

“Seeing and believing—through the darkness”

September 26, 2010

Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15, 2 Corinthians 4:1-3, 6-10, 13-15

I.

In my six-plus decades on this planet, I can't remember a time when we've been more divided and polarized as a nation. For sure, the economic hard times underlie much of the frustration and anger that people are feeling. People are anxious and fearful about the future.

In many ways, it's pretty straight forward. People need jobs so they can pay their bills, meet their financial responsibilities, and have a sense of hope about the future. And, again, the ongoing hiccups and failures of the economy make everything more prickly.

There is a long list of things that feed this frenetic cloud of fear and uncertainty:

1. For some, it is fear related to immigration ... taxes ... Islam ... health care ... and what they call big government.
2. For others, it is concerns about education ... finding our way out of Afghanistan ... more regulatory oversight of pretty much everything ... expanding health care reform ... and a more just tax system for the wealthy and middle class.

And so, we rant and rave and there's finger-pointing everywhere. And of course, talk radio and the media have a field day off it all.

What's interesting about all of this is that if the economy were to suddenly turn around, most of these issues would soon fade and—overnight—take on a much lower profile.

However, because of high unemployment and the jobs situation, people's fear, as we've seen, transmutes into anger.

- In bizarre, highly publicized rallies at the Lincoln Memorial, which we saw a short time back.
- And in the rise of the Tea Party movement which made the cover of this week's TIME Magazine.

Part of what this is all about is that people don't know what to do or where to turn. It's as if we're mired in a cloud of darkness. And as first-hand participants in the long night that is upon us, we wonder: from where will the light come and when? As people of faith, what are we to do? What are we to believe in? And where is God in all of this?

II.

During the historical period of the prophet, **Jeremiah** (late 7th century/early 6th century, Before the Common Era), many Israelites wondered the same thing.

At the time of our reading this morning, from **Jeremiah 32**, Israel is under siege and Jeremiah has already announced that, because of her disobedience, Jerusalem will fall to Babylon and that King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem will be deported. As you would imagine, this sort of foretelling made Jeremiah anything but popular. People—especially kings—don't like bad news.

All of Jeremiah's predictions, of course, eventually come true. That's what makes his purchase of a field, described in **Jeremiah 32**, so peculiar and unusual. During a time of war, why would anyone buy a plot of the very land that is in the process of being conquered?

And not only that, but **Jeremiah** is also in prison at the time for telling the people to lay down their arms in the face of the siege, an action considered to be treasonous.

It should be noted, in all of this, that Jeremiah's bold act of faith comes on the shoulders of the new covenant he has already announced in chapter 31:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the House of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people (31:33).

This covenant signals a remarkable breakthrough in Israel's awareness. Clearly, the oracle that Jeremiah announces is related to the Exile; because now, in exile, everything has changed. The vast majority of Israelites have been deported—marched off to Babylon. They are scattered about. There is no unifying element for the people.

Here's the situation, therefore—CHECK IT OUT: In this foreign land, how can Israel maintain her identity as a Jewish state? In exile, Israel needs a new declaration about her future—a declaration no longer bound by geography but, rather, by a covenant of the heart.

And I will write my covenant on their hearts, says the Lord.

Jeremiah has been an insider on this new arrangement. And it's in this context that he risks buying his cousin's field.

III.

In purchasing the field, **Jeremiah** demonstrates an unambiguous faith in *the future*—and faith, too, in *God's future* with Israel. Judgment and Exile cannot ultimately trump the

covenant—God’s binding relationship with Israel. Again, check it out:

Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Imagine the power this event must have held for Jeremiah’s contemporaries; for those who had already been deported off to Babylon ... for those living in fear of probable deportation.

Seeing and believing—through the darkness. *Seeing and believing* that God cares ... and that the future is still open ... and that the present, no matter how dark and discouraging at the moment, cannot hold back the dawn.

For Israel in exile, just as with us in an economic recession, it’s a time of great upheaval and uncertainty.

1. Would Israel in exile one day get her life back?
2. Would the years of immense personal and national loss give way again to a period of promise and prosperity?
3. Would Israel’s faith in God find a redemption that heals and a renewal that builds up hope once again?

IV.

For us, today, though our historical context is different, still our concerns bear much in common. With the resounding blows of the economic downturn, with all the foreclosures, loss of jobs, and with the sweeping lack of trust in the sustainability of the market place,

1. will we—millions of people across America—will we get our lives back?
2. Will our fundamental confidence in ourselves and in our government and economic system be restored?
3. As with the people of Israel, will we, too—once again—be able ***to buy houses and fields and vineyards in this land?***

Will we be able to ***see and believe, through the darkness,*** to the light on the other side ... trusting that the night—however long—will soon give way to the dawn?

What **Jeremiah’s** faith shows us, friends, is that, even in the midst of unspeakable catastrophe, God’s hand is upon us.

And it shows us, as well, that there is no darkness God’s light cannot penetrate, there is no despair God’s hope cannot transcend, and there is no discouragement God’s promises cannot turn into better days.

V.

In the days of the Apostle Paul, the early church knew troubled times—times of darkness and discouragement. How could it have been any other way? Think about it!

To begin with, they were a radical minority. Also, there was no manual on *new church starts*. What sustained them was faith ... faith in what they believed and in what they experienced ... in what Paul called, the light of the knowledge of *the glory of God* in the face of Jesus Christ.

As Paul said to the Corinthians, ***Let light shine out of darkness.*** And it does, friends. **Seeing and believing, through the darkness.**

Through the many dark periods of our history, through wars and economic depressions, and through the awful darkness of 9/11, unfailingly, the light of God's purposes has seen us through.

This light, from the heart of God, knows no darkness that it cannot overcome. And thus it is that we—like the Corinthians ...

...are afflicted in every way, but not crushed ... perplexed, but not driven to despair ... persecuted, but not forsaken ... struck down, but not destroyed.

And so, in these days of our lives, the word from the Lord is: no matter what darkness comes our way, through the economy or whatever; no matter how much fear and anxiety have risen up around us; no matter the extent of our failures and set backs. No matter anything about us ...

Houses and fields and vineyards will once again be bought in this land.

What a powerful message of faith.

And so, friends: we are called to believe in God's future, which is our future as well. For God has come to us in Christ; and love is more powerful than death. And always, the light shines on and there is no darkness that can put it out.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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