

Church of the Crossroads  
Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 30, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

DARING HOPE

Jeremiah 32:1-15  
Psalm 91  
Romans 8:19-25

(Part II of a two-part sermon on the prophet Jeremiah)

Last Sunday, we explored the grief of Jeremiah as he looked upon the faithlessness of his people. We discovered that Jeremiah's grief was also God's own grief.

*O that my head were a spring of water,  
and my eyes a fountain of tears,  
so that I might weep day and night  
for the slain of my own people.* —Jer 9:1

God's heart is broken wide open. God's grief is not unlike the grief of a woman who has been raped. Judah, in violating the covenant has violated God's own being. God is angry, surely, but God also grieves. In grief, God even wants to take leave of this people who had once been God's own people.

*O that I had in the desert  
a traveler's lodging place,  
that I might leave my people  
and go away from them.* —Jer 9:2

We spoke about how much God must be grieving over our world in this, our time and place, so filled it is with faithlessness and war and bloodshed. God weeps, and, like the prophet Jeremiah, so do we. Sometimes weeping is all that we can do in the face of our despair over our world.

Today, in the second part of this sermon on the prophet Jeremiah, we turn to the theme of hope, for that is an emotion that also emerges in the life of the prophet Jeremiah. He is a prophet who weeps and grieves; he is also a prophet who is filled with daring hope.

This hope is expressed through one of the most remarkable stories in all of scripture. Alas for those who regard the Hebrew Scriptures as not

worthy of a Christian's study. They surely miss so much of the Gospel that is to be discovered in these ancient texts.

The time of the story is early 587 B.C.E., just before Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, completely overruns Judah and the city of Jerusalem, and takes more than one thousand of Judah's political and religious leaders into exile. Already, Jerusalem is under siege. Judah's king, Zedekiah, still does not want to recognize what is happening. He still thinks he can get out from under the heavy hand of the Babylonian army. Jeremiah has informed him of his coming fate, but instead of trying to do what he can to avert the disaster, Zedekiah instead puts Jeremiah under house arrest. The prophet is confined to the court of the guard.

Now this is what happens. The word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and lets him know that his cousin Hanamel is going to pay him a visit and ask him to buy his field at Anathoth, for it is both Jeremiah's right and duty to do so in order to keep the land within the possession of the family.

Sure enough, Hanamel comes along and does exactly what the "word of the Lord" said that he would do. Jeremiah buys the field, and we hear exactly how the deed of purchase was signed and sealed and with the deed itself was placed in an earthenware jar, so that, as the text says, they might "last for a long time." After all, with the forthcoming disaster, these documents had better last a long time! Now this was transacted in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. This is not a *private transaction*. It is a *public act* and provides Jeremiah the opportunity to deliver yet another word of the Lord:

For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of  
Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall  
again be bought in this land. —Jer 32:15

In the midst of despair and suffering, there arises not only a word of hope but also a daring *act* of hope. After the destruction, there will be reconstruction. After the exile, there will be restoration. "Houses and field and vineyards shall gain be bought in this land."

The story intrigues me. I wonder about the relationship between despair and hope, suffering and healing, grief and the assurance that all will be well. Does hope defeat despair? Does healing negate suffering? Does the assurance that all will be well cancel out grief? Or, can all these be held together at the same time in one's heart?

Our story for today would seem to suggest the latter, that *at the same time* we can hold despair and hope together in our hearts, and also suffering and healing, as well as grief and the assurance that all will be well. After all, the word of hope is given to Jeremiah in the very midst of impending disaster. And this word of hope he himself acts upon when he purchases the land from his cousin Hanamel. No one in their right mind purchases land in a place that is headed for disaster and destruction. But Jeremiah does. He may be a prophet of doom and gloom. He may be a prophet of grief. But he is surely also a prophet of hope.

It seems that Jeremiah can embrace suffering and hope at the same time. I think this also rings true with our human experience. It rings true with my own experience. In times of great despair and suffering and grief, it is the case that we can also experience healing and hope and hold fast to the assurance that all will be well. But I speak here from the point of view of faith. I have come to believe that hope that makes no room for grief and suffering is not hope. It is something we might call optimism. Jeremiah had no reason to be optimistic when he purchased the land from his cousin. He knew that Judah would be defeated. At the same time, rooted in the word of the Lord which promised new life for Judah, he had every reason to be hopeful.

We do belong to an officially optimistic culture, a culture that does its best to bury and cover over the reality of suffering and the despair that so hidden but so very present. Optimism goes well with a “moving forward” culture, but it has little place in the life of faith. It is hope that finds its home in a life of faith, a hope that emerges in the very midst of grief and despair.

Jeremiah’s act teaches us much, especially those of us who are engaged in the work of peace and justice in our world. Walter Brueggemann has said that we have a tendency to invest so much in our efforts to bring about social change that we begin to think that the struggle in which we are engaged is God’s last, best hope. (*Like Fire in the Bones*, 182.) Then when our efforts produce little or nothing, we easily become hopeless.

Brueggemann urges us to make a distinction between our prospects for social change and God’s promises. As people of faith, he says that “we need to be saying to each other that our energies are rooted in and aimed toward God’s promises and not [our own] social prospects.” (Ibid.) If Jeremiah had placed his energies in trying to avert the disaster he knew full well was going to come about, he would easily have become defeated. But in purchasing the land, Jeremiah focuses not any kind of optimism for change in the present, but upon the promise of God that “homes and fields and

vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” We ought to do the same. As people of faith, we need to hold fast to the promises of God, which are surely the only source of our hope.

So much more could be gleaned from this remarkable story from the life of Jeremiah. Please bear with me as I do my best to say just one more thing, and this is not about us but about God. We cannot help but wonder what was going on in the heart of God when God’s anger and grief gave way to God’s compassion for Judah. After all, the God who is bringing about the disaster, who was ready to abandon God’s own people, now becomes the God who gives a word of hope. What is happening in the heart of God?

Perhaps it is comforting for us to envision a transcendent God who is beyond us, ever constant, unchanging and all-powerful. But the Book of Jeremiah reveals otherwise. It reveals a God who is deeply immersed in the life of God’s people. The faithlessness of Judah causes God to become angry, and then to grieve. Then, Judah’s impending exile prompts a change of heart in God. Judah’s impending suffering causes suffering in the heart of God and in the midst of God’s own suffering, God’s compassion is kindled and Judah receives the gift of hope. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be brought in this land.”

God is affected by what takes place in the world. Human faithlessness prompts anger in the heart of God. Why should we imagine otherwise? But God also grieves over the world’s faithlessness, and it is in God’s grief that God’s compassion is awakened.

So, my sisters and brothers, given our grief over the destructive ways of America, and given the suffering of so many people in our world, we can imagine that God grieves with us and also suffers with us and with our world. “Only a suffering God can help,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A God who suffers is a God who surely desires healing and a new beginning for us. Let us therefore be a people of hope, knowing with St. Paul that in the midst of a groaning creation, in hope we are saved. It’s not that we can see that new world God has in store for us who now experience our own kind of exile. It’s enough to know that God is with us and that, in the end, all will be well. That was enough for the prophet Jeremiah whose hope was so daring that he bought a piece of land even as everything was falling apart around him. May our hope be as daring as his.