

Bill Countryman

Good Shepherd Berkeley

21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 25, 2009

Proper 25B: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:4-52

MESSAGES OF HOPE

From Jeremiah this morning:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

Return where? To Jerusalem. And at this point in Jeremiah's life, that city was in the last, desperate stages of the Babylonian siege. Soon, it would be a heap of smoking ruins. Already you could picture the survivors gathered in clumps outside the city, scrounging for something to keep themselves alive, waiting to be ordered out on the long march to the country that is now Iraq. Many of them, of course, would die along the way.

And Jeremiah is offering hope?

Jeremiah is offering hope?

It wasn't his usual message. If you've read much of his book, you may have had a moment of uncertainty during that reading. Was this passage really from him? Did the lector get it wrong and read Isaiah instead? [No, though it sounds almost like Isaiah.]

Jeremiah spent most of his career as a prophet predicting, accurately, that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, would capture the city, kill the king and his counselors, and carry most of the population off into exile. Almost nobody with any clout believed him. He always reminds me of the Trojan prophetess Cassandra, who was condemned by Apollo always to prophesy the truth and always to be ignored.

But here he is—right in the heart of the horror—offering hope.

It seems terribly out of character. But then again, it makes you pause and reflect. What did *he* know? He'd been right about the disaster; could he be right about the return?

At least you could be sure of one thing: he wasn't just giving expression to a naturally sunny disposition. He didn't have a trace of that. And that means his message isn't just about optimism. It's about something more difficult and also more life-giving. It's about hope. It's about God's enduring connection with us, which gives us the courage to go on trying to build something of value in our world even when all the odds seem to be against us.

And hope, of course, isn't a one-time deal. It's still central to Christian life. And that's why the community of faith, the church, is important to Christian life, too. We need one another here to remind us of the reality of God's grace and the hope that comes from it. It's hard to remember that all by our lone selves. We do much better when we have people to remind us.

I've found myself reflecting a lot lately on the question: Why do people go to church? Now, you are all largely responsible for that because, a few months ago, we had some very good house meetings where we talked about that very thing.

The answers weren't surprising, but they were quite wonderfully varied. Let me recall a few of them: For the community. Because Sunday is a day to be quiet. Looking for a sense of the sacred. Getting a different perspective on living. A ministry of presence to one another. Habit. Finding a sweet spirit in the congregation. Opportunity for involvement in service to the community. Opportunity to sing. (And this isn't even the whole list.)

All that from this one small congregation. People are finding all those things here.

Now, none of us, at the time, said anything explicitly about hope. But I think it may have been implicit in some of the things we did say, such as getting a different perspective on living, getting an opportunity to serve and to sing, finding a sweet spirit in this

community. And yet, one result of those meetings has been that I have found myself getting newly hopeful in the weeks since.

Of course, I don't have as hard a time being hopeful as Jeremiah's audience. We're certainly not in the kind of fix they were in. And, while I can't claim to have an optimistic disposition, I'm not as glum as Jeremiah was.

But our world isn't *short* on reasons to get depressed. Between the evangelicals trying to tear the Episcopal Church apart on one side and the Bishop of Rome "power play," as the *Economist* called it, on the other, church politics offers a good opportunity for it. The economy is still stumbling along; and that's a more important issue for most people. The state government is in the throes of near paralysis. Congress is finding it really hard to pass a health-care bill that should have been in place decades ago.

Are you with me? Are you feeling bad yet?

And we have our anxieties here at Good Shepherd. Oh gosh! we'll have a new vicar before long. Will we like that person? Will that person like us? Will we all learn to play well together?

Okay, it's not on a par with the siege of Jerusalem. But I'm feeling a little antsy, and I'll bet I'm not the only one.

And then along comes Jeremiah saying, "God is going to create a future of hope that you could scarcely have imagined." And if you can't believe Jeremiah when he says that, who *could* you believe?

And so I'm actually kind of infected with this surprising sense of hope and excitement. Maybe I'm even infectious. I don't know, but it can happen, you know.

And, just to round things out, we also read the story of blind Bartimaeus today, sitting beside the main road out of Jericho, begging. He hears a crowd going by, asks what the occasion is, and is suddenly filled with hope. And he accomplishes the impossible. How would Jesus even hear him in all that commotion? How could he expect a major public figure to stop and pay attention to him? And the miracle is a real surprise, coming at just this point in Mark's Gospel, because, according to Mark, Jesus had pretty much run out

of miracles by this stage in his ministry—probably because people were running out of the kind of faith and hope that made them possible.

So here is Bartimaeus, finding the hope and therefore the energy to break out of his place on the side of the road. He could then have gone home with his new-found vision, learned to read, gotten steady work, made a life there in Jericho. But it just didn't seem good enough anymore. He had caught hope and he wanted to keep close to the source of the contagion. So he followed Jesus toward Jerusalem.

Now, you and I know what was going to happen there. For Bartimaeus and the rest of Jesus' followers, the crucifixion must have been their own version of the fall of Jerusalem—complete and utter devastation. And then, the next they knew, here came hope again with the news of the resurrection.

That's the situation we live in: looking for hope and then being surprised by it. Sometimes we're more aware of our need than others. But, when all is said and done, I think this may be our deepest reason for going to church, for sticking with our little band of fellow-travelers. It's probably the most important gift we can share with each other in the months to come. And it's probably the most important gift we can share with our new vicar, too. God has things in mind for us that we can't even imagine yet.