



Date: November 8, 2015

Title: "Hope When There Is No Hope"

Scripture: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Description: How do we continue to hope in situations we have no ability to affect?

These words you are about to hear from scripture are beautiful words, so packed with beauty that they also are loaded with power. Listen hard and listen quick, for there are only eighty-five of them and they may be gone before you get into gear.

Jeremiah 33: 14-16: ¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

"House of Israel" "House of Judah", Branch of David—these are ancient history words, how can they be beautiful or powerful for us? "Israel", "Judah", "King David", the terms that make them ancient are the very things that make them real. These are not Hallmark words of pretty fluff; these aren't background music to a dinner at the Disney World castle. This promise intends to be real and it intends to be taken seriously.

Jeremiah wrote these promises originally to people who were counterparts to today's Syrian refugees. Their entire society had collapsed. They were an occupied country and the violence would not cease. First the government buildings were destroyed, so there was no protection there. Then the churches were demolished, so there was no comfort there. Then the occupied forces went door to door, and this was the part that was worse than they had anticipated.

Earlier, Jeremiah had given voice to what we all feel when things go terribly wrong. "You deserved it. This is what happens when you turn your back on God." But it got so bad, even God wailed in pain. Jeremiah gave voice to that also.

Despair is not limited to ancient history. If you've never felt despair, give the world time; you will. Despair is more than pain. Despair is pain without purpose, without hope that the pain will end.

In the teeth of despair, Jeremiah wrote these words and claimed they were God's words. How would they sound today? Who would hear them?

Her first-born little baby suddenly is eleven years old, full of hormones, of confusion about what's happening to her body and to her mind. This once-sweet child is a rattlesnake of emotions and especially filled with venom towards Mom. Tough love, empathetic listening, gentle guidance, adolescent counseling—Mom has tried everything and it only gets worse. She would do anything to get control of this young life. Better yet, send her to her dad's to live. But neither is going to happen.

The words are spoken with confidence and certainty:

[Jody] ¹⁴Look! The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to you ¹⁵ When the time is right, I will cause a righteous Branch to sprout from your family. She will do what is right and just in the land. ¹⁶In those days, she will be free and so will you. She will live in safety, and you will live in peace."

He sits behind the wheel of the car on the fourth level of the parking deck that serves the hospital and the physicians' center. He has the keys in his hand, but he doesn't put them in the ignition. On his lap is a pamphlet the Physician's Assistant gave him after the doctor left the room. "A.L.S" in big letters blocks everything else out. He doesn't yet know that ALS stands for "amyotrophic lateral sclerosis" and he doesn't care about Lou Gehrig. He simply knows that it will get worse. And after that, it will get worse. And when it becomes unbearable, it will then get worse.

How long does he have left? And what will it be like during that "how long"?

God whispers to him softly, for a whisper is all he can hear right now:

[Andy] "Look, the days are coming when I will fulfil the promise I made to you....You will live in safety and you will live in peace."

I told you they were beautiful words. Beautiful and powerful as well. But are they helpful? Are they true? How do you put such beautiful, powerful promises into practice?

The only way to hope is to give up hope. You can give up and leave, just check out and choose not to care; or you can give up and stay, hanging in there, caring with

all your heart. But you have to give up. You have to give up feeling responsible for other people's choices. You have to give up the responsibility for making things turn out right.

Don't give up hope that people will change or that things will change. Give up hope that you can change them. All that feeling hurt, angry, anxious, afraid, guilty, and stressed comes from feeling things are out of your control. All you can do is all you can do. After that, give up the illusion that you are in control of things, that you are responsible for how things work out.

You know the Serenity Prayer¹ adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, but you probably know only the first two verses. Let's read it together.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time.
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
The sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
if I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Give up hope that you will ever be able to make things turn out right. Give up the hope that things must turn out right, or else all will be lost. That kind of hope leads to despair. You don't need another success manual bringing you ten more tidy tips on how to get it right this time. You don't need another layer of "should" on your burdened soul.

There are a hundred voices saying, "If you only did more, did better," or "There's more you need to do." There is one voice that says, "All will be well." Listen carefully.

There is an alternate way. Give up hope, then place your hope in the promises of God. Let God lead you beside quiet waters and restore your soul. That kind of hope is

effortless and simple, but I prefer harder, more complicated strategies and efforts, because they carry the illusion of power. I love to be able to say, “I did this.” “I made this happen.” And they exert a heavy price.

Trying to stay on top of all the things I need to stay on top of is like being a stray dog at a whistler’s convention.² Just when my tongue is drooping with fatigue, the ads begin, reminding me that the holidays are coming.

There is an alternate way. Jeremiah didn’t offer ten tips, he simply gave voice to God’s promise. (Jody, then Andy, then Dave) *“Look, the days are coming when I will fulfil the promise I made to you....You will live in safety and you will live in peace.”* And there it lies, with no strategy, no plan, no explanation as to how it will work out. God’s promise never needs defending, never overcomes by force, never wins through competition, never works according to the way we wanted it to work, *and never fails to accomplish its purpose.*

We’re not expected to bring about God’s purpose through sheer force of will or creative talent. Instead, we wait, and hope, and keep our eyes open. Keep our eyes open, because God never does it in exactly the way we expect.

There was a time when God completely kept this lavish promise. It happened in a way so innocuous and so inconsequential that hardly anybody noticed. It was a little baby—who’d have thought? But that baby turned everything upside down, and still is turning everything upside down. In a way so good. In a way that filled hearts with thanksgiving and turned winter into Christmas.

Can you give up the hope that eats away at your joy and hang in there with your longing for what God will do? Try it this week with the most frustrating person in your life. Adopt the attitude that there is nothing about that person that needs to change. Picture that person held by an ocean of God’s love. Hold that picture as long as you wish. Next simply say, “amen.” Then pay careful attention to what happens.

1. Written by American theologian Reinhold Neibuhr (1892-1971).

2. This is the opening sentence in *The Art of Pastoring* by William C. Martin. It was published by CTS Press in 1994. Many of the thoughts that follow come from this wonderful book.