

Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15 “Hope or Despair?”

It's confession time again. I know I do this now and then, but as they say, “Confession is good for the soul.” I have been *rationing* my news intake for about a year now. I have to do this for my own mental health's sake. It's not like I'm trying to avoid knowing what's going on in the world, it's just that I have to limit my dosage. Prior to this news fast, especially when I did yardwork and chores by myself, I'd plug in my ear buds and listen to at least one network news report followed by NPR, then I'd listen to some program that summed up the week's news, then I'd listen to my favorite commentary podcast “Left Right and Center,” because it featured honest-to-goodness civil discourse from a variety of perspectives. Every day, my morning would be spent reading my newsfeed on Apple News which featured headlines from a number of Associated Press sources as well as local news stories from the *Enterprise Record* and *Chico News and Review*. Lately? Well, lately I listen to one network or NPR news podcast. *If* I'm in the mood. I read Apple News *headlines* in the morning, but I'm very selective about which stories I read in detail. I do the same with the local Chico papers. You may say, “Oh, that's not good Jesse. You know that Karl Barth once said that preachers ought to have a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other when they prepare a sermon!” Yeah. See, that's a common misquote. He actually wrote, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” And that's what I try to do. The issue I'm running into is that reading my Bible gives me hope. And that's great. That's what it's supposed to do. But nine times out of ten, the newspaper ... well ... let's just say that it ... *doesn't*. In fact, it's more likely to invite despair into my life.

So then what are we supposed to do with despair when it comes knocking? And what does that despair do to us? How are we to live as followers of Jesus in seasons of despair? In our cultural context, it seems like there are a variety of responses from which to choose. We can all take a page out of my book and just take in as much as you can, then try to block the rest out. But that presents a problem. Because then

we end up closing our ears to the cries of despair, whether it comes from within us or from around us. Then we end up living out our lives as though we were still innocently ignorant of what was going on. Social psychologists have noted that this is a frequent reaction to being overloaded with *fearful* news. If the nightly news bombards us with information about environmental catastrophe and growing levels of global poverty, and we have no sense of being able to make a difference, then we can reach a saturation point where we close down and stop allowing ourselves to feel the impact or importance of the news.

We get paralyzed ... “comfortably numb” to quote an old Pink Floyd song. That’s when we end up narrowing the scope of our vision so much that we concern ourselves with only the little bits of the world where we have some power to do something. You might think, “Well, that makes sense. Think globally, act locally, right?” But what ends up happening when we reach that over-saturation point is that we just adopt an “I’m only looking out for number one” attitude. Without any hopeful view of the future, we start focusing only on our immediate pleasure and profit and eventually become oblivious to the plight of others. Trusting in money, or material possessions, or drugs, or mindless pursuits of pleasure while watching the world burn is just another symptom of despair. When we reach that point, we’ve given up hope of *anything* except waiting for the end.

The story we heard about the prophet Jeremiah this morning is set against a background of deep despair in the divided Kingdom of Israel and Judah. Jeremiah himself has been accused of treason and locked up in the palace dungeons in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the seemingly unstoppable Babylonian army has surrounded Jerusalem. The siege of the southern Kingdom of Judah is on. Their food is running out, and so is their hope. The surrounding land is being laid waste and everyone can see that any day now the walls will be breached and the people will be marched off into exile. Jeremiah has been telling everyone this would happen for some time now, which is why he was locked up in jail in the first place. Ironic, right? You’d think Jeremiah would be feeling a little

smug now. You think he'd be saying, "Told you so!" from his jail cell. But instead, we get a picture of the intense grief he's feeling as he watches the fall of his people. And in the middle of it all, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel visits him in prison and offers him a great deal on a piece of property. (He did what?!) Every family has a skilled opportunist in the ranks, right? Except Hanamel doesn't seem so skilled when you consider that this piece of property is about to become the property of Babylon. There is no good reason for Jeremiah to buy this land. Yes, it had been in his family for generations, and he was the only member of the family who could keep it that way, but with the Babylonians bearing down, he would only be keeping it in the family for a few more days ... hours ... if that. If Jeremiah started shutting down and just looking after number one, he'd probably hold on to his money because who knows what he might be needing it for once the Babylonians take over.

But Jeremiah didn't shut down. He bought the land. He even made double sure that the transaction was properly witnessed, and recorded. Anyone with any amount of sense would have asked, "Is he nuts? What's wrong with him?!" "Well," says Jeremiah, "This is what the Lord says. This is what the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel says: Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land." What an outrageous act of faith! In the face of despair, in the face of the overwhelming destructive might of the Babylonian army, Jeremiah is making a statement of hope. A statement of trust in God. No matter how all-powerful the forces of destruction that surround us are, the future lies ultimately in the hands of the God who is all-faithful and who will never forget or forsake God's people. We might be carried off to exile, but God will be there with us. Guaranteed. And God will bring us back and give us back our homes. Jeremiah said, "Yup! I will take that land, thank you very much, and let that be a sign of promise ... of hope in the face of despair."

To act in hope in the face of despair does not come easily. When despair surrounds us like an army, it feels all-powerful. But see, we have an

advantage. We have reason to reach for hope in this story, because we know that the Babylonian exile eventually came to an end and Jeremiah's purchase proved to be a prophetic investment in hope. And we as a Christian church have reason to reach for hope too, because we know that despite the horrific finality of Jesus' death on a cross, Jesus was raised to new life, and offers us the same new life too under the embrace of God's new reign on earth. Remember what I said last week ... we are an Easter people. We affirm the resurrection. And by doing so, we are saying a new world order has begun, and that no military force, and no callous regime can prevent its coming. The resurrection is our way of affirming that Jesus has turned the world on its head so that despair will never again have the last word.

Both the resurrection and Israel's return from exile are both calls for us to choose life. It's a call for us ... (okay, for me) ... to quit shutting down and ignoring the needs that are in front of us. It's a call for us to trust in the promise of a better future and act on it now. For a few of us, responding to that call may involve some grand heroic act like standing in front of Pontius Pilate like Jesus did when he was on trial and saying, "Go ahead and do what you have to do. But I'll be back." But for most of us, these heroic moments will happen in much smaller and seemingly inconsequential acts. For some of us, when the reality of despair takes the form of debilitating depression, just getting out of bed in the morning and putting one foot in front of the other can be an act of hope.

It's funny how our favorite Bible stories are the ones where someone does something overtly heroic and brave. We love stories like Daniel in the Lion's Den or David standing up to Goliath or Samson slaying the Philistine army with the jawbone of a donkey. Even Hosea standing up to King Jeroboam was a bold, brave move. We love these stories! But what was Jeremiah's heroic act of faith? He bought a piece of property! Ooh! But little acts of faith count just as much as the big ones. We're in the business of bearing witness to what God is doing, not ushering in the new age by the scale of our own actions. We are called to faithfulness, not effectiveness. Jeremiah's purchase was not some big brave public

show for all to see. It probably wouldn't even have been noticed if it hadn't been written down so carefully. He just bought a piece of land that no one else in their right mind would have bought. Nothing heroic. Just an act of hope. Just an act of trust in a God who can raise life from death, and bring home the broken hearted from exile. Each little act of hope nourishes our potential to undertake further acts of hope, so that with *one little act of hope at a time*, we break down the power that the voice of despair has over us.

The fact that you are here this morning is an act of hope! You're bearing witness that something new is happening and that it is in God's hands. It's a small act of hope that can nourish future acts of hope. Maybe some of you have come from different places of struggle and despair, or maybe this week the despair has been a little more distant and you're feeling fine, but all of us are here because *here* is hope. *Here* we take a stand for life, for peace, for a world of mercy and grace.