

FRIENDS OF HOPE: VISITORS' DAY September 24, 2016

Sermon:

A Bridge Called Hope

After a lengthy siege by the armed forces of Babylon, Jerusalem was on the verge of falling. After many raids that removed the best and brightest, all that remained throughout the land of Judah were those that the captors found of little value. The opening words of the one often referred to as the weeping prophet tell the tale: "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! . . . She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave" (Lam. 1:1).^{*} Jeremiah continues: "Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place. All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress" (v. 3.) Jeremiah explains the anguish of his heart for the fate of his people by saying, "My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. . . . 'Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets; my young men and maidens have fallen by the sword'" (2:11, 21).

An unnamed psalmist, later reflecting upon his time as a captive in Babylon, echoed this anguish when he wrote, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1-4).

It is challenging to begin a sermon with a thought that seems so negative. We live in a world where people wish to see only the positive; and such is understandable in light of the fact that we are surrounded by so much bad news. In the calendar year that just ended, we heard of planes inexplicably falling from the sky—probably never to be located, diseases ravaging populations in epidemic proportions, armed conflicts erupting in locations where the dream for peace once existed, and economic crises in countries that were seen as virtually immune to such. This is just an abbreviated list.

Then there is life on the personal level: mounting bills, unexpected repairs, increased taxes without the benefit of increased wages, sickness, sorrow, and death. Jesus said it best when He told His disciples, "'In this world you will have trouble'" (John 16:33).

We also face intense spiritual warfare, as we labor to grow in Christ. Concerning salvation, Jesus said, "'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door'" (Luke 13:24.) When He said "'make every effort,'" the Greek word employed is that from which we get the English word *agonize*. God never promised an easy journey, even in the spiritual realm. Like Paul the Christian, we see our personal unworthiness (Rom. 7:14-24). Like Paul the gospel worker, we sense our inadequacies (1 Cor. 15:9).

As such, it becomes easier for preachers to proclaim a message that is designed to make the hearers feel good about themselves, those who are around them, and about life in general. It makes us feel good about ourselves as well. It appears to be, as it were, the newest version of a prosperity gospel—not one that focuses on material wealth; rather, as one that is designed to create within the hearer a sense of calm, an oasis in the desert of one's existence. Yet that oasis

proves to be a mirage, for it is not rooted in the totality of biblical reality. It proves to be superficial at best.

Against these backdrops—both 2,500 years ago and today—is there hope for us? Does God offer something that transcends the despair that threatens to envelop us? Such are valid questions, for in many respects there are similarities between our lives today and those of the people of Judah around 600 B.C. The people at that time felt persecuted by God; today,

people feel abandoned by God and hopeless. As they said then, we might also say, “I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is” (Lam. 3:17).

The Beginning of Hope

It would be easy to experience countless heartaches and tragedies, and give in to the accompanying despair. The lamentations of Jeremiah, however, take a sudden and unexpected turn. While he recalls the trauma of the past, he doesn’t dwell on it. He is aware of what has transpired, but he is not held hostage by what has taken place. “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope*” (vv. 19-21, emphasis supplied.) Hope begins when we choose to not focus on what surrounds us.

Does choosing to not focus on one’s surroundings dismiss the reality of one’s surroundings? Of course not. There will always be a need to acknowledge the existence of what is *and* look ahead to what can be or what will be. Hope serves as a bridge that spans the chasm. Hope is that road we travel from the place where we currently reside to the place we want to go.

Jeremiah does not dismiss the thought of what has happened to his people. It pains him. There isn’t a day that passes during which something reminds him of what is taking place. But though others have captured his nation—while loved ones and friends have been whisked away to a foreign land—he does not allow himself to be held captive by ever-growing despair.

What did Jeremiah call to mind? What was it that gave him hope? What was the construction material that built the “bridge” that led from despair to anticipation? He continues in verse 22: “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed.” What the New International Version translates as “great love” is translated as “lovingkindness” in the New American Standard Bible. The King James Version uses “mercies.”

However one translates this concept, however one sees it, Jeremiah possessed hope, not because of what he saw with his eyes or experienced through his emotions; rather, because of what he beheld in his heart. Deep in his soul, he knew that—contrary to how things might appear—God had not abandoned His people. God had not left His chosen ones as orphans. He knew that life would be so much worse had God actually forsaken His elect.

Along with God’s great love, His mercies, Jeremiah also saw a compassionate God. While some might wonder what the difference is, at its core, the word *compassion* carries with it the clear connotation of suffering with or alongside someone. The weeping prophet experienced mental pain; but he knew he wasn’t experiencing it alone. He knew that there was a God in heaven who felt every pang far more intensely than anyone in captivity ever could.

It’s so easy for us to believe that no one feels our pain when we experience those trying times in our lives—when we experience sickness, when our loved ones endure unending pain, when others are unfairly treated, when natural disaster strikes, when companies fire people in order to improve their financial bottom line. But the words of Jeremiah serve as a constant reminder that in spite of all these and so many other unexpected events, the great love and mercies of God still surround us and lift us up. But it is not our job to focus on those things that happen to us or around us. It is our responsibility to focus on what God does for us in spite of the things that happen to us.

Remember the words of the prophet. He recalls his affliction, wandering, bitterness, and gall. But far more important, he recalls that God exercises lovingkindness toward him and his people, and that God stands by their side, suffering with them. Furthermore, God’s attention to His people is not a passing interest. It lasts both day and night. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Says the prophet, his compassions are “new every morning” (v. 23).

Jeremiah concludes this part of the chapter with a short and simple, yet powerful, statement. Only two words in Hebrew, but filled with significance. Those two words are translated in several English versions, “Great is Your faithfulness.”

At the core of this statement is the root word for *faithfulness*. It is the word often translated *amen*. *Amen* signifies something that is dependable, reliable, trustworthy. Jeremiah acknowledges the great steadfastness of God in the midst of troubles. Although we acknowledge trials, heartaches, disappointments, and pain (indeed it is both unrealistic and unbiblical to pretend that such things do not exist), we don't focus on them. Instead, we are to focus on the faithfulness of God toward us. Hope forms the bridge that Jeremiah travels from the troublesome past and present to a glorious future.

The Continuation of Hope

But some bridges take longer to traverse than others. There are two bridges in the southern part of the state of Louisiana that span Lake Ponchartrain. Each of them is 24 miles (38 kilometers) long. If one were to drive from north to south or south to north, it would take approximately 30 minutes. Many people who cross the bridge do so to get from home to work in the morning, and back home in the evening. For many, the two bridges connect two realities of life.

For us, hope has to serve as that bridge that grants us the ability to travel from where we were to where we need to go. But in order to travel from point A to point B, one needs some sort of vehicle. Could a person walk from one end of the bridge over Lake Ponchartrain to the other? Yes. But that would take many exhausting hours; so a car would make more sense. What if you didn't have a car? You could borrow someone's car, in much the same way that a teenager borrows his or her parents' car to go places.

It is in this sense that Jeremiah continues in verse 24. "I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'" In Psalm 16:5 David uses the same Hebrew word to describe God's provisions for him. Jeremiah chooses to not focus on what has transpired, because he knows that God has already taken responsibility for providing anything and everything that Jeremiah and his people need to survive what they are experiencing. This is why he can say "Therefore I hope in Him!" (v. 24, NKJV.)

In the Spanish language, the verb *esperar*, depending on the context, can be translated "to wait" or "to hope." The prophet has confidence in God, knowing that during the time it takes for the Almighty to effect a solution to the problem, He will provide everything that is needed for the journey from the past to the future—no matter how long it takes. Jeremiah can wait on God because he hopes in Him!

The Promise of Hope

Waiting on God often proves challenging; but as we do so, we develop patience and trust to a degree we might not otherwise have experienced.

Joseph previously experienced a captivity similar to that of the Jews. But his was arguably worse in that he was sold into slavery by his brothers—his own flesh and blood. Many years later, he experienced yet another form of captivity that was also not of his own doing. He was imprisoned.

The story is told in Genesis 40 and 41 of the dreams of the cupbearer and baker, and the results thereof—one positive, one negative. One can hear the mixture of Joseph's recalling what has transpired in his life with his longing for freedom—looking back to his pain and looking forward across the bridge of hope—as he pleads with the soon-to-be-released cupbearer: "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon" (40: 14, 15). Yet it was two more years before there was any visible sign of emancipation from the trauma of his past.

Sometimes in life we find ourselves having to press forward into the dark unknown, often being inundated with reminders of what we can clearly see—as opposed to thinking about

what we cannot clearly see. The past looms large, haunting us. Hope seems empty, a dream only to be chased.

How did Joseph survive those dark moments? The key may well lie in the words of Lamentations 3:25, 26: “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; *it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord*” (emphasis supplied). Joseph never lost hope, or he might have yielded to the temptation presented to him by Potiphar’s wife—choosing perhaps to give in to temptation because he saw no future in following his convictions.

More than that, it becomes clear that while Joseph waited for divine deliverance, Yahweh was good to him—not only bestowing divine favor upon him, but placing him in a position in which he received human favor as well. Potiphar trusted Joseph, making him overseer of his property (Gen. 39:4). The prison warden did the same (v. 22). These blessings came into Joseph’s life because the Lord was with Joseph and granted him prosperity and success (vv. 2, 23).

Conclusion

Though it is never a pleasant topic to discuss, pain, sorrow, and heartache are present realities experienced by young and old, short and tall, rich and poor—Asians, Africans, Europeans, South Americans, and all others. Since the entrance of sin, such has been the lot of all creation. According to Paul, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:22).

But Paul looks not only back at the things that have happened. He looks forward to a better day. “We *wait eagerly* for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For *in this hope we were saved*. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?

But if we hope for what we do not yet have, *we wait for it patiently*” (vv. 23-25, emphasis supplied.)

These and other statements by Paul in Romans 8 point to the Ultimate Hope, Jesus Christ, as the Perfect Solution to all life’s problems. Paul looks forward, down that bridge called *Hope*, and sees the day when the challenges we face will be things of the past and we will be glorified (8:30). So he can then joyfully proclaim, “If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vss. 31, 35, 37-39.)

Let the hope in Jesus and Jesus alone be the power that sustains us from now into eternity.

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