. Not short-term results but long haul outlasting and never giving up.

I remember the 1966 letter that young antiwar activist Jim Forest received from Catholic monk Thomas Merton. Forest was close to giving up in despair. Merton wrote to him, "Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, ... you may have to meet the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, ... As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the



value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. ... it gets more and more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.”

(By the way – I went to seminary in Louisville, Kentucky because I wanted to be around people who knew and read Thomas Merton and Wendell Berry. That happened. But also, what happened is it was there I met Jane.)

The hope of Jeremiah, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul becomes a kind of resistance. We resist the powers-that-be. We resist the empire – not by violence but by saying, like our t-shirts, we are “rooted in Christ and grounded in community.” Therefore, we will never relent and become what you want but we will embody what God wants. We live now what God wants for all people and all creation, and which someday will all come true.”

There is a famous scene in the movie *Gandhi* (which I strongly recommend that you watch) where the common and poor people will no longer go along with the British Empire control of salt. In the scene before the British controlled salt works, the police are lined up with riot sticks, facing them are the people who have been trained in non-violence, and they are lined up down the road as far as you can see. One of Gandhi’s associates says that the British expect “us to fight or give up in despair. We will do neither.” Then people walk up, non-violently, six abreast to the police who club them down. Women come and drag the beaten protesters away and six more protesters walk forward to be beaten. This goes on and on and on. Eventually, we now know, that the police gave up in exhaustion, but the people trained in non-violence did not give up.

That’s a Jeremiah and Jesus kind of hope. In our Bible story today, the choices are either to fight or give up in despair. The God of Jeremiah, the God we know in Jesus calls us to do neither. Instead, we are called to a hope that never,

never gives up.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.