

Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-13

May 11, 2008

Theme: God reveals and fulfills His vision among those who seek Him with all their hearts and seek the wholeness of the world around us.

Title: *A Hope and a Future*

Before reading: some background / exile / uncertainty / difficulty
 maybe how some of you feel today
 you could allow God's words through Jeremiah to create a hope
 and future in you today

READ Jeremiah 29:1, 4-13

Some of you will remember when our seven-year-old son, Luke, read the Scripture here in worship back in January.

We were just coming to our table for lunch last week with Bob Russell, our guest preacher, when Luke asked, "Rev. Russell, could I sit with you?"

"Sure, Luke," he said. And as they took their seats, Bob struck up a conversation.

"So, Luke, what do you think you want to be when you grow up?"

"A senior pastor," he said. "I've already preached once."

The human heart is made for vision, for thinking big and looking out far.

Jesus was all the time appealing to people on this basis, stirring up a hope for the future, a vision of what could happen in God's plan, a picture of the kingdom of God like in the parables of Matthew 13, one of which Bob Russell drew from last Sunday.

"The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field..." (Matthew 13:44) "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed"—verse 31. "The kingdom of God is like yeast"—verse 33. Or in Luke 17: "The kingdom of God is within you."

We have always found our motivation to serve Christ, our determination to stick together in His love, our hope for the increase of God's will and way in the world—we've always found our priorities and perseverance in vision: in a future the way God would want it to be.

This kind of seeing with God's eyes was what Peter declared now to be possible as the Holy Spirit was poured out on all people there gathered to celebrate Pentecost.

He stood up to quote the prophet Joel, there at the top of your sermon notes: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams." (Acts 2:17)

You look around here. You name it. Every advance in the history of our church, every step forward in the fulfillment of our mission has at one point been nothing more than some person's restlessness, some woman's dream, some man's idea, some student's hope, some individual's passionate desire to seek God and to seek the blessing and wholeness of the people around us. That has always been Centenary's heart.

I love this quote in your sermon notes from Clayton Cox, who wrote a brief history at the

100th anniversary of Centenary in 1966: “We feel that a part of Centenary’s greatness comes from the fact that she is a young church, and has the stability of a mature church. As we look back across the century which is behind us, we believe that Centenary has stood as a fitting memorial to Methodism’s first century in America. However, we do not believe her best years are behind her, for **we dare believe that the best is yet to be.**”

And today is proof that Mr. Cox was right. And today is also a commitment to make sure Centenary’s best days are still yet to be.

This is a day of great vision for us, of bold hope in God’s future: the stuff that sets our priorities and keeps us going, keeps us living.

Proverbs 29:18 [KJV] says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Or someone has said that where there is no vision, the people will find another parish!

The Hebrews must have felt that they were at the brink of that kind of risk, having been carried off into captivity in Babylon as the consequence of their sin, taken away from the land of God’s promise, searching now to know what to hope for, what would be God’s future for them.

And through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord spoke: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Earlier, Jeremiah had warned people against prophets who spread deceptive dreams and false hopes. Chapter 23, verse 16: “They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.”

There is vision that comes from human imagination, from personal ambition, telling people what they want to hear. God doesn’t honor that.

But there is a hope of who we can become and what we can do that God gives and fulfills, a future in God that we discover and that He then makes real among those who seek Him for His own sake.

For the rest of my life, I will always remember that turning point when the team charged with responsibility for developing a strategic plan to support our long-term vision as a church hit a wall and stopped their work and began meeting simply to pray, and then began fasting weekly, and then began studying the Bible together. And they identified prayer partners who started praying specifically. And that’s all they did for months, simply seeking God, for His own sake.

Not seeking plans. Seeking the Planner. The Bible says God “rewards those who earnestly see him.” (Hebrews 11:6) “Seek and you will find,” Jesus promised. (Matthew 7:7) “Seek first God’s Kingdom and His righteousness.” (Matthew 6:33)

We can give ourselves sacrificially today to a vision of increased outreach and ministry on The Land because we gave ourselves away completely, early in the process.

We gave up fear of what we could handle. We gave up questions of how it could all be done. We gave up anything that could compete with seeking God with all our hearts.

Today is only one more chapter in a completely improbable story that God began writing when we abandoned all agenda and simply began seeking Him.

So as we come to the altar today, let's pledge this to each other again: we will always be a church that seeks God with all our heart. We will be people who seek God, not just up the limits of what seems doable or acceptable or normal or affordable or sensible or comparable with others.

Let's promise to one another we will not rest until the character and purpose of God are fully expressed in our lives and in our church, whatever the cost: becoming a body of people whose activity and attitude resemble Jesus to a watching world.

Which is the other part of this vision God gives to His people: for the world.

Seek God. And seek the wholeness of the world around you.

The Hebrews were exiled in a strange place as Jeremiah spoke to them, and yet God's word of hope allowed no room for hostility or separation. It wasn't, "Close ranks. Don't get involved with these people. Don't invest. You're not going to be here long."

No, God said, "Dig in. Get connected with your neighborhood. Support the community. Build relationships, and think long-term about them."

In Jeremiah's words, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you will prosper, too." (Jeremiah 29:7)

The word here for "peace and prosperity" each time is *shalom*: wholeness.

Look around, God says, and roll up your sleeves. Seek the wholeness of the world around you.

When I look around, I see a city of more than a quarter million people, over a third of whom are 24 and younger, growing in a direction where there is need of a witness to Jesus Christ.

From Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, 7½ miles out Richmond Road to I-75, there is no church. Out every other major artery, there are churches. But not this one, where great growth is coming and need already exists.

I believe God wants a presence there for the future. He has wanted to bring some land into His possession for that. He looked around and found some people seeking Him and said, "These are the ones I can use to get that done."

When I look around, I see so few churches where people are meeting Jesus and discovering life in a relationship with Him.

The Herald-Leader carried an article back in March citing a study from the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life showing that in all the churning in religion in American, the segment growing the most is those who dropping out all together.

The category of "no religious affiliation" is growing three times faster than those who are coming to faith.

All of which makes me fall to my knees in gratitude for being here at a time when God is blessing us with a confirmation Sunday like we had, a youth skit like we saw.

God is blessing us with adults becoming Christians for the first time, or being brought back to a vital relationship with God, many in their twenties, the hardest group to reach.

God has something going here that needs to be multiplied. It needs to be increased and exported and duplicated and shared in a second location.

When I look around, I see an opportunity God has provided for us to put our mission statement into action like never before: reaching into the world.

The Land is our chance to get it out there, to take it to the streets, to be the “light of the world,” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, letting our “good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise [our] heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:14-16 [NLT])

When a church prays and seeks God and builds teams and takes risks and buys land to increase ministry, there really is nothing else on this planet that could be more important.

You and I know this isn't about us. This is about the glory of God and the redemption of His world, seeking the wholeness of the world around us, the saving of human souls, which is the real business of life.

The economy can provide needed jobs. Educators can teach useful knowledge. Psychology can improve self-understanding. And all of this is good. But only Jesus Christ can transform the human soul.

When I look around I see souls, people who need the grace of Jesus Christ that conquers sin and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and repairs broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life a time. That's what this day is about.

Yesterday, we baptized one of those changed lives, a young man named Sammy. You'll hear Sammy's story sometime in the future.

Sammy's dad walked out on their family when he was nine. A few years later, Sammy's mom turned her back on him for a boyfriend. Sammy has been on his own since he was a teenager, eventually falling into doing drugs and selling drugs and getting into a crowd of people who took advantage of him.

Back in the winter, an old friend, Kegan Weatherford, a relatively new Christian in our church, got Sammy on his mind. God helped him remember his cell number. And when Kegan called, Sammy was ready to listen, which began conversations that led to Kegan introducing Sammy to Jesus.

I met Sammy at The 5:15 back in February, and he's not missed a Sunday night since. He's come through The Alpha Course, and now he's in a small group of other young guys giving each other support and accountability in a life of following Jesus. Everyone around him can see how deep and real his new faith in Christ is.

Sammy said he wanted to be baptized outside, like Jesus was. So about twenty of us met on a farm in Woodford County yesterday to worship God and be a part of Sammy's baptism in a creek on that farm.

I offered the vows, and Kegan did the dunking honors. Sammy had told him not to rush, to leave him under a second or two: he wanted to feel it. When he came up, he was beaming. He pushed off swimming in that cold water, swimming in his baptism as we stood on the banks and clapped.

Because we were witnessing a new Christian who had introduced his friend to Jesus who has become a Christian, a second generation: two young guys now new men in Christ: and the Kingdom was a little closer and the darkness a little weaker and all our faith was a little stronger.

We have so many stories around here that help us know with confidence that no one,

nothing is beyond God's hope and future.
We simply dare to believe that the best is yet to be. That's definitely true for Sammy today. And that can be true for you, too.
On this Pentecost Sunday when Christians were first filled with the Spirit, you may be feeling pretty empty. He wants to fill you with faith and new strength. Would you come to pray about that?
On this Mother's Day, your heart may ache over children you've wanted, a kind of love your mom never gave you, a mom you would give anything to see. God promises a hope and a future to you. Would you come and pray about that?
On this Commitment Sunday, we're seeking God and we're seeking the wholeness of the world around us. Would you come and pray about that?
This is one of those Sundays when I'd like to ask for the church to come and pray: for all of these things, for anything on your heart today. This is one of those days when we need to come to God as a family and open our hearts to Him in prayer.

And let me add just this closing word as we come with our commitment cards. Cards are provided in the bulletin today. You can see containers at the front where you can bring yours.

As you come, I'd like to invite you to think just this moment about a great example of commitment, of giving, in the Bible: the woman who broke a container of expensive perfume and poured it out over Jesus' feet. It was all she had, it was everything, given spontaneously.

Jesus received it and cherished it and honored her for it. He said it was a good thing and that she would be long remembered for it.

You may have come to this moment with gift in mind. Or some of you may still need more time to pray about your giving. But is there something you feel you ought to do today—just right now, given spontaneously?

When have you loved Jesus like that: on impulse, in the moment?

Some who have already pledged have called in this week to increase their commitment. I've been so inspired by some of the stories of sacrifice you've been telling me: some giving for the first time, some selling stocks you have in your name since you were a child, some doubling your early pledge?

Would you do that? You may need time to talk it over with your spouse. But could you do something bold, something spontaneous out of the overflow?

Would you give at the level of vision—just pushing out, just swimming out into the hope and future God wants for our church and that our world desperately needs?

If not now, when? If not this, what?

“You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you,” God said through Jeremiah. So that's what we want to do now.

So let's bow our hearts as we prepare to come.

Source:

Thomas, David R., *A Hope and A Future* (June 15, 1997) and *To Him Be Glory in the Church* (August 11, 2002).