

(Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 NRSV)

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. ² At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, ³ where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

⁶ Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: ⁷ Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." ⁸ Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. ⁹ And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. ¹⁰ I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. ¹¹ Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; ¹² and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. ¹³ In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, ¹⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ¹⁵ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

(Luke 16:19-31 NRSV)

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

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²⁷ He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- ²⁸ for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰ He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

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Hope in the Ashes

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Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31

The rich man hears words that must have stunned him: “Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so.” The rich man wanted a second chance. Surely, he thought, nothing can be that final.

But Luke’s message in this parable, a message similar in some respects to his message in last week’s parable of the dishonest manager, which comes right before this one in the text; Luke’s message today, which in a profound way balances the radical forgiveness found in his parable of the prodigal son, the message in this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that things have their consequences, and those consequences cannot be undone, no matter how much everyone may wish they could be. Luke means in this parable to inject a certain urgency into the Christian message, an urgency meant to make people realize that many important moments of human life simply cannot be taken back. It’s too late. The rich man cannot take back his life-long lack of compassion for Lazarus begging at his gate.

Some years ago in the gang warfare in Boston, I remember reading the poignant story of a young man, less than twenty, a boy really, involved in a gun battle on the city streets. Suddenly his pistol either ran out of ammunition or jammed. It wouldn’t fire. And the young man held his hand up, as if to take a time out: Wait a minute my gun’s not working.

The young man thought it was all a game, not a matter of life and death, not really. But of course, it wasn’t a game. As he stood with his hand outstretched, calling time, he was shot dead. And there must have been a moment when it hit him that this was for real. The consequences of gang shootouts was real. He was going to die, and there was no time out, no taking it back, no game anymore.

Mothers against drunk driving (MADD) has its origination in a similar reality. Too many young people have thought that their drinking and driving would never catch up with them, and because of it, too many parents and close friends have tearfully buried their children and their friends after gruesome car accidents. And as they go through the motions of the visiting hours and the memorial service, everyone is grieving and stunned, almost in disbelief that the person they knew and

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loved two days ago is no longer. In their disbelief, they find themselves wishing they could take back the lost ones' getting in the car drunk, get a second chance, but they can't.

And I suppose, even if the result hasn't been a death, we can all look at our own lives and find those moments, those actions, that we would give anything in the world not to have had happen. Maybe it was a word said or a punch thrown in anger that has forever affected a valued relationship. Maybe it was a seemingly minor indiscretion that ultimately betrayed loved ones in ways we never dreamed of. Maybe it was just that we spent too much time at work, and now the kids are grown up, and no matter how regretful we are, we can't get a second chance to be a better and more attentive parent.

Luke tells us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to tell us that things, or at least some things, cannot be undone, even by our religion. The scene is graphic. Abraham and Lazarus enjoying the cool environs of his afterlife on the one side; across a deep chasm the rich man burning up in torment. First the rich man asks that Lazarus come and give him a cool drink. When he realizes that it can't be, when he drinks in that he can't get a refreshing drink from across the divide, the rich man pleads that Abraham send Lazarus to warn those who are still alive. Abraham says, No, it won't do any good. They won't listen. The rich man then pleads, But if you send someone from the dead. Abraham reminds the rich man that someone has just risen from the dead, Jesus, and people still haven't listened, and still haven't changed.

This is a difficult story, not what we want to hear. As a minister I am often asked to take care of the weather. While it's always a joke, it also reveals a deep-seated belief that if your religion is in order, you can control things, even the weather. In the same way, I am certain that most of us would like our religion to let us off the hook, to give us a break, even when we don't deserve it. But whatever is meant by forgiveness in Christianity, Luke wants us to know it's not about getting off the hook. It's not about rolling back the clock and getting a chance to do things all over again. Similarly, whatever is meant about new life in Christianity, whatever is meant about resurrection, it is not getting to live forever in this life.

Alex Miller tells the joke about three men who are killed in an automobile accident. They arrive at the pearly gates before their funeral, of course. So they are asked, What would you most like to hear people say about you. One man says, I want people to say that I was the greatest doctor who ever lived. The second man says, That's not so important to me. I want people to say what a wonderful person I was, how I loved my family and my friends. But the third man spoke for all of us. He said, I want them to say: Look! Look! He's moving! Wouldn't we all rather just avoid death than have to worry and speculate about the afterlife?

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But whatever the meaning is of our religious faith, it is certainly not about getting the world to act the way we want it to, about immortality – meaning getting to live our lives here forever; nor about second chances – meaning getting to take back the things we’ve done that cause us and others so much pain and suffering.

Jeremiah’s Jerusalem faced this same reality. Jeremiah had been preaching repentance to them for a long time. He told them that the unjust treatment of the poor would get them in trouble, but they had not listened. He told them that their turning away from a true relationship with the sacred would have dire consequences, but they had ridiculed him, and waved aside his warnings and put him into prison for treason, where we find him this morning.

So now, now, at this passage we read this morning; now at the 32nd chapter of Jeremiah, late into the book, Nebuchadnezzar’s army is poised to strike Jerusalem. Now it is too late for repentance. Now it is too late to listen and change. As much as the people might want to, it is too late. The Babylonian army will strike, Jerusalem will be crushed, the holy temple will be obliterated, and the people will force-marched to exile in a foreign land with foreign Gods. A whole nation will be without home and anchor. There is no escape.

So, what do we find Jeremiah doing at this final moment? Do we find him yelling, I told you so, from his prison cell? No. Do we find him engaged in one last futile attempt to change the people? No. We find him buying a piece of property. What a curious thing. The city is about to be overrun by a foreign army, and Jeremiah goes about the business of buying a piece of land, the deed to which will be worthless in a matter of moments. Is Jeremiah mad? Or, is he speculating, buying land at fire sale prices? He buys the land from a cousin; maybe he’s helping out a family member short of cash?

No, Jeremiah isn’t mad. No, he isn’t a property speculator. No, he’s not helping out his family by buying the land. Jeremiah buys the land as a symbol of his conviction, his conviction that one day, one day, there will again be vineyards in this land. One day there will be houses and fields. One day there will be marriage and families again in this place. One day, Jeremiah is convinced, there will be a new beginning, convinced even as he sees death and destruction about to reign in the land, to swoop down upon them all.

Notice that Jeremiah isn’t saying that the people are going to get a second chance. He isn’t saying that he had just warned them to scare them, but now everything will be fine, that he was just kidding about the consequences. Nebuchadnezzar is coming. Jerusalem will fall. The people will spend the next forty years, as it turns out, dispossessed, homeless, and bereft singing psalms of lament. Nevertheless, at the brink of this disaster, Jeremiah makes a statement of hope.

Martin Luther, the great church reformer, was once asked what he would do if he knew the world were ending. He said he would plant a tree. It’s the same kind

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of hope, the same kind of conviction that Jeremiah evidences. In the face of certain disaster, Jeremiah demonstrates his hope, not his hope that the disaster will be averted, but rather, that despite the disaster, there is reason to hope.

This, of course, is the part all the disciples got wrong, too. They wanted Jesus to make the world work as they thought it should. Show some of that Godly power. Maybe kick the Romans out. Maybe turn the society around. Certainly not be strung up as a common criminal. They weren't interested in resurrection after disaster; they were interested in avoiding the disaster altogether. So, when the disaster struck, they walked away in despair. Some left town. Others locked themselves away in fear. It took a long time and some real convincing for them to accept the kind of resurrection and new life Jesus was talking about.

The two passages we have read this morning, one from Jeremiah and one from Luke, tell us a couple of things about life and then something about our religious faith. As Christians, heirs to the Old Testament, we are given a world that God pronounced to be good after every day in creation. This life is precious and important. And we are given a warning, You can make a mess out of this life. The things we do can have horrid and irreversible consequences. In addition, as precious and wonderful as this life is, it is, also, difficult, even if we don't make a mess of it ourselves. To be sure, very often we are the victims of our own miscues, or those of others. But just as often the hard parts come at random. Cancer strikes. A plane falls out of the air. And whether we are at fault or not, there is often little we can do to reverse the tide and remove the tribulations of life. The point here is captured in the serenity prayer. We should be work hard on the things over which we have some control so as to minimize the trouble. We should try to accept the things we can't control. And we should pray to know the difference.

But there is something more. In the end, after the trouble has been sown and reaped, whether we are the rich man who left Lazarus begging at his gate, or are the Israelites who waved away the warnings of Jeremiah, or are simply victims of a harsh world, there is a hope beyond all this. It is the hope of a mature faith, for it is not a hope that answers our most obvious prayers, for the weather, for the avoidance of death or even for a second chance. But it is a hope that says on the other side of all this pain, on the other side of a life filled with mistakes and the consequences of them, on the other side of a painful exile in Babylon, on the other side of consequences which cannot be undone, on the other side of even death on a cross, there is something new, something rising out of the ashes, something so true that it causes Jeremiah to buy a parcel of land even as Nebuchadnezzar is camped at the gate. This hope that buys the land, or plants the tree, or prays at the darkest moments, this hope is the very centerpiece of our religious faith.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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