

“Reflections on Hope”
Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15
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In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner says this.

Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept.

Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking.

Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes on.

Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it. (p. 96)

It is a different perspective on wishful thinking which we often contrast with hope — the former being viewed as fraudulent, the latter authentic. But it’s really just a matter of semantics. Both terms express a longing for something better, often in a context of despair. The questions are — upon what or whom do we base our wishes or hope, how do we sustain our longing in the worst of circumstances, and how can we know that our hope is genuine and not just the delusion of a crazy person who cannot accept reality?

The reading from Jeremiah provides insight into our reflection on these questions. Jeremiah is the last person we might envision as the poster boy for hope. He is the prophet of doom and gloom. He says the people have sinned and thus God will allow the nation to fall. But his work does contain what scholars call the book of consolation, sayings scattered across a few chapters which envision a time after the conquest and exile when the people will dwell in the land again. In our reading today, Jeremiah doesn’t just express this hope; he embodies it. He literally puts his money where his mouth is.

It is the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, and the eighteenth year of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, 587 BCE. In fulfillment of Jeremiah’s

doom and gloom message, the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem. And as if it's not bad enough that the whole city is being held captive, Zedekiah is holding Jeremiah on house arrest, confining him to the court of the guard in the king's palace. We might think that by now old Zed would realize Jeremiah is right and cut him some slack. He doesn't. Some leaders cannot acknowledge their mistakes.

But it is at this moment that Jeremiah receives word from God that his cousin Hanamel will come to him offering to sell him a field at Anathoth because he has the right of redemption by purchase. God tells him to buy the field. So, he does. At the very moment the entire nation is being occupied and no title to any land will have any meaning — the Babylonians will have it all — Jeremiah spends good money, seventeen shekels of silver, to buy this land. A deed is signed in front of witnesses, two copies are made, one written on papyrus and stored in an earthenware jar, the other left out for easy access. It is the most carefully detailed account of a business transaction recorded in scripture.

Is the point to make sure history records what has to be the dumbest land acquisition on record? Jeremiah might as well be buying a bridge to Cyprus! No, the text ends with this explanation. “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” In other words, there will come a time when the people will return to the land. Who knows how long it will be! Jeremiah probably won't live to see it. But his descendants will, God's people will return, there is hope for a better day.

How does Jeremiah know this? Upon what or whom does he base this hope? There is no evidence that the Babylonians are going to back down. And in fact, they do not. There is no sign that they will decide to let the people go right after they take them into exile. And, as it turns out, they do not. According to Jeremiah 29:10, the exile will last seventy years. So, why does Jeremiah buy this land and thus express this hope? The text says it is because God tells him to do so.

However we understand this claim, however God speaks and the prophet hears, Jeremiah believes he is hearing from his Maker, and he trusts God with his life. For him, that is all that is needed to inspire hope and sustain it, and if people think he is crazy, that is their problem. They have thought he was

crazy all along! But as it turns out, Jeremiah is right about the fall of the nation and his hope for the future. Most of all, he is right to place his trust in God.

So, what is the message for us? Upon what or whom we base our hope is not simply an academic matter. There are many real concerns that inspire hope or despair within us — the war in Ukraine, the persistence of the pandemic, one natural disaster after another, rising inflation, political division, threats to human rights, our own challenges.

And not all hope is valid, there is such a thing as false hope. I could have hoped to play center in the NBA, but being just shy of six foot three, that wasn't going to happen. We might hope that Vladimir Putin will grow a conscience and thus end his act of brutal aggression on Ukrainian citizens, but the lack of a conscience is the only advantage sociopaths have, that isn't going to happen. You might hope that this sermon will only be ten minutes long, but that isn't looking very likely.

Just because we want something to happen doesn't make it happen. Wishing doesn't make it so. And if we take our cue from Jeremiah, the validity of a hope isn't necessarily based on evidence we can see with our eyes, though we like to see evidence, like the number of COVID cases and deaths dropping. But the only foundation for hope we can rely on is God, our trust that God can bring about something ultimately redemptive. That is where Jeremiah finds hope.

It may sound simplistic and naïve. But in the end, as in the beginning, God is the only given. To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes who was speaking of Watson, God is the one fixed point in a changing age.

The question is: how do we sustain our trust in God, and thus our hope, in difficult times? The Ukrainian people have expressed resilient hope, but can that hope endure forever? We have held together during the pandemic. In many ways, the best has come out in us as we have cared for each other and found ways to adapt. But there have been times when we have grown weary, times when we have felt like giving up.

How long can we live with the disparity between rich and poor Jesus addresses in the parable from Luke without giving up hope? And many of us

with lifelong personal challenges, the stress of caring for loved ones, have struggled to sustain the hope we once had. How do we hold on to it? In the same way we develop it in the first place.

We begin by nurturing our relationship with God and by being honest with God about our struggles. Deep and abiding faith is not about denying questions and doubts. It's about being honest so that God can help us. But in general, trust in any relationship grows when we spend time with each other. This is true of our relationship with God.

It also helps to surround ourselves with people who want to remain hopeful. They should be people who are honest about their questions too but also long to hold on to something that endures. It will be difficult to retain hope if we are surrounded by doom and gloom. It's difficult enough to be at a ballgame surrounded by naysayers. I wonder how many fans were true believers all the way through Appalachian State's game with Troy a week ago. With more serious concerns, we need all the encouragement we can find.

But while spending time with God and surrounding ourselves with encouraging friends will help us retain trust and hope, ultimately, we have to be open to the ways God offers to breathe hope into us.

Ken Sehested put it this way recently (Alliance of Baptists email).

[Siblings], don't be fretful.

Don't chew your nails or gobble your food.

Pace yourself, on both gas pedal and heart rate,
so you don't race to ruin.

Don't faint in despair when the gunslingers flourish.

Don't let fearmongering threats upset your soul.

Let the confidence of Heaven throttle your breathing and
the breath of delight inspire all that you do.

Don't go gettin' all worked up when the hucksters and
the hypesters and the sub-prime shysters come out ahead.

God knows their boondoggles and bailouts are coming to an end.

Trust in the One whose justice can be trusted: the meek are
preparing for coheiring the earth.

Wait on the One whose way is sure mercy, paved with
justice and righteousness bright as noonday!

That's how we sustain hope — by allowing Heaven to inspire us, trusting in the God of justice, waiting on the One whose way is sure mercy.

The question that remains is as to how we know we are not crazy. The truth is there is no way to know. Trust is revealed before we know for certain what any outcome will be. So, hope is subject to critique.

When I was a youth, I was privileged to have as a minister of music a dignified Chinese gentleman named Dr. Richard Lin. He taught us many things about fine choral literature and life. He even convinced seventies teenagers that the classical sacred literature we were singing had a richness to it, as well as a capacity to develop our voices. We had fun, and we sang lighter pieces too, but Dr. Lin had a significant influence on us. Yet, though he had lived in this country many years, he remained part of a different culture and his English was limited.

On one occasion, Dr. Lin was not satisfied with how we were rehearsing a song. He told us we needed to sing enthusiastically, like this, he said, “Hope break out one morning; joy, joy, joy!” “Hope break out one morning!” this was the first line of the song... sort of. The line was actually, “Hope *broke* out one morning...” past tense, but Dr. Lin still spoke present-tense English only. We were not entitled to laugh, given the chances than any of us could have learned Chinese, but we did.

Yet, as I reflect on that experience, I wonder whether there wasn't something unintentionally prophetic in Dr. Lin's linguistic faux pas, I wonder whether any reference to hope might not ought to be in present tense. Hope can be based on the past, and it is future oriented, but any genuine hope must be experienced in the present. So, there is no way to know that we are not crazy. All we can do is place our trust in God.

Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it. Whichever way it works, we'd like to be the ones who are wishing, the ones who have hope.