

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

Judgment, Anger, Wrath, Desolation; God appointed Jeremiah to “uproot,” “tear down,” “destroy,” and “overthrow.” (1:10) The lectionary text this month has been a brutal reminder of God’s anger and judgment against Israel. Jeremiah has proclaimed God’s words to “the people of Judah” and to the “inhabitants of Jerusalem” (18:11). Recall with me, the word of the Lord, spoken through Jeremiah:

“My people are foolish, they do not know me, they are stupid children. They have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.” (4:22)

Upon hearing these harsh words, Israel’s heart still remains with another, and not with God. God continues to speak through Jeremiah.

The whole land shall be desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back. (4:27-28)

Last week we heard from a grieving and pain-filled Jeremiah.

“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.”(8:18)

Each Sunday this month, the harsh reality of God’s judgment against the people of Israel has been present with us in worship. Today, after 32 chapters, several decades of prophetic gloom and wrath and a month of Sundays later, we finally hear a word of hope from Jeremiah. Listen closely. Listen attentively. Hope rarely pours forth from the lips of Jeremiah.

Liturgist: Jeremiah 32:1-3a

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>2</sup> At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, <sup>3</sup> where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Wayne: Jeremiah 32:6-15

6 Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>7</sup>Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.’ <sup>8</sup>Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.’ Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

9 And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. <sup>10</sup>I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. <sup>11</sup>Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; <sup>12</sup>and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. <sup>13</sup>In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, <sup>14</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. <sup>15</sup>For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Could it really be? After all this time, hope for Israel? Hope in a future restoration? Jeremiah buys into it, and quite literally I may add, as he physically buys a parcel of land.

(shaking head)

Now correct me if I'm wrong, but typically when another empire is invading your land, financial investment in land is not ranked high on the list of smart things to do. Not only is the Babylonian army taking over, but Jeremiah's current place of residence is the king's prison. Regardless of these outside circumstances of battle and defeat; and never mind how Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel traveled through a besieged land to reach Jeremiah, or likewise how Jeremiah actually gets out of prison to then himself travel through a besieged land to reach his home land of Anathoth. – Never mind all that. -- The focus here is that Jeremiah hears a word from the Lord,

“Buy the field in Anathoth” (which just happens to be Jeremiah’s home territory). If you are wondering why Jeremiah should buy the field at such an odd time, you aren’t the only one. Jeremiah, himself, also seems curious about why he’s buying land. Did you notice? He only reminded us a mere FIVE times that this is the word of the Lord. As if to make clear, this is not my doing (*it makes no sense to me*), but rather it is God doing.

So, Jeremiah buys the land. Remember, by the time Jeremiah buys the land he has already proclaimed the defeat and exile of Zedekiah, the king of Judah, (21:1-7). His prophecies, combined with the current events, clearly indicate that the king and the people have zero future in Judah. Thus, the hope that arises when Jeremiah buys the land has nothing to do with the present circumstances which foreshadow siege, defeat, and exile. Rather, the purchase of land symbolizes the future restoration of Israel. It is like “a down payment on the future, a foretaste of the promise, but one that takes place in the midst of the reality of judgment.”<sup>1</sup> The proclamation, “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” beautifully captures Jeremiah’s hope. Although exile is forthcoming, Jeremiah receives great hope and places much trust in God and their future restoration.

A story of trust and hope in God is so sweet to hear after such a dry, harsh period of judgment. Jeremiah, the people of Israel, we (as the readers) finally have heard and seen a strong word of hope from the Lord. Now I ask you, with such hope from Jeremiah, do we dare look at the gospel reading? Lately Jesus’ words to us, to the disciples, the Pharisees, to the crowds around him have been no brighter than Jeremiah’s daunting predictions of judgment for Israel. In fact, Jesus’ words have been quite harsh. Do you remember his words to the large crowds traveling with him? “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and

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<sup>1</sup> NIB 820.

children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27). In fact Jesus goes on to say to them, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:33). --- It’s harsh! Even after we read it in context, and we talked about the appropriate literary, historical, and social context. We took it, tried to shape it, tried to make it sound a little bit better. It’s still just harsh. It’s not what we or any of Jesus’ followers want to hear.

Then of course there was last week. Jesus wasn’t as much harsh as he was plumb confusing. He told his disciples, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (Luke 16:9). What? So has anyone had a spark of enlightenment since last Sunday? Because I left confounded and confused.

So back to the question at hand, wouldn’t you rather close the Bible now and end on a positive, uplifting note of hope from God. The future restoration of Israel. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in the land of Judah.” Jeremiah believes it. Jeremiah proclaims it; a word of hope! (Look around—any takers?)

*(Sigh)*, but do you know what? I distinctly remember in the midst of the harshness and confusion this month that Jesus tells us two parables saying that if even one of us gets lost, he will leave the others to come and search for us until we are found. And then he’ll come home rejoicing. If Jesus can continuously rejoice over finding me, then I’m more than willing to struggle through another one of his parables. Besides, if Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, finally gives a hopeful prophecy, maybe Jesus will be in a better mood today? Or at the least, not as confusing.

The Gospel text: Luke 16:19-31

<sup>19</sup> "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, Lazarus longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. <sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where the rich man was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' <sup>27</sup> The rich man then said, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' <sup>30</sup> The rich man said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> Abraham said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

This is the word of the Lord.

This parable begins similar to other Lukan parables and teachings of Jesus. The status of the rich man compared to the status of the poor man. But this parable of poor man Lazarus is different; it is special. It goes further than the rich/poor debate. It takes the hope of the poor man and offers it to everyone, including the rich.

The first part of the parable defines the characters and builds the plot. We learn that there is a rich man and a poor man. Both die. The poor man is carried off by angels and seems to be in a place of comfort compared to the rich man who describes his own position as one of great agony and torment. The rich man then enters into dialogue with Father Abraham. It is here, within their conversation that the treasure of hope for all (both rich and poor) is revealed.

The rich man first asks:

**Q: 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.'**

**A: But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'**

Abraham's reply is a little confusing. He seems to be suggesting that one's salvation is based on their financial means and comfort or really the lack thereof; stated more simply: the rich go to Hades and the poor live a life of luxury. Well you're right. There's not much hope in that (at least not for us). But the next two questions give us a little more perspective on what Jesus is trying to say through this parable.

**Q: The rich man then said, father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house-- <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'**

**A:<sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'**

Abraham's reply gives us hope. The rich brothers are not destined to Hades. Their fate is not tied to that of their rich brother, nor is it tied to their "richness." Rather their fate is wrapped up in their response to Moses and to the prophets. The question is not only will they listen, but will they respond accordingly?

We receive hope in knowing that in this parable we are neither the rich man nor the poor man. We are the brothers. We like the brothers, are still living. We have the opportunity to listen and respond to the Word of Moses and the prophets.

Of the prophets, whose words would you say are the freshest on your mind? The words of the prophet Jeremiah of course. What has Jeremiah been saying all month? Jeremiah has continuously encouraged the people of Israel to wholeheartedly worship God, to turn away from their idols of stone and wood, and to once again give glory to God. Jeremiah not only calls attention to the absence of worshipping the Lord, but also to their ill-fitted social behavior and how they had begun to treat and relate to one another. The people of Israel, much like the people of Atlanta and the people of Decatur, had begun to put other things before God. Anytime something takes our attention from God, it becomes our god. Often times this starts unintentionally. We don't go around dreaming and wanting to worship money, houses, cars, land, clothes, video games, and other what nots. As people of the church, this makes no sense to us. We all know we are called to worship God. But often times comfort and idealism becomes our deity. The ideal of the American dream consumes us, and pushes our real, true God away. As God proclaims through Jeremiah, "They have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands." This statement is just as true for us as it was for Israel. Fortunately, the hope God extended toward Israel is also extended toward us.

Abraham's response to the rich man's final question, fills us with even more hope. The rich man, in response to Abraham's remark that his brothers would be fine if they would only listened to Moses and the prophets, cried out:

**Q: 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'**

**A: <sup>31</sup> Abraham said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"**

Wow, it's unbelievable. Here is the midst of amazing hope, we sit back (a little too comfortably) and chuckle to ourselves. "He's talking about Jesus." And not only is he talking about Jesus, but we know all too well that when Jesus comes, they are not going to listen to him either." (chuckle)

But you know sometimes we get caught in our smug grins—the grins that occur because we finally recognize or have a bit of insight into what is being said so that it's not total confusion anymore. But sometimes these grins get in our way of hearing/seeing the whole picture. So yes, if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they listen to Jesus. Only, in this story Jesus hasn't died yet. In fact he's telling the story, so he's definitely not risen from the dead.

(yet). Here two things jump out at me. First, the rich man is so sure that his brothers will listen to someone risen from the dead. So sure in fact that he asks if Lazarus can be sent, and not himself. Second, it seems that it is the rich man's turn to laugh at us, us- meaning the collective group of people that have lived since the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. According to the rich man, how could we not believe? How could we not respond to the word of the lord? How can we still- - after hearing from one that has been raised from the dead, and after we have been given such great hope—how can we still turn a deaf ear to God?

We live on the flip side of the Jesus' resurrection. We've been given the extra word, the extra hope, the extra ... maybe just the extra bit needed to encourage us to listen and respond to Moses, to the prophets, and to Jesus. The rich man adamantly believed that if someone from the dead came to his brothers, they would listen; they would respond. Someone risen from the dead has come to us (and we chuckle because we know it is all too true), but do we really respond to his words? To his teachings? (PAUSE)

(calm, not angry)

All month we have listened to Jeremiah rant and rave and bring down curses and judgment upon the people of Israel because they did not repent; they did not turn from their evil and wicked ways to worship God. I imagine that many of us, like the people of Israel, wished that Jeremiah would just be quiet. We wondered when the lectionary text would finally move from Jeremiah. We are sick of hearing him. We are tired of listening to an angry God cast down judgment on God's people. I mean really, we just want to come to church, praise God, and be happy; enough of this gloom and despair from Jeremiah.

I also wonder anywhere in our self-righteous critiques of the lectionary text, did it ever occur to us that Jeremiah may be talking to us? Obviously we are not being overthrown by the Babylonian army, but do we truly worship God? (and that is a much different question than "do you come to church on Sunday morning?"). Do we truly worship and respond to God as God has called us? All month Jeremiah has called us to hear the word of the Lord in our lives and to respond. Today, the rich man begs us to listen to Moses, to the prophets, and to Jesus --the man who was raised from the dead --so that we might be saved. Today, we are reminded over and over again by both Jeremiah and the rich man, that we have been given hope, hope in a future restoration, hope in a second coming of Jesus. Are we listening? Are we responding? Or are we merely chuckling because we know the stories all too well for anyone (including God) to tell us what to do?

Let us not follow Israel's example. Let us listen and respond to the word of the God in our lives. Let us be continually be filled with the hope and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And now let us continue to wholeheartedly worship God together.