

“Giving Thanks for the Hope that Holds Us”

Sixth Sermon in the Six-Week Series: Hold On! – *Hold On - to Hope...for the Long Haul!*

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; and 31:31-34

New Revised Standard Version

Jeremiah had few friends and many enemies. From the very beginning of his ministry, he was “*appoint[ed] . . . over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant*” (1:10; see 18:9; 24:6; 31:28; 45:4).¹

Jeremiah’s a prophet for the Southern Kingdom, just like Isaiah 200 years before him. They both had a hard time. But while Isaiah struggled to get people to listen to him and understand his message, Jeremiah was physically abused and beaten, he was imprisoned, and worst of all – he was banned from the Temple. He said the things that no one wanted to hear; he is proof that truth has never been popular. His words called out the sinfulness of not only the people in power, but ALL the people who remained silent and complacent to that power.

But even these people deserve a chance, because as we see in today’s text, with the Babylonians encroaching in on them, Jeremiah – even from his imprisoned place – is doing everything he can to get a word of warning to the people and King to say, “*it’s not too late. Turn from your ways...*”

The Lord tells Jeremiah to write these words of warning on a scroll to preserve them so that future generations could look back at the current chaos and maybe just maybe it would lead them to repent of their ways. But, of course, he’s banned from the Temple, so Jeremiah instructs his scribe Baruch to write down all the ways that the king and people will suffer if they don’t change what they’re doing. And in a clear display of drama and power, the King cuts up the scroll and burns it – bit by bit.

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “Commentary on Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34,” *Working Preacher* (25 Nov. 2012), accessed on 21 Nov. 2020 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jeremiah-2/commentary-on-jeremiah-361-8-21-23-27-28-3131-34>.

It would be as if back in 2018 or so, someone had given us a book describing what 2020 was going to be like...and we read it and then just ripped it up – page by page – not just ignoring the warning of what it was telling us, but actively eviscerating the words, as if destroying the words would make the events themselves – and their consequences – just disappear. But surprise! That’s not how the world works is it?

In actuality, a lot of what Jeremiah wrote was recounting what had already happened under King Jehoiakim. And so it’s no wonder the King wants the scroll destroyed; it’s one of the first acts of “book burning” that we know about it. The King wants to control the narrative of how his reign is remembered; regardless of the truth.

Of course, WE know, both then and now, that we cannot ignore the actions and inactions of people in power that cause suffering and death. Nor can we ignore the consequences of our own sinful behavior.

Jeremiah did not have a fun job. Nobody wants to be Jeremiah; nobody wants to disrupt the status quo or speak truth to power knowing you will face punishment and persecution. It must have been Jeremiah’s faith that allowed him to “Hold On” to his calling. I can’t think of ANY other reason that would have made a man who was abused, beaten, imprisoned, and silenced – keep going. Where did this faith come from? Where did Jeremiah find the strength to “hold on for the long haul” even in the face of so much opposition?

Well, this is where we turn back five chapters to Jeremiah 31. To remember the promise that had been given – the promise of a NEW covenant, a new way of doing things between God and God’s people. God says, *“Even though y’all have broken ALL the promises I’ve made with you before, I’ll keep trying. This new thing I’m doing – well, you can’t mess this one up. Because I’m gonna write it*

on your hearts. Yep, you can't burn your heart like a scroll; you can't smash your heart like the tablets on Mt. Sinai. Nope. I'm writing this promise on your beating hearts. I will be your God, and you will be my people. And finally because you can't destroy these words, you'll do the right thing, the thing you KNOW to do without having to be taught or reprimanded. And you'll ALL do the right thing – no matter who you are or where you're from. I'll forgive your sins and forget the evil you've done. Clean slate. (based Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Sounds like utopia right? All of us just doing what God asks us to do? No mistakes? No second takes? Sounds like the world we all long for and pray for each day.

As Christians, we believe this is the new covenant we see given to us in the person of Jesus Christ – someone who had the very heart of God and whose life showed us how to live from a posture of grace and service; not power and control. But you

see, for Jeremiah – who didn't even know about Jesus, who had not yet experienced anything at all about this new covenant that was coming – I think the very knowledge of this promise was enough to give him hope...enough to give him the energy to write down God's word once, and to write it down again when it was burned...knowing that his ministry was not in vain, even though he saw the fruits of his labor destroyed in real time. I don't know about you, but if someone ripped up and burned my work – not just anyone – but the *very* people for whom that writing was intended, I wouldn't have the guts or the patience to write down the *exact same thing* again...unless...unless I trusted that in writing it – I was part of a larger piece of a puzzle – that my ministry and my persistence in the face of people ignoring me – would not ultimately go to waste, but would be used by God – somehow, someway.

I think Jeremiah believed that. Look – we're still reading his words today aren't we? But the

question is not whether we're reading his words, the question is are we heeding his words?

You see, while Jeremiah's message is for ALL the people of the Southern Kingdom of his day, it's also for each and every one of us. God has called us to repentance and to relationship again and again. And isn't it amazing, that through all of these callings...through all the times when WE have been the ones to ignore the message, to shred the evidence, to burn away what we don't want to hear or accept because it's hard and it calls us to be accountable for our actions – isn't it amazing that the very love and forgiveness that we so long for and desire – is actually accessible to us already? Written on our hearts?

The wisdom of the Lord is within us. Yes, it is in the Word of God. Yes, it is in the words of prophets and pastors. Yes, it is written all over creation and spoken through the mouths of babes AND yes – it is written on YOUR heart too.

With every beat of our hearts, we have a chance to tap into that which we know to be true – that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we have ever done that could make God love us less. God loves us and forgives us. And that, THAT – is what we must give thanks for each and every day – THAT gift of love and forgiveness is THE very thing that gives us HOPE for the LONG HAUL. That no matter how long the journey is – God's love is longer. No matter how many pits we fall in – God's forgiveness is there to catch us every time. No matter how many times we fear the worst, and start freaking out, we never get ghosted by God; God is there to say, I am here, I am with you. As close to you as your own heart.

There are days where the very presence of God might not be enough for us. We may want more from God. Maybe we want a miracle or a healing or an incredible action that comes down to save the world or destroy our enemies. But God's

done a lot of that already – and quite frankly – all the miracles and stuff – even the Savior that came to save us – even all of that – is never enough for us, is it? We always want more.

Sometimes, I think, we need to remember what Jeremiah remembered...that no matter what comes our way or who throws away or ignores the gospel message and our living out of it – that God's promise IS enough to carry us through. God's love and forgiveness IS written on our hearts. We ARE God's people, and God IS our God.

Place your hand over your heart. Feel it beat. With every heartbeat, we have a new chance to accept God's love more deeply, and to forgive ourselves – and one another – more freely.

And when our anger stirs and our frustrations rise at all the people around us who can't seem to get the message to love one another – or when you catch yourself living out your worst self instead of your best

self – take a deep breath and put your hand on your heart again – and again – feel it beating. Know that your life itself is God's way of saying to the world – Look World, I am here. I'm right here.

THIS Is the HOPE that holds us, my friends. Through pandemics and protests. Through elections and EKGs. Through diagnoses and droughts. Through fires and fear. Through grief and gut-punches.

This is the HOPE that holds us. It is a HOPE that NO one – no matter how powerful they are – can take from us – because it lives in our hearts, not in our politics or our possessions.

It is a HOPE that NO disaster or diagnoses – no matter how devastating – can take from us - because it is indestructible.

It is a HOPE that NO grief – no matter how debilitating – can take from us - because it transcends this earth and reaches to heaven.

Does this kind of Hope look like what we'd want it to look like all the time? No. Does this kind of Hope take away our pain and suffering? No. Does this kind of Hope restore justice? Not on its own, no. Does this kind of Hope bring back our loved one who has died? No.

So if that's the case – then what DOES this Hope do? What's the point? Well, as Jeremiah shows us, Hope helps us HOLD ON. Hope gives us what we need to make it one more day. Hope calls us forward from this moment to the next – reminding us that we don't have to have all the answers; we can just do the next right thing. Hope reminds us that God's vision is bigger than our own. Hope reminds us we are not alone.

Hope is not a hoax. It is not a placebo effect. It's not a miracle vaccine that will solve all the world's problems. Hope is one of the greatest gifts that God has given us – the ability to believe that our best days are not behind us – but before us.

The ability to trust that what we do matters – each and every day. The ability to know that no matter what happens God is with us, God loves us, God forgives us. And that no person or situation is irredeemable.

This Thanksgiving, when so much else seems to be falling apart, let's give thanks for the HOPE that HOLDS us – the HOPE that we don't even have to HOLD ON to ourselves, because it's written within our very hearts. The Hope that, if we let it beat strong and steady through our lives, will carry us forward in faith, no matter what the future holds.

Amen.