

Defying Despair

A sermon on Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15 & 1 Timothy 6: 6-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 September 2019

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Message

There are plenty of reasons to despair of the future, but Jeremiah and Jesus show us a pathway of hope that overcomes despair.

Sermon

We live in what is sometimes described as an age of despair. Many people are living lives of quiet despair. For some people, it can no longer be hidden, and as I discussed last week, they are gripped by times of crippling depression. Others appear to be coping better, but often only because their despair is expressed in more socially acceptable ways like overwork and over-consumption and the mindless pursuit of pleasure.

The level of despair is no surprise. Looking around us, there are more than enough reasons for all of us to be gripped by despair. For many of us there are reasons enough in our own immediate circumstances. Relationship breakdowns. Redundancy or meaningless, joyless work and no foreseeable way out. Failing health, either our own or in people we love dearly. And if things are okay at home, we only have to lift our eyes and look further afield to find plenty of reasons to despair. If the face of catastrophic climate change, environmental degradation, war, terrorism, global poverty, and the collapse of democracy as we have known it, it is difficult to see the world having much future at all, let alone one worth living. Perhaps despair is just realism and good sense.

What do we do with that despair? And what does that despair do to us? How are we to live as followers of Jesus in an age of despair?

In the culture around us, the most prevalent reaction to despair is to block it out. We close our ears to the cry of despair, whether it comes from within us or from around us, and live 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 are paralysed into obliviousness by the despair, and what usually happens then is that we narrow the scope of our vision and concern ourselves solely with the little bit of the world where we have some power to do something.

If that stayed connected to the broader vision, it might express itself in the “think globally, act locally” approach that is the cornerstone of most real movements of change, but usually it disconnects the two and becomes just a “looking after number one” or “me and my family first”. Without any hopeful view of the future, we look only to our immediate pleasure and profit and become oblivious to the plight of others. And so we get the example of the rich man in the parable we heard tonight, unthinkingly stepping over the poor man at his gate.

Similarly we heard the apostle Paul urging Timothy to urge those who were wealthy in the church to avoid putting their trust in money. It is those of us who are rich (which in this

country is most of us) who can afford the sort of pleasurable distractions that inoculate us against reality. Trusting in money to secure our interests while the world falls apart around us is commonly a symptom of despair. We have given up hope of anything but partying madly until the end. As we confess here each Sunday, we can despair of changing the world and neglect even to change ourselves.

The story we heard about the prophet Jeremiah tonight is set against a background of deep despair. Jeremiah himself has been accused of treason and locked up in the palace dungeons in Jerusalem, but now the all-conquering Babylonian army has surrounded Jerusalem and the siege is on. **Jerusalem is as powerless as Greater Western Sydney before the might of the Babylonian Tigers.** The food is running out, and hope is running out. 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 predicting all this for sometime, which is why he was locked up, so you might expect him to be feeling a little bit smug now, but Jeremiah is not known as the weeping prophet for nothing. As the author of the book of Lamentations, we have a permanent record of his intense grief and despair at the fall of his people.

But in the midst of it, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel visits him in prison and offers him a great deal on a block of land. A great deal?! Yeah right! This is no better than an offer of a block of land through which a freeway is about to be built. This is about as attractive as being offered a good price on a block in Tuvalu as the rising sea laps at its front gate.

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 hours. If Jeremiah was closing down and just looking after number one, he'd be keeping his money in his pocket. Who knows what he might be needing it for.

But Jeremiah has not closed down. He buys the land. He even makes double sure that the transaction is properly witnessed, recorded, and the papers stored. Is he nuts? What is he on about? "Well," says Jeremiah, "This is what the Lord says, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."

This is 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 his people. We might be carried off to exile, but God will be with us even there and God will bring us back and give us back our homes.

"I'll take the land, thanks, and let that be a sign of promise, of hope in the face of despair."

Our reading from Timothy spoke of "Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession", and when you think about it, that's another astonishing act of hope in the face of despair. Jesus knew what he was up against. He knew that he was on his last chance to back down, to pull his head in, to comply with the demands of the powerful authorities and get out of there with his life. The shadow of the cross was looming ever larger

and darker before him, but there was still time to change his tune and walk away. He could succumb to the despair and look after number one. He could settle for having done all he could, call it quits, and walk away humbled but alive.

But if he continued to bear witness to an alternative hope, a hope in a kingdom that will come even if the powers-that-be do their worst now, then he's a goner. They cannot tolerate such resolute defiance. But Jesus does not get closed down by despair. In the face of the callous cynicism of Pontius Pilate, he continues to bear witness to the truth. "What is truth?" sneers Pilate. "A hope worth dying for," says Jesus by his actions. "The hope of mercy and peace for all. The hope of a new day when all things will be made new. The hope that even when death does its worst, life will rise up and prevail.

To act in hope in the face of despair does not come easily. When it surrounds us like an army, despair feels all-powerful, and hope feels like a mirage. But we have reason to reach for hope, because we know that the Babylonian exile came to an end and Jeremiah's foolhardy purchase proved to be a prophetic investment in hope. And we have reason to reach for hope, because we know that despite the horrific finality of a tortured death on a bloody cross, Jesus was raised to new life, to the life that truly is life, the life that is lived forever in the safe embrace of God's new kingdom.

To act in hope is not a claim that we can do anything much in the face of the forces of death. Rather it is a claim that in the resurrection of Jesus, a new world has begun, and that no military force, and no callous regime can prevent its coming. It is a claim that the resurrection of Jesus has turned the world on its head so that despair need never again have the last word.

The resurrection and the return from exile are both calls to us to choose for life, to refuse the selfish turning in and the callous hardening of heart of despair, to trust in the promise of a better future and act for it now. For a few of us, responding to that call may one day involve the grand heroic act, the standing before a Pontius Pilate and boldly bearing witness to a truth that the Empire cannot touch. Greta Thunberg before the UN Council this past week comes to mind.

But for most of us, most of the time, it will happen in much smaller and seemingly almost 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 through the routine tasks of the day can be an act of hope, our one refusal to bow before the darkness of it all. Bearing and raising children in a world besieged by terrorism, war and ecological catastrophe is either an act of thoughtless stupidity or a Jeremiah-like act of hope in the promise of a new world which only God could bring about.

But little acts count just as much as the big ones. We are 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 political act. It probably wouldn't even have been noticed if he hadn't written it down so carefully. He just bought a piece of land against common sense. Nothing heroic. Just an act of hope, 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, and 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 tonight is an act of hope, a bearing of witness that something new is happening and that it is the hands of God. It is a small act of hope that can nourish further acts of hope. I'm here tonight because although I struggle at times to see how there might be hope beyond the despair that besieges me and the world I live in, here at this table among you I have tasted hope. Little more than a tease of a taste, but the first fruits of a promise, nevertheless.

So I am back here tonight to nourish my hope. And others 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, a world that lies still on the other side of exile or even crucifixion, but a world whose promise of resurrection we can taste as we gather together around this table.