

Sermon: September 25, 2016 – Jeremiah 32: 1-15
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

The summer I was 21, I learned the value of praise when received from an unexpected source.

In my first summer of student Ministry at Shaunavon SK, my supervisor enlisted me to help out at the local rodeo. Once my volunteer shift was over, I sidled over to hang out with a bunch of older ranchers who were standing to one side of the rodeo ring.

I'd never seen rodeo up close before so I was terribly impressed at the action, but as one rider after another did his thing, this group of ranchers just stood there in stoic silence, arms crossed, scowling, saying nothing. Occasionally there would be a gruff comment like, "didn't spur him high enough" but not once was there applause, or praise, or physical gestures that could be interpreted as enjoyment. Not until something specific broke the silence.

During the bull-riding, a bull rider got thrown awkwardly, and one of the rodeo clowns a.k.a. "bullfighters" jumped in and saved the rider from being stomped or gored. At this moment, the silence was broken and the ranchers, as one, unfolded their arms and applauded, cowboy hats were tipped to the rodeo clown and the admiration was palpable. And because they were usually so stern, their praise meant that much more.

Over the past few weeks, we have become acquainted with the prophet Jeremiah, who would fit right in with those Southwest Saskatchewan ranchers on the "happy meter." When we first met up with him about a month ago he was looking back with regret at his call story, the moment where his life ceased to be his own. Two weeks ago Jeremiah was at a potter's house, drawn most of all to the ruined pieces of clay. Last week Jeremiah was mired in lament.

But today's reading is not filled with lament, or regret, or crushing an imperfect vessel back into clay. In today's reading Jeremiah did something that showed confident hope in God's future... and because he was usually so negative, the people knew this hope was authentic. Offering praise and encouragement did not come easy to him, so when he finally unfolds his arm and tips his cowboy hat in appreciation, it's hard not to notice.

So what exactly did he do? Under house arrest because he was having such a negative impact on public morale, Jeremiah had a visitor. His cousin, Hanamel, had some land available for purchase. A bit of further investigation to the laws and customs on the land reveal two things: that Hanamel must have been in poverty or in debt to sell land in this way; and, since he was now asking a cousin rather than a sibling, he had most likely been turned down by other relatives before approaching Jeremiah. (Bright, p. 238)

Although I have heard that it's generally a good idea to "buy low and sell high" when making an investment, this was not a wise purchase. You didn't need particularly keen powers of observation to see that any day now, Babylonia was going to overwhelm the people of Judah and haul them away to exile – so acquiring title to this land was nearly meaningless. But in the midst of those grim days, fully aware of the bleak future, Jeremiah bought this land and sealed the deal with these words: "For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

What a startling proclamation of confidence from the most dour of sources. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah's knew these words wouldn't come true in his lifetime, but hundreds of generations later these words still bring hope to the people of the Middle East. God was well aware of the challenges the people were going to face, and within that framework of woe said to Jeremiah, "lay some money down, son, help out your kinsman and buy some of your family's land. People need to know that they aren't going to be desolate forever."

Imagine, with me, people who need that kind of reassurance right now, in the world of today, people whose lives are so compromised that they need some tangible sign that God wants better for them.

- I think of the people of Fort McMurray, trying to rebuild a community after a fire at a time when the commodity they have to sell isn't worth much on the world market.
- I think of people who have had injuries to their body, mind or spirit, who yearn for a day without pain.
- I think of tribal people world-wide who are seeking fulfilment of treaties, or restoration of territory wrongly seized.
- I think of people of colour in the USA, and more parts of Canada than we would care to know, who live each day in fear of it being their final day
- I think of Jeremiah's own people, the Jews, who still struggle to find right relations with their neighbours and a rightful claim to their land.
- I think of people in our community who, like Hanamel, are deep in debt and have had their debts sold to a collection agency.
- I think of endangered species whose existence rests with us.
- And I think of the people of Aleppo – and particularly our refugee family from Aleppo, who will soon begin arriving in the Bow Valley.

In a world where hope so often gets squelched, or delayed so long that people have given in to despair, Jeremiah's act of defiance stands tall. He knew that things were going to get worse before they got better but he also knew that God is in it for the long haul.

In spite of what the fanatics say, God's concerns are about people, and moving their lives from the overshadowing of fear, to the illumination of love. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, some 250 times it is promised that God's deepest desire for people, a state of Shalom, will come to be the governing principle for humanity, and all people will have wholeness, peace, justice, and fullness of opportunity. In the book of Isaiah (ch.56) is God's hope that the tribes of Israel, scattered as exiles, will find their way home, along with others who will join in the promise. And in the gospels we have Jesus' words about the Kingdom of God, where reconciliation leads us to peace and a new realm governed by love. Across the span of scripture and in the unfolding of human life since then, God is always speaking hope to people who need hope.

And so we add our hearts and voices to those words of Jeremiah so long ago. His hope was not derived from any particularly hopeful signs in the situation at hand (Clements, pp. 194-195), nor from a generally positive outlook, but rather, his hope was founded in the power of God's sturdy, faithful love, a love that does not go away in times of trouble. And so it is for us. By our insistence on following a God who knows human need and desires the best for all people, we express the same hope that Jeremiah did so long ago. One person at a time, one decision at a time, one changed heart at a time, the promise of God's Shalom enters human lives as a lived reality, again and again and again.

So just as we thanked Jeremiah last week for his willingness to stay in the hard places and offer lament, this morning we give thanks for the hope he has engendered for over 2500 years, by the simple act of buying some land when life was closing in around him. For all words and deeds that inspire us to hope and action, we offer our thanks and praise. Amen.

References cited:

Bright, John. *Jeremiah* (The Anchor Bible). Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Clements, R.E. *Jeremiah* (Interpretation Commentary). Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

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