

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 26
The Reverend John H. Brock

5:30 p.m. Saturday, September 25, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The opening lines from our first reading in Jeremiah contain the kind of information that in saying them, if you know what's going on, they can cause you to say to yourself "oh, my goodness." These lines would be similar to, in a bit more modern terms; it would sound something like this:

"The word that came to Billy Graham from the LORD during the office of John F. Kennedy, which was in the third year of Fidel Castro. At that time the army of Cuba, backed by the Soviet Union, was threatening a missile strike against the United States, and Billy Graham was confined in federal prison, where President Kennedy had confined him."

It's that kind of a dramatic opening, and it's that important. Because our passage from Jeremiah is about the end of the line for the country of Judah and for the city of Jerusalem. And, maybe, even for the people of God. Things simply Do Not look good for these folks. The Babylonians are not quite as blood thirsty as the Assyrians, who had taken over the northern kingdom of Israel about 125-130'ish years before hand. All the same, when your capital is being besieged; when you've got prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel all pretty much saying "you've brought this on yourselves"; it doesn't feel like there is a whole lot of good that is about to happen. Or, maybe we could say that Hope is gone from the people. Yet in reality, what Jeremiah is trying to tell them is that hope **is** there.

There were a lot of names in verses 6-15, and maybe you didn't quite catch what all was going on, so let me try to clarify. A cousin of Jeremiah has got some family land that, according to Jewish law, if he wants to sell it, family has the first right to purchase that land. AND you have to Actively track down the family members to find out if they want to buy it. You can't just say "oh, well I sent out an email and I never heard back from you so it sold it to, you know, the big corporation that wanted to buy it." No, you have to go; you have to find a witness to go with you to actually have them say "no, I don't want it," or as in the case of Jeremiah, "yes, I do want to buy this land."

Now the selling of land in and of itself isn't all that uncommon, but cousin Hanamel is trying to sell this land during a Time of War. With the Babylonians parked right outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Okay, so if your country is being invaded, if it looks like you, your family, and pretty much everybody you know is staring into the face of the Great Unknown; why in the name of sanity would you want to Purchase property that A- is probably about to fall into the hands of the invading army, B - you won't be able to do anything with because of "A", and C - you're in prison.

You're under house arrest, so what do you think you're going to DO with that piece of property, anyway?

But this is why I love Jeremiah, because he is not like the folks that I talked about last week, those folks who do the forced "positive thinking." The ones who say "think positive thoughts and only positive things will happen to you." That's Joel Olsteen kind of thinking and those kind of folks are the ones who tend to believe that once you're a believer, so long as you Really Believe, God won't let anything really bad ever happen to you. Therefore, when something bad does happen - therefore is when something bad happens, not if something bad happens, then they tend to save well obviously your faith wasn't strong enough. And my friends, **that** is bad theology. And it is my experience with folks who tend to have that kind of theology, they also tend to be the kind of folks who might say, "Well you know, if you send \$100 to my ministry, God will surely bless you." "If you're having difficulties in your life, just support my ministry with your generous gifts, and God will take all your problems away." God doesn't work like that. Anyone who promotes that kind of bad theology is what scripture calls a *false prophet*. Jeremiah is **not** a false prophet. Jeremiah does not do that pretend positive thinking. He knows, he *knows*, that the Babylonians are right outside. He *knows* things do not look good. He *knows* that there is a really strong chance he might not make it out of his prison cell. Still, he purchases this land, because Jeremiah is striving to bring the people a message of hope in a time of despair.

A time of despair is what our gospel lesson is about as well. The rich man in the gospel parable, he had everything that he needed in life, and more. He had more than enough to share, **if** he had indeed the desire to share; instead, he chose to keep everything for himself. It was only after he could no longer do anything, that's when he chose to try to change. When he saw the consequences of his actions brought him into the painful surroundings, only *then* did he start to think about Lazarus and think about others. First he thinks of himself though: "Father Abraham, would you please send Lazarus, just let him dip his finger in a bit of water so that he might cool my tongue?" And Abraham, I love the guy, dearly says to the rich man, "Tough." Then the rich man claims to ask for his family, "Well then father send Lazarus to my brothers because I've got five brothers so that they won't end up here as well." Abraham says "During your life you offered no solace and no hope, it's not going to work for your brothers either. They have all the same chances and opportunities that you have. The prophets, the synagogue, they have eyes to see those in pain and hurt all around them." Abraham goes on to make the point that if the folks didn't listen the first time, they won't listen even under extraordinary circumstances.

That undercurrent of "hope in the midst of despair" is still there. That "hope in a time of despair" is Exactly what Jeremiah is striving to do. He's striving to be the antitheses of the rich man in the parable) even though the parable won't be written for another 600 years.)

Now I don't know what "hope in a time of despair" looks like in your life. I DO know that there are people here, right now, who have suffered loss, and hurt, and

despair. They have suffered the Loss of loved ones, the loss of employment, or of savings, or status, or home. There are those in our lives and among us now who have suffered the hurt of rejection and of dismissal, of being ignored, or unwanted. We know people who are dealing with the despair of being alone, or afraid, or being considered unnecessary.

Jeremiah strives to counter the despair that he sees in his countryman. Not by the purchase of the land, in and of itself, but rather what that purchase of the land implies. It implies there will be a land to which we will return. There will be a time to plant again. There will be a time when we will receive the harvest. There will be a time when the people of Jerusalem, the descendants of Abraham will live again in the chosen land and worship the Lord God Almighty.

The Babylonians are not the end, says Jeremiah. Our city might be facing destruction; still, Hope lives. The bad, the sorrowful, the painful time might be Now; God promises life will be better.

I don't know what your despair is. I don't know what you are suffering. But I do know this: in all that happens to us, God is with us. We live in the promise of the cross. In the assurance of Christ, that God loves us. God forgives us, and Christ **IS** our Hope in the midst of our own despair.

Amen.