

“Sign of Hope” – Jer 32:1-3a,6-15 – Sept 26, 2010

I’m building a shed. It’s not that I have a whole lot of spare time on my hands, or that I really need another project. But I’m building a shed at home. It’s turning out to be a very nice shed, and I’ve had a lot of fun designing it, and then watching it come together. I’ve got the floor done, and the walls framed, and two walls sheathed, and a few rafters cut. I never thought Elizabeth would be so agreeable to surrendering a bit more of the back yard, but the promise of a place to neatly store gas cans, antifreeze jugs, spare outboard motor parts and so forth was appealing to her, not to mention getting back part of the laundry room that I currently use for storing tools. I suppose some would say I’m a little foolish starting a building project at my age, but hey, I have hopes of using it for a long, long time.

I’m sure many thought Jeremiah was a crazy old coot as well. There he sat, in prison, having offended the king by claiming that God would let the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, destroy the city of Jerusalem. Of course the king was doubly offended that Jeremiah claimed that God said it was because they had angered him, and triply offended because it was all happening just as Jeremiah had said it would.

And Jeremiah was not popular with the people either for saying these things. Israel’s faith centered on God’s promise of an eternal throne of David. Those promises had been threatened a century and a half earlier with the invasions by the Assyrians, but when that threat dissolved the Israelites became firm in their belief that the Temple was inviolate. As the historian Albright puts it, “Elevated by theological optimism, the nation marched toward tragedy confident that the God who frustrated Sennacherib would frustrate Nebuchadnezzar also.”

But now the attackers were building siege ramps; the defenders were tearing down buildings to erect fortifications; people in surrounding Judah were being forcibly taken away to Babylon; and Jeremiah sat in jail, still bringing messages from God to the people. It was a desperate time for the Israelite people. Removed far from their homelands, losing everything, including the beloved Temple, the house where God lived. How could they sing their holy songs as they sit by the rivers of Babylon, they cried. How could they ever hope for things to return to normal, to once again revel in prosperity and peace?

These are themes that are familiar ones today. Whether it is the poor people of Haiti, still living in temporary accommodations – isn’t that a fancy word to describe hovels made from shipping pallets and blue tarps? – or the desperate hordes in Pakistan, trying to recover from having the nothing they had being swept away by flood waters.

And we needn’t pick on the traditionally poor countries for examples of uncertainty, loss, and desperation. In the “sun belt” states that are popular with Canadian ex-pats, the housing market has collapsed so completely that people are able to purchase a house using a credit card! I saw a woman on CNN who bought a house in Florida – I think it was a three-bedroom bungalow if I remember rightly – for \$14,000 using a credit card. This is not restricted to the United States, however, since all around the globe nations and peoples are struggling to recover from economic chickens coming home to roost. Strikes, uprisings, street assemblies are becoming more and more common as people react to the realities of crushingly increasing debt and declining revenues with which to address those debts.

These increasing global economic pressures are also manifesting, not surprisingly, in political pressures. Increasing competition for both resources and international sales are causing border frictions to escalate. The tension between North and South Korea has hit an all-time high, with senior analysts stating that the only step left for escalation is open conflict. Relations between China and Japan are more strained than ever, particularly in disputes over jointly-claimed marine areas thought to be rich in petroleum reserves.

In North America the ever-expanding demand for illicit drugs continues to fuel the violence and oppression in the drug trade. Canada has finally issued a travel alert warning us not to drive through the USA-Mexico border, as it is too dangerous. How long before the same kind of warning

might be issued for our once-peaceful interior municipalities like Kelowna? Already parts of the lower mainland are almost “no-go” areas late at night. What has happened to the world we thought we knew?

The Israelites sitting by the rivers of Babylon in the Sixth Century B.C. must have had the same thoughts about the promises from God. After all, weren't they the inheritors of the covenant God made with Abraham, the predicted nations in the promised land? Weren't they the children of the children that Moses led out of Egypt, and to whom God promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience? What had they done wrong? How had they disobeyed so badly as to be rounded up by the invading troops and carted off to Camp Babylon? Life had been so good, so normal. God's favour had shined upon them – jobs were available, businesses prospered, children grew up, houses and farms were bought and sold, worship was conducted in the Temple. Life was good.

But now it was so different. Captives, prisoners, detainees held in bondage far from home. It was told by traders that the Temple was no more, torn down, desecrated. Jerusalem lay in ruins, foreigners occupied once-prosperous homes and villas that had been confiscated by the local authorities within minutes of the detainees being loaded into carts for the long trip to the strange interior.

Where was God in all of this? Did this mean that God's covenant, so treasured and so vaunted by the rabbis, were no more? Had God gone back on His word, canceling those covenants and abandoning His people?

I'm sure we can imagine how those captives felt, because there are times when we feel somewhat the same way. Natural disasters, diseases that kill millions, economic oppression, political oppression, religious oppression, harsh regimes, suicide bombers, lying politicians, heartless churches, the list of ways in which it seems that God is no longer interested in people seems endless at times. Even in our personal lives there are times when we are moved to ask, where is God in all of this? Has He forgotten me, abandoned me?

Yes, the world is in a desperate situation, but before we completely lose hope, let's return to the story of that crazy old coot, Jeremiah. Sitting in prison for telling it like it was, the city in the last stages of being attacked and looted by the Babylonians, Jeremiah buys a piece of land in his home town outside the city. His cousin Hanamel, son of his uncle Shallum, comes to Jeremiah hoping he will take this piece of property off his hands. We don't know what was in Hanamel's mind, but one has to suspect that he either was looking for a bit of charity from cousin Jeremiah, or perhaps thought that Jeremiah was weird enough that he just might fall for “such a deal.”

Although Hanamel probably was unaware that God was not only observing his actions but giving Jeremiah a “head's up”, Jeremiah was clear as to God's intent, and gladly carried through with the transaction. I'm sure Hanamel walked away muttering to himself, “I never thought he'd fall for it! I've always known cousin Jeremiah was a bit odd, but he must now be totally crazy!”

Well, sitting here some twenty-six hundred years later, we know that Jeremiah was not so crazy after all, and that instead he recognized this offer and sale of property in a land being overrun and occupied by an enemy as a sign of hope, an omen signifying the everlasting promise of God's care for his people. After years of telling the people that their wayward ways, their turning away from God's call for justice for all people would result in the calamity of being conquered and force-marched into exile, with this concrete symbol of hope, a deed buried safely, Jeremiah begins to bring God's message of assurance to his troubled people. God promises to relent, and declares that his people will come home, that the cities and towns and villages and farms of the land of Israel will be rebuilt and will once again prosper.

Through Jeremiah, to those people in exile, came a promise of a new covenant, one not like the previous covenant, the one given to and through Moses during the journey out of Egypt. What was to be different about this new covenant, what was to be unlike the old? Well, that old covenant, centered

on the Ten Commandments, was a covenant of rules, of laws, of prescriptions of “do’s” and proscriptions of “don’ts” fleshed out in volumes of rites and observances. Filled with blessings and curses that previous covenant was a dangerous minefield for the faithful, with almost countless ways to fail in perfect obedience. It is no wonder that even God commented that the previous covenant was one “that they broke.”

That this covenant was initiated by God was nothing new – all the previous covenants were as well. That the people would know God intimately was also nothing new. Even that God would forgive sins was a feature of previous covenants declared by God. But now instead of focusing on past failures here is the promise of a future filled with hope in a new and different definition of the relationship between God and His people, with the law written not on cold tablets of stone but written on the heart. The newness is a special gift, the capacity to be faithful and obedient. In the Old Testament the heart is the seat of the will, the determination, the driving force of life. Here, the gift of the law written on the heart implies the will to be faithful now comes from within instead of being imposed from outside forces. God is promising to change people from the inside out, centering them in their faith.

Of course, we who are New Testament people cannot read the Old Testament except through the filters of our own faith, and we proclaim that this promise of the new covenant was fulfilled in Christ Jesus, that through Jesus the words of God’s new law are written on our hearts. Those words of love, faith and loving faith are indelibly inscribed upon our hearts as promised: “I am yours, and you are mine,” says the Lord. In a new covenant established in the death and resurrection of Jesus we are claimed for all time in a relationship that nothing can destroy or wither.

And so the answer to the question “where is God in all of this?” comes clearer – God is with us, with Christ in our hearts and the Holy Spirit energizing our very being. The question then shifts perhaps to “where are we in all of this?” and the answer is also clear: we are not adrift, we are not abandoned, we are neither ignored by God nor rejected by God. We are safe in the arms of Jesus, whatever the world will throw at us. Life will continue to offer both challenges and bonanzas, but through it all will ring clearly this message of hope from God, offered through his prophets and sealed in the blood of Christ: “I am yours, and you are mine.”