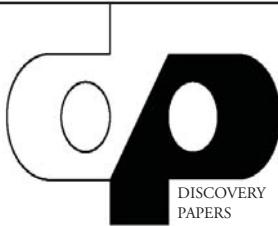


ISN'T HOPE JUST A SHAM?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 32:1-15
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The Astronaut Farmer is a movie about someone who did a really lunatic thing and what the people around him thought of it. It is inspirational because we like the idea of a guy who has a dream and is willing to do something crazy to make it happen. We like to watch someone who has hope and we desperately want his hope to come true. At the end of the movie trailer we see people looking into the sky and we're led to believe that this guy made it happen. And we want to believe that because we find hope inspiring. We love stories about hope.

But we're also really skeptical about hope. We love stories about hope because that's exactly what they are: stories. And we are particularly skeptical about hope in any religious sense. To many people in our world, spiritual hope is just a fairy tale. They don't buy it. They think hope is just something that religion comes up with to make it easier for people to believe. Hope just doesn't seem real to them. Today we're asking the question that a lot of people are asking, "Isn't hope just a sham?" Isn't hope, especially hope in some God who may not even exist, just a fairy tale? Don't you eventually grow up and realize there's nothing to it?

This is the eighth week of our series in Jeremiah. This is the last message in this part of the series, but we'll pick it up again later this year. As we've studied through Jeremiah, we've seen that he was tasked with preaching a message of destruction to the city of Jerusalem that he lived in. The place that he was ministering to was a place where there was no hope. And yet Jeremiah was there to proclaim destruction, but also to proclaim hope. The problem was that the hope he proclaimed didn't make sense to his world. There may have been hope, but in the face of the destruction that he preached, hope sounded silly.

So Jeremiah did something that was silly. Just like the astronaut farmer, he did something that nobody around him understood. He acted in a way that simply didn't make sense in the world that he lived in. But he did all this so that people could see that hope was real. He was trying to make the hope that he preached more real to the people around him. So God led him to a concrete way of expressing this hope.

This story is recorded in Jeremiah 32:1-15. As we look at this story, we'll see the background situation that frames this event. Then we'll see God speak into that situation and invite Jeremiah to do something that could only be described as lunatic. And then we'll see how this act proclaimed hope to his world. Finally, we'll ask the question of how we can follow in Jeremiah's example and proclaim hope to our world.

Our world is hopeless

Let's start by looking at the context that provides the background for Jeremiah's lunatic act of hope. We see this set up in the first 5 verses of our passage. Jeremiah 32:1-5:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. The army of the king of Babylon was then besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah. Now Zedekiah king of Judah had imprisoned him there, saying, "Why do you prophesy as you do? You say, 'This is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the king of Babylon, and he will capture it. Zedekiah king of Judah will not escape out of the hands of the Babylonians but will certainly be handed over to the king of Babylon, and will speak with him face to face and see him with his own eyes. He will take Zedekiah to Babylon, where he will remain until I deal with him,' declares the LORD. If you fight against the Babylonians, you will not succeed."

So this scene starts as many of the scenes in Jeremiah begin: with the word of the LORD. We are given the time frame when this particular word from the LORD came to Jeremiah. It was in the tenth year of Zedekiah. This turns out to be 587 B.C., the year before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. So right away we are warned that this event occurs just before the major catastrophe that most of the book of Jeremiah has been moving toward. It would be like me beginning a story by saying, "Our story begins with George Washington in the fall of 1775." This event is placed just before a really significant event.

The setting that is being described is one of terrible circumstances. In verse 2 we learn that the army of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem. This was a horrible military strategy. The basic goal is to restrict movement into and out of a city in an effort to make people desperate through starvation or lack of water. We learn about other examples of siege in different parts of the Bible and hear about terrible things like people eating their children due to starvation. A siege was a terrible thing. So this word of God comes to Jeremiah in the midst of a terrible national crisis and right before a cataclysmic event. When we began this series, we talked about how Jeremiah was a book about global crisis. Well, this event occurs right at the cusp of this global crisis.

But we also talked about how Jeremiah was a book about personal crisis. And the rest of this passage shows us that Jeremiah was in the midst of a crisis. He was “shut up in the court of the guard”, which basically meant that he was under house arrest in the guardhouse of the king’s palace. This wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened to Jeremiah, but it was a pretty bad situation. We learn that the reason behind Jeremiah’s imprisonment was that he had preached the word of God to Zedekiah, the king of Jerusalem. And Zed didn’t like the message that Jeremiah brought. That message was that Zed was doomed. Jeremiah told him that God was going to let Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon take over Jerusalem. So Neb was going to walk all over Zed.

I love verse 4 that describes the king of Judah being given into the hand of the king of Babylon and speaking to him face to face and eye to eye. You can be sure that is not a pleasant meeting. In fact what ended up happening, we learn in Jeremiah 52, is that Zedekiah did meet Nebuchadnezzar eye to eye, but not for long. Right after the king was taken, Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah’s eyes gouged out. But not before he was forced to watch all of his sons be executed.

This is essentially what we talked about last week. Jeremiah is undergoing personal suffering because of his faithfulness to God’s call on his life. God gave him a very unpopular message. Jeremiah delivered it. Now he is in prison. Jeremiah’s world is hopeless on a national level and a personal level.

If you look around at our world, you’ll see that we are running low on hope as well. This week saw the single largest declaration of corporate bankruptcy in the history of the world. Our state is facing the largest financial crisis in its history. Families all across America are suffering. And even if these things don’t affect us, each of us have some deep awareness that things in this world just aren’t right. We need hope. That’s why movies like *The Astronaut Farmer* appeal to us. Our world is no different than Jeremiah’s. Our world is hopeless.

But the problem is even more complicated than that. Because even though things are bad in our world, the surprising truth is that most people haven’t given up hope. We think that Obama is going to make things better, we think enlightened religious views will improve international tension, we think new structures of accountability will prevent our economy from crashing again. So people have hope, the question is whether they have hope in the right things.

Even though our text portrays the situation in Jerusalem as pretty hopeless, what we realize when we read it carefully is that the problem was that King Zedekiah had hope. He had hope that he would be able to defeat Babylon. He had hope that Israel would come out of all this intact. Jeremiah was preaching against his hope, telling him “if you fight against the Chaldeans (that’s another word for Babylonians; by the way, I learned that from VeggieTales, not seminary) you will not succeed.” So the problem that

Jeremiah sees is the same one in our culture. People have hope in the wrong things.

G.K. Chesterton, a Christian writer from the turn of the 20th century, once said, “As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable.”

That is the situation that we find ourselves in today. Our world actually seems still hopeful. In the face of everything that has happened, we still have faith in the same old things that people had faith in when we got into all these messes.

So even before we see what Jeremiah did, what his crazy act of hope was, we can learn something significant. Our world is hopeless. But most people don’t see it.

The question that we have to ask of ourselves is whether we see that hopelessness. Do we really feel hopeless apart from God? Does our world? For me, I started to get really interested in hope when my life started getting really tough. I started thinking about what it meant that God was preparing a new creation when my Rachel and I went through some struggles in our marriage that just about made me lose hope for this world. Do we really have a sense of our hopelessness? Or are we just hoping in other things?

I’m afraid I have to make a confession. I’m a huge fan of gadgets. About six months ago, a company named Palm announced a new cell phone that was supposed to be really cool. And for the last six months, I’ve been waiting for this phone to come out. I’ve been checking websites about what its going to be like and trying to find rumors of when it was supposed to come out. And it just got released yesterday. I was one of the first people in line and now I finally have what I’ve been hoping for these past six months.

But I had to give God credit for the irony that I get my new phone the day before I’m preaching on hoping in the right things. I find it so easy to have hope in things that are here. Things that are coming soon. Things that we can understand and that will fix our lives here and now. But our world is hopeless. Jeremiah wants the king to see the hopelessness and to know that “if you fight against the Chaldeans, you will not succeed.” If you put your hope in a military victory, or a new political regime, or a new romantic relationship, or a new job, or a new phone, you will not succeed. These things will not ultimately fulfill our hope.

I’ve had Psalm 39:7 written in my office these last few months to help me remember what I’m really waiting for. That verse reads, “Now, Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.”

God speaks into our hopeless world

So our world is hopeless, but we know that God has something to say about that hopelessness. AS we keep

reading, we see God give Jeremiah a message to address this hopelessness. But what God has to say isn't just a message of words. This message is spoken through actions. In verses 6-8, we find out how God wants to communicate His hope to Jerusalem:

Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.' " Then, just as the LORD had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, 'Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. Since it is your right to redeem it and possess it, buy it for yourself.' " I knew that this was the word of the LORD;

God tells Jeremiah that his cousin, Hanamel, is going to approach him and ask him to buy his field which is located at Anathoth. This Jeremiah's hometown: Anathoth. In their culture, this is kind of like declaring bankruptcy. When you were about to go into poverty, you sold your property to the nearest relative as a way of staying afloat.

So God predicts that Jeremiah's cousin will approach him and ask him to buy his field. Right away this is a pretty absurd situation. The city of Jerusalem is under siege. People are starving. The enemy armies are camped all around the city. Everyone in the city is in the midst of a financial crisis. The whole country was in a mess. So for Hanamel to come to Jerusalem to ask for help to keep him out of poverty is ridiculous. Everyone was in a mess. Hanamel's situation was no different than anyone else. And not only that, but the field he is selling is currently covered by Babylonian soldiers. It's not worth anything. This is a ridiculous offer. But God says that he is going to approach Jeremiah and ask for help. So in the midst of the hopelessness of Jerusalem, God intervenes. God speaks into our hopeless world.

Then in the next verse, we learn that this is exactly what happened. Just as Jeremiah predicted, Hanamel came to Jeremiah and asked him to purchase his field because he had the right of redemption. And this is the test for a real prophet of God. Deuteronomy 18 explains a simple rule for determining whether a prophet is really from God. If what he prophesies comes true, he's authentic. If it doesn't come true, he's a false prophet. So this little announcement of God followed by the event coming true highlights that Jeremiah is a real prophet from God.

And what we have here is God instructing Jeremiah to *do* something. Most of the time, God tells His prophets to *say* something. But here, God gives Jeremiah something to do. And as it turns out, this action is symbolic. God wants to *say* something to His people through what His prophet *does*.

This is fairly common for prophets in the Old Testament. God asks Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman (Hos 1:2-3) to symbolize God's marriage to unfaithful Israel; God asks Ezekiel to pack up his belongings as if he

is going into exile (Eze 12:1-4), God asks Isaiah to walk around in his underwear and barefoot for three years to symbolize what the king of Assyria will do to Egypt (Isa 20:1-3), Jesus causes a fig tree to wither to demonstrate the unfruitfulness of Israel (Mark 11:13-20). These types of symbolic acts are common throughout Scripture. Sometimes God doesn't just tell us something, he asks people to do something so that people really get the message. That's how God chooses to speak into this hopeless world.

We proclaim a crazy hope

Our world is hopeless. God speaks into our hopeless world. And Jeremiah does what God asks him to do. As we continue in our passage, we see how the purchasing of this field plays out and most importantly we get to find out what it means. We find out what God was trying to say by asking Jeremiah to do this. Verses 9-15:

So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales. I took the deed of purchase-- the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions, as well as the unsealed copy-- and I gave this deed to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and of the witnesses who had signed the deed and of all the Jews sitting in the courtyard of the guard. "In their presence I gave Baruch these instructions: 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.'

In these last verses, Jeremiah follows through on the plan that God has set before him. He does something that can only be described as lunatic. He buys a field that is currently being used as a camping spot for the enemy armies that are about to destroy Jerusalem. This is crazy.

And Jeremiah wants people to see it. The way this text is written is an example of Hebrew slow motion. When you're watching a film and something really important happens, the speed of the filming slows down and you watch the action happening in slow motion. Well, you can't do that when you're reading. So one of the ways that Hebrew authors demonstrated that a particular action was really significant was by slowing down the pace of the action and describing every last detail of what was happening. So you have Jeremiah weighing out each shekel of silver. You have him signing and sealing the deed. You have him taking both copies of the document. This event plays out detail by detail. He takes the cap off the pen, he puts the pen to the paper, he starts to sign his name. We see everything. And that's because this is a significant act - this purchase means something.

But what did it mean? What was the point of all of it? The point is that God is going to restore Israel. Jeremiah talked a lot about how the Babylonians would conquer Jerusalem. But he had to remind people that God wasn't destroying Israel, He was remaking her. That hope seemed distant and far off from them. So God has Jeremiah do something that made it real to them.

God gives Jeremiah a symbolic act, just like Hosea and Ezekiel, and Jesus, in order that people might see hope as real. As it turns out, hope is one of the central things involved in following this. Hebrews 11 defines our faith as being sure of what we hope for (Hebrews 11:1). Paul says that what the gospel does is to tell us about the hope of what God is doing (Col 1:5). Peter talks about setting our hope on what will happen when Jesus returns (1 Peter 1:13). And what Jeremiah shows us is that God speaks into the hopelessness of our world, but He does so through us. He asks us to do crazy things to make hope real. We proclaim a crazy hope.

But these symbolic acts that God asks us to perform aren't just symbolic. It's not as if God asked Hosea to *pretend* to marry an unfaithful woman and asked Jeremiah to *act like* he was going to buy a field that the enemy was camping on. These prophets actually did something. They took an action. It wasn't just an illustration, it wasn't just an example. It actually happened, and it actually affected their lives. These symbolic acts are real and costly. They cost the people that follow through with them. Jeremiah was out 17 shekels of silver after purchasing this field. Hosea was married to a prostitute for the rest of his life. Isaiah lost three years of his life walking around in his underwear. These symbolic acts of hope are costly. They are real things that people do and they have a real cost.

And because these acts are costly, they don't make sense to most people. It is lunatic. Unless God turns out to be right. Eugene Peterson says, "All acts of hope expose themselves to ridicule because they seem impractical, failing to conform to visible reality."

A symbolic act of hope makes no sense unless the hope that it is based on turns out to be true. This week saw the bankruptcy of General Motors, arguably one of the most American company of all time. And our federal government entered into a previously unheard of deal, agreeing to take over ownership of over half of the company in order to help them succeed. Now, whether or not you think that was the right thing to do, you have to understand what this means.

This is a symbolic act. For our government to allow General Motors to crumble would signify the death of part of our economy that isn't acceptable. So the government invests itself in this company as a way of saying that cars and trucks will again be manufactured in this land. This is a symbolic act, declaring hope for our country. And it costs something. In fact it costs about 50 billion dollars. And if things turn out badly, if GM ends up not coming out of this and our government shares in its downfall, then people are going to be pretty upset. That

act makes no sense unless our government's hope turns out to be true. Unfortunately, they don't have a word from God like Jeremiah does.

That's why we are doing this thing today called Barefoot Sunday. This is an opportunity to demonstrate symbolically God's concern for people in poverty throughout the world. This is a symbolic act - walking out of this room without shoes symbolizes our compassion for and connection with people around the world without shoes. But it is also an act that costs us something. We are out a pair of shoes because of this. This is the type of thing that Jeremiah does.

And so the question comes to us, how do we proclaim a crazy hope to our world? What does it look like for us to do something that turns out to be crazy if God's work in our world turns out to be just a sham? Our world thinks that hope in God is a sham. Just like the Israelites had a hard time seeing the restoration that God promised through Jeremiah, people in our world don't have a picture of God that includes Him working to restore things to their proper order in our world. That's who God is. That's what He is doing in the world. He is working to right injustice, to end poverty, to squelch oppression, to ensure equality. He's just addressing the problem at the root, he's dealing with our hearts and He's doing it in a way that when all things are made new, the new heavens and the new earth will operate in the way that they should. All will be well on the new earth.

But that's not how people perceive God. The hope he offers doesn't seem real to most people. This passage challenges us to listen to God and see if He might be asking us to do something to make that hope real. Are there lunatic things that we might participate in that demonstrate that hope? Taking off your shoes today and leaving this room barefoot is a start. But what else?

I don't know the answer to this question. My prayer is that we would seek God and be asking what He is asking us to do. For some of you, maybe it is something huge: a major change in your life. But for most of us, it is probably a lot of little things. Maybe it is going on a short-term trip when you hate travelling. Maybe it is being generous with your money in a way that only makes sense if God is real.

One of the things that is applicable to those of us with young children is how we decide to live as a family in this area of pressure driven achievement and success orientation. How you raise your kids tells people a lot about where your hope is placed. In this culture, people's hope is in education, accomplishment, and success. Kids need to be in the best preschools, maximize their educational opportunities, make sure they have six exceptional skills by the time they enter junior high.

But if we're living with the kingdom of God as our reality, our hope is in a relationship with God. And a relationship with God involves learning to love Him and love other people. So it might be a lunatic act of hope for

you to prioritize your family relationships over the achievement of your children. One way we can demonstrate where our hope is placed is by prioritizing relationship over accomplishment for our kids, prioritizing relationships over accomplishment. Maybe it's more important for kids to play together, to learn to share, to resolve conflict with their siblings, and to be connected to their parents than it is to achieve and succeed. After all, relationships are eternal, accomplishments are temporal.

We try to live this way as a family, but just like Jeremiah's act, it can sometimes be costly. On Saturday mornings, I often drive by the school field near our house and see a bunch of kids and families gathered there playing competitive sports. And part of me feels like I'm missing out because we haven't enrolled our kids in all that stuff. It costs us not to keep up with everyone. But prioritizing family relationships is an act that demonstrates where our hope is in sharp contrast to the way our culture operates.

So what about you? Is God calling you to anything? Is He asking you to do something to demonstrate your hope? Is there a big decision or change in direction that God has been asking you to consider? Or maybe for you it's more of a lifestyle issue: lots of little decisions about how the way you live your life communicates what you hope in. What field do you need to buy? What lunatic thing is God asking you to do to demonstrate hope to our hopeless world?

Conclusion

My challenge for us is to look at our lives to find out our hope. People can tell what we hope for by how we live our lives. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are proclaiming our hope with acts that have symbolic meaning every day.

Everyone knew what the Astronaut Farmer was hoping in. He wanted to go into space. And he was willing to do something crazy and stupid that was symbolic of his hope. But it was more than symbolic. It was real. And if he made it into space, it would be clear that this act wasn't crazy and stupid, it was heroic and brilliant.

What does that look like for us? What lunatic things is God calling us to do to demonstrate our hope? For us, it may require that we take an honest look at what we are hoping in first. It could be that we are right alongside our world and we have hope in the same things that they have hope in. I need to ask God to help me change my focus from the newest and coolest gadget to the newest and most significant way that He is inviting me to love Him and love others.

And then we need to demonstrate that hope to our world. It won't make sense to anyone. It will look stupid.

It will cost us. It might hurt. We might feel like we are stupid. We may even feel stupid in this community. Just because God is calling us to something doesn't mean that other people who know God will necessarily recognize that. But as we live our lives based on hope for what God is doing in the world, we will proclaim God's work to our world. And that will give Him the opportunity to work through our lives to make that hope real. Jeremiah looked like a fool, but this book recorded this purchase. And when God's people came back to the land, you can be sure that one of Jeremiah's relatives knew that this field in Anathoth belonged to him. Our symbolic acts of hope may cost us now, but they will pay off. God will not let us down. He is redeeming our world. Let's live like that's true.