

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Truth, Grief, Hope.

Jeremiah 32

The Season of Creation

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Jeremiah 32 recounts in plodding detail the story of Jeremiah buying a piece of land from his cousin. Out of context, it has all the drama of a trip to the DMV to register your car. But in the context, at that exact moment, with that person, it's a breathtaking, prophetic enactment of hope. We all need hope. In small things and big things, we need something to cling to when it seems like the bottom has fallen out, something to cling to that is sure and is not going to let us crumble with it, something when the darkness closes in.

Hope was needed then with the Babylonians closing in. Hope is needed now, in all kinds of ways, in each of our lives manifest in different ways. We are going to read this story, and I invite us to seek and find hope in the light of our context of ecological crisis. But at the very same time, invite the Holy Spirit to speak to each of us for how Jeremiah's bold, prophetic, and frankly, very strange hope speaks into each of our lives in just the way we need it today. Both are happening at the exact same time. What's happening to all of us and what's happening to each of us individually.

Hope is needed in all of this, and we draw the season of creation to a close with hope. But this is no cheap hope. Jeremiah won't allow it. In real crises of despair, hope is possible, but it is not a cheap imitation of positive thinking or optimism. Of all people in the world, Christians, who believe in Cross and Resurrection, know how to see and tell the truth, even when the truth is hard. When the truth is hardest and the night is deepest and the crisis is greatest, Christians shine like a city on a hill--or we should be. Of all people in the world, Christians who believe in Cross and Resurrection, know how to find hope. Or we're supposed to, right? Maybe Jeremiah can help us, but if he does, it's no cheap hope.

In Jeremiah's time the problem pressing down on them were the Babylonians. The Babylonians don't mean much to us today. I don't think any of you woke up, worried about the Babylonians. Babylonians are not our problem, but it was a problem for them. Jeremiah's message was, "They are coming, it's going to be bad, and then it's gonna get worse. Each of us individually and all of us collectively bear some responsibility for what's coming because the Babylonians are the manifestation of the consequences of our unfaithfulness to God, our lack of justice and mercy for the suffering, and our failure to skillfully care for the land God has given us. There's a direct line between our actions and the consequences and God's not going to step in and stop it."

It was not a popular message, but it's an enduring message—there are consequences for our actions.

Jeremiah kept insisting on looming consequences over the protests of the "Peace, peace" crowd—Today, by all measures, it appears as if we are going to increasingly experience the

consequences of our actions and the actions of those people we know nothing about. Soil degradation by industrial agricultural practices, atmospheric warming by our insatiable burning of fossil fuels, our loneliness by our retreat from beloved communities of simple, shared life. It's all tied together; its name collectively is Babylon.

All through the 52 chapters of Jeremiah: the looming threat of defeat and exile. And all along there are denials, rejections, and frustration at someone who says what no one wants to hear and wouldn't know what to do about it even if they could hear. We see all along the rejection of Jeremiah's sobering message echoes objections to ecological crisis warnings now:

"What we're doing isn't so bad." They said it then, we say it now. "You're being an alarmist, a bummer. Have more faith." They said it then, we say it now. "There aren't real consequences that will affect us." They said it then, we say it now. "It's going to be ok. God, or technology, or good luck, is going to get us out of it." Then, and now. What can we do about it anyway? We might as well be optimistic or we just despair. I think it's fair to say most of us have thought or felt most of those things.

Jeremiah's obviously not talking about climate change, but we should be, even if we aren't sure how or to what end. The courage of God's prophets is to look squarely at the reality of the situation you're in and ask: "What is God's Word for us, in this?" Whatever the long list of issues to be worried about or angry about or in despair about, the Ecological Crisis is our Babylonian invasion and the consequences for people whom we love, places which we know, and generations to follow us are just as real as Babylon was to them, which is to say it's a far-off, distant, almost absurd idea of a problem, until it gets real.

Of all the people of the world, the church is the people who should care about and be most in tune with threat to the gift of creation. But even if we are, goodness, now what? What do you do about Babylon, Jeremiah? The common thing to do is retreat--to optimism or despair.

In the bunker of optimism—either it's not really that bad or if it is, then everything will be ok and we'll be ok; that that thing that's out there will work itself out somehow, but it's not my concern, or if it is, I have enough other concerns, thank you, to worry about that. Superficial optimism isn't a Christian strategy to problems; it's a privileged response that is neither faith nor hope nor love. It is the rich man saying, "Oh, that guy Lazarus out there, someone else will take care of him. It will be fine."

Despair is optimism's twin—"nothing will be ok and we're doomed." So, we give up. Rachel Solnit rightly punctuates the illusion that despairing about something is the same thing as caring about it. She writes about ecological devastation, "For those of us whose lives are already easy, giving up makes life even easier, at least in terms of effort...I doubt that anyone in desperate straits has ever taken comfort from the idea that somewhere far safer, people are bitter and despondent on their behalf." It's the rich man feeling sad, "Oh that poor guy out there, there's simply nothing that can be done. I feel so sad for him. Bring me another chicken leg."

Superficial optimism and abject despair are all over the pages of Jeremiah and all over the Bible and all over the place today. The illusion of Optimism—"It's not so bad; it's probably not even real; it's just politics." The wallowing of Despair—"I can't imagine bringing a baby into the world as it is today. Humans are a plague on the earth, and Christians especially are to blame." What's a church to do? Ignore it, and preach a gospel that floats above God's Creation in travail until we escape from it? Wallow in it, and give up and feel sad or angry, and then preach a gospel that floats above God's Creation in travail until we escape from it?

As he so often did with penetrating vision, into the breach and into our confusion, steps Walter Brueggemann, rallying the church to have a burning in our bones for the gospel in that's neither of the cheap alternatives. Brueggemann says, "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, to grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair".

Truth, grief, hope.

To tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion is the commitment to seek and speak a clear-eyed perception of reality, when society, and even we, are drawn to embrace ideologies and illusions. Christians can lead the way on acknowledging the ever-emerging realities of the problem and the people, communities, cultures, and places that are most vulnerable. We have our eyes wide open. We hear, and we tell the truth.

To grieve in a society that practices denial is to remember with sacred intention what is lost, and lament harm that has been done by us and to us. It is to choose repentance and forgiveness over denial. For Christians, grief leads to lament, which leads to confession of sins. We grieve our ecological sin, if we can call it that, and grieve the real-world consequences of it, which we must call it. We have our eyes open. We have our heads bowed in humility and submission to God.

To express hope in a society that lives in despair is to articulate and enact a robust hope for an alternative future. Christians, of all the people in the world, will still have hope that we can change, and we can bear witness to a watching world of the goodness of a better way. We will not give into despair. We believe, as a bedrock theological conviction, God will restore; God will redeem. And it begins through us. We are people who are made who we are by believing that the hope of resurrection follows the cross even if everyone else gives up. We have eyes open, heads bowed, hands uplifted, and Jeremiah in our Bibles.

By chapter 32, the Babylonians are here. Long forecasted, long denied, long contested, the evidence is now obvious. Peek over the city walls of Jerusalem and see them out there. The siege has begun. It has been for a long time; they just couldn't acknowledge it. It's here now.

Jeremiah all along has been a man of truth and grief. Can he also have hope, and if so, how? His cousin finds him, Hanamel, with an offer any rational person would refuse.

“Cousin,” he says, “I have a deed to land in our hometown Anathoth. I’ll sell it to you. It’s yours for possession and redemption.” Anathoth was 2-3 miles from Jerusalem and was already lost to the Babylonians. But it was a place Jeremiah knew well and loved. He had memories there. Brueggeman says “Memory produces hope in the same way amnesia produces despair.”

Jeremiah has truth and grief, but memory and therefore, hope. Which is remarkable because he’s the one person in the face of their superficial optimism who has been preaching the doom and gloom of their future. But now, when the reality of the situation has settled into their bones, just the moment when they are groaning in collective despair, he’s the one person who has any hope. It’s not hope that the Babylonians will go on back home. It’s hope that no matter what happens, no matter what we suffer, God will find a way. God isn’t done with us yet. God knows the plans he has for you, plans for a future and a hope--which changes how we live now.

With this conviction in his bones, the drama unfolds. In front of all the witnesses, he weighs out 17 shekels of silver, signs the deeds and says, “In the name of the Lord, take these deeds and put them in an earthenware jar so they will last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.’”

This transaction isn’t just about a small plot of land already occupied by the enemy. It’s a prophetic display of hope for all land, all places, all people. All under threat, all still, despite all evidence to the contrary, still under God’s care. Daniel Berrigan calls it a “peaceable drama” in a time of war. “Peace is possible...even during a siege of terror....a prophetic act declares the integrity of the human, embattled though it may be.”

Berrigan goes on, “Buy the field; declare yourself friend of creation (and of the Creator); indict the destroyers of an ecology, blasted and degraded by war...no handwringing, no self-pity; but a lively spirit of imagination and enterprise. In worst times, we are not to play victim, not to give up, not to sigh in resignation before the invincible [forces of destruction]. Here’s Jeremiah, man of God, man for others, friend of creation. A soul at peace, calmly carrying out the one thing necessary.” (*Jeremiah*, 136)

As dawn comes into the dark, as resurrection comes from the tomb, so the work of peacemaking begins under siege where simple acts become prophetic signs of hope. Where your simple acts become, in God’s economy, prophetic signs of hope. Of all people of the world, the people of Jesus know what to do—seek and find a place of hope and purchase it, with everything you’ve got. From there, you will find the path to peace with God and peace with all creation. Amen.