

9/29/2013                    Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15    Luke 16:19-31    "Hope: A Candle for All Times"

The gospel lesson, the story of the rich man and the poor man after death, is intended to be a wake-up call to us, to make us realize that the life we live NOW, the way we use the gifts we have been given and the way we respond to the suffering of those around us, matter to God and in fact will determine our judgments after death. Life today is important, and God cares what we do with it.

This having been said, the rest of today's sermon will focus on the lesson from Jeremiah. Much of this sermon leans heavily on the work of a preacher by the name of Thomas Rogers. May God bless and lead us all through these stories.

Cynthia stood before a church group in a neighboring town. She had been invited to share the story of her faith in her successful struggle against death. She stood before the group with a candle in one hand and a pocket lighter in the other.

She began, "Three years ago I went to the hospital for a series of tests and I was told that I had malignant cancer. I was also told that, although it was possible for me to take chemotherapy treatments, the chance of them helping at all was very slim. My doctors said treatments would most likely only bring misery to my final days. This was, of course, very bad news for me. I fell into a deep despair. I was ready to give up. All I could see was darkness.

"As I lay in this dark despair in my hospital bed, I started reading a Bible that was in my room. I happened to turn to the book of Jeremiah. What I read there changed my life. It also literally gave me life.

"In the darkest moment of my life, I read about the dark times that Jeremiah and the nation of Judah experienced. Following directions that he had received from God, Jeremiah prophesied for 12 years that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Finally, having angered the king by saying such things, Jeremiah was sitting in prison watching his prediction of doom come true. The Judean nation was on the brink of destruction. Her enemies were making their final assault on the city. The Judeans who had already been killed lay unburied and those who were still alive suffered from famine and pestilence. The end was very near. Soon the enemy would break through and drag the survivors from their homeland into a captivity in a foreign land. It was a very dark time for them. As I read, it was easy for me to relate to the despair of their situation.

"In the midst of this hopeless and despairing situation, God led Jeremiah to do an incredibly hopeful thing. At the moment when things looked the worst, God led Jeremiah to purchase a field. He bought land in a country that was about to be completely taken over by the enemy. In this action Jeremiah was making an investment in the future. In the midst of a very bad time, he looked with hope to a better future of better times. Jeremiah knew that the hard times of exile were about to come upon the people of Judah, but God also led the prophet to symbolically proclaim that things would eventually get better and that God would return the people to their home. In faith, Jeremiah saw that future. As a symbol of hope, he invested himself in that future by buying a piece of land."

Cynthia said, "When I read about Jeremiah's purchase of the field, it was as if God had suddenly brought a light into my darkness." At this point in her story Cynthia lit the candle she was holding. She continued, "I had a candle brought into my hospital room and I lit it that day as a sign of my hope -- a sign that I was going to trust God like Jeremiah and invest in the future.

Cynthia continued, "Against the recommendation of my doctors I took chemotherapy treatments. In the process I got very sick and came quite close to death. But as I stand before you today, my cancer is in total remission." She raised the lit candle in front of her. "God gave me hope during my darkest times, during my bad times. Like Jeremiah, I put my faith in God and invested in the future. Now I praise God and celebrate the good times of health that the future has brought me."

At this point in her talk everyone broke into spontaneous applause. Everyone, that is, except for a quiet man in the back row. After a moment he raised his hand and asked to speak. He said, "Your story sounds similar in many ways to a story that was a part of my life. It is very similar, but only up to a point. My wife also had cancer. She too had hope that God would move her through the dark times into better times. She invested in that future. She trusted God as the light to see her through her darkness. She took all kinds of treatments, and she too became very sick. Together we hoped, together we prayed, and then she died." He said, "Please don't get me wrong. I am very glad that the future in which you invested turned out to have good times in it. But as you stand there holding that candle, I have to ask you -- what do you think Jeremiah's hopeful action of purchasing a field has to say for my wife?"

All eyes were upon Cynthia. In absolute silence they waited for her response. She also waited, and then, discovering that she did not have a response, told the man that she was sorry for his loss, blew out her candle, and sat down.

What about this man's question? Did Cynthia did understand this story correctly? The purchase was a symbol of hope. The small plot of land that Jeremiah bought is a symbol of the whole land and the prophet is a symbol of all who will own property in the new day when the Lord will restore the fortunes of Israel. Cynthia heard the story promising that we can make it through even the very worst times by trusting God -- by hoping for the time when God will finally set things right. Jeremiah's symbolic action seems to proclaim that there will be better times ahead. So, how do we respond to the man in the back row whose wife lit a candle in her darkness only to have it snuffed out by unsuccessful cancer treatments and finally by death? What can be said to the people who join Jeremiah in hoping for better times, but who do not get to experience any better times? ...

There is undeniable tension in the story of the prophet's land purchase. The hopeful vision of a return to the land that Jeremiah's purchase symbolizes *does* turn out to be true. When we move ahead in the biblical narrative we learn that the exiles did eventually get to go home. Ironically, Jeremiah was dead by that time. And since the Lord had told him, "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters" (16:1-2), his piece of land had to pass on to others. So notice: for Jeremiah himself, the bad situation did not actually get better. He never got to truly possess

the land that he bought; he could only think about it and talk about it. The prophet invested in the future, but where did he personally reap the dividend? Perhaps, like the wife of the man in the back row, Jeremiah hoped for a light in the darkness, but that light was snuffed out before he had a chance to personally experience it.

Here's another story, about a man named Ralph. Ralph had a very rare eye disease. He was a very successful CPA in his mid-30s and he was going blind. Ralph tried everything. He went from doctor to doctor and they put him on special diets and gave him special treatments, but nothing seemed to stop the steady loss of vision. Finally an eye specialist told Ralph that he had one last option. An extremely complicated surgery could be performed. If it was successful some of his vision would be saved. If unsuccessful, he would go completely blind immediately rather than gradually with the natural progress of the disease. Ralph opted to have the surgery. He emerged from that operation with no sight at all and no hope for that to ever change.

After the unsuccessful surgery, Ralph's pastor went to see him in the hospital. The pastor said, "I'm so sorry. Is there anything that you would like me to do for you?"

Ralph said, "Yes, there is."

The pastor said, "Just name it."

Ralph said, "I would like a candle."

The pastor was surprised by the request, but said, "Fine, I'll be sure to bring one when I come next time."

Ralph said, "No. I want one now."

The pastor said, "Don't you even want to talk for a while first?"

Ralph shot back, "If you really want to do something for me ...."

The pastor interrupted, "Okay. I can see that this is important to you. I'll find you a candle right now."

Within half an hour, the pastor returned to Ralph's room with a candle in hand. Approaching his bed the pastor asked, "Do you want me to light it for you?" Ralph said, "Oh, no. Just hand it to me." He took the candle in his hands, gripping it tightly. He then said, "During these last months I have often thought of myself as a candle about to go out. I thought that everything I am is tied up in being able to see. I expected that when blackness came then there would be nothingness." He then said, "Now I'm blind. It's dark." He held the candle tightly. "But the candle is still here. I'm still here. I am still me. God is still God. It's going to be okay somehow. My life will go on."

Sometimes the Light shines in the darkness so that we can see it and have hope. Sometimes we see nothing and wonder if there *is* any sense to hope. The man in the back row did not get the light he was hoping for, and neither did Ralph.

Ralph, though, discovered that a candle is a lot more than a fragile light. Flames come and go on candles. But a flame doesn't make a candle. It's the candle itself that makes a candle a candle. For him, the candle itself became a symbol of hope, because, regardless of whether there was a flame or not, his hope came in the promise of "candleness" itself. He came to realize that hope is not grounded in what will or will not happen to us, but in who we are.

Everybody here has had dark times. You may be in the middle of a hard time right now. The Bible would tell us that when things go badly for us it is not a time to despair, but a time to invest ourselves in the future by what we do in our present, with our right now. To do so is to act in faith. (Hebrews 11:1 - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.")

When Jeremiah bought the plot of land, he invested in a future he would not live to see, but he did so in faith and in obedience to the God who was the ground of his life. God used Jeremiah's faithfulness to shine light for *us* when our paths seem hopeless. God does the same with us.

We, like Jeremiah, are called to walk in faith and obedience as we live out our todays. We do so not because we are certain that God has something better in store for us, but because we know that we belong to God, God who has promised to be with us in every moment of our lives and beyond, and God who has asked us to spend our lives showing love, forgiveness and hope to others. God has declared that our lives - no matter how old, young, or burned out we feel - matter! Like Ralph, we may think of ourselves as a candle. We have good times and we have bad times. The flame may come and the flame may go. Ultimately , our hope is grounded in the fact that we are children of God. We belong to God, and through Jesus we are promised that God loves us, forgives us, saves us, and asks us to be candles for others, no matter what. Thanks be to God!! Amen.

*A good bit of this sermon was derived/adapted from "Stepping Inside," Thomas G. Rogers, CSS Publishing Company, 1994, 0-7880-0047-0 (As found on esermons.com)*