

Building for Possibilities

4th Sunday in Lent – March 21, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Jeremiah 29:11-14

¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life

This week, we continue the series: Building the Kingdom. Last week, we saw what it truly means to be God's people and how to find our purpose in this. Today, we see how this purpose leads us to possibilities and to the "life that is really life."

"A future with hope"

At one time or another, many of us have felt trapped and cornered by life. We've run out of options; all doors seem closed. The darkest times of my own life have been like that. I remember feeling like I had no possibilities, that no good choices were open to me. Those were days of despair, not hope.

Surely, the first exiles from Jerusalem despaired as they confronted life in Babylon, more than a thousand miles from their homes, uprooted from the land God had given them. I'm sure they felt trapped and cornered, stripped of all possibilities for hope and renewal. But Jeremiah, still in Jerusalem, wrote a letter to the exiles, a letter filled with God's promises of hope and possibilities. This letter is found in the 29th chapter of Jeremiah.

In the opening portion of his letter, Jeremiah urges the exiles to accept their new life, at least for awhile. They are to build houses and plant gardens. They are to marry and raise their children. They are to seek peace and prosperity. They are even to pray for their oppressors (29:7). Jeremiah reminds them that God is with his people even in exile.

But the letter is not just about the present, it is also about the future. Even as the exiles endure their punishment (for

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was from a small town north of Jerusalem. He prophesied from about 627BC to beyond the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. His ministry began during the reign of King Josiah. After Josiah's death, his successors rebelled against Babylonia, to whom Judah was a vassal state. Jeremiah believed that Babylonia was God's instrument of judgment upon Judah. He was branded a traitor and imprisoned. Though a tribal priest himself, Jeremiah would preach hard words against the temple establishment. Centuries later, Jesus would invoke the words and actions of Jeremiah in his own confrontation with the temple priests.

During and after the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah brought words of comfort and hope to God's people, promising a day when Israel would be restored and God's covenant would not be written on tablets of stone but upon his people's hearts (Jeremiah 30-33). After the burning of Jerusalem, Jeremiah went into exile himself.

Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality among God's people during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God's call to stay faithful to God and his law and he brought them words of comfort about the "life-after-death" to come.

this is how they understood their exile¹), God offers them the promise of a “future with hope.” Though they live in exile, God has plans for them, plans for their welfare. God promises them possibilities that, surely, they could hardly imagine. God will gather them from all the lands and nations to which they have been driven. He will hear their prayers. He will renew and restore. He will again open up a world of possibilities for his people.

“Do good . . . be generous and ready to share”

What is possible in life? What does it mean to *really* live? Today’s passage from 1 Timothy is one that can make us uncomfortable. In the NT there are many such passages, passages about the dangers of wealth. Indeed, there are so many warnings that it is easy for us to misread them.

James D. G. Dunn is one of the most prominent NT scholars working today. In his commentary on 1 Timothy,² the section on 1 Tim 6 is titled, “Putting Wealth in Its Place.” It is clear from the NT writings that there were wealthy Christians in the early church. Indeed, early Christians met in the homes of the most affluent members of the churches. Paul never condemns the wealth of the affluent per se, but he does warn them: “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their

“Shedding Privilege, Getting to Work”

While I was writing this study, a bulletin board at church caught my eye. Tacked to the board were Dallas Morning News clippings about our youth’s mission trip to Nueva Laredo last summer. One of the headlines read “Shedding Privilege, Getting to Work.” It struck me as a headline that could have been ripped from the pages of 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy is a pastoral letter written to encourage early Christians and to point them toward the living out of the true faith as the community of God’s people. In this letter, Paul tightly integrates his theology and his ethics. In other words, what we proclaim, what we believe, and what we do are bound together.

The work that our church is able to do in Nueva Laredo is a direct and concrete expression of the love of neighbor to which God calls us. When someone joins our community of faith, we ask them if they will uphold it with their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service. This is how we build the kingdom, by looking more toward the welfare of others than to our own. Whether this means shedding some of our privileges or giving up some of our precious time or even diminishing our own financial security, Paul urges us to look outward . . . “to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share” (6:18)

eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6:10). Bear in mind that poor and rich alike can succumb to the “love of money.”

I understand that there are very few people in this world who consider themselves to be rich. But those who have been to Nueva Laredo or any place like it, know that many of us at St. Andrew are, to put it bluntly, rich. We know that Paul is speaking to us! As tempting as it might be for us to put our hope in our bank accounts and 401k’s, Paul urges us to put our hope in God, for it is God “who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (6:17).

We know, as does Paul, that the pursuit of wealth is filled with temptations and traps. We can lose sight of God and one another, forgetting that we are to pursue not money, but “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness” (6:11).

How do we avoid the traps that riches can breed? Our safeguard lies in doing good, in being rich in good works, in being generous and ready to share (v. 18). We do so by setting aside conceit, envy, dissension, and slander (6:4). We do so by combining godliness with contentment (6:6) as we “fight the good fight of faith” (6:12). We set our hope upon God (6:17), for in all this . . . in all the good work of God’s kingdom . . . we store up for ourselves the treasure of God’s kingdom, taking hold of the “life that is really life” (6:19), the life for which we were created.

¹Common to ancient cultures, including the Israelites, was the belief that the gods (or in Israel’s case, YHWH) directly caused everything that happened in life, good and bad. As they tried to make sense of Jerusalem’s destruction, the loss of the temple, and their own exile, God’s people were surely tempted to conclude that YHWH had been defeated, as it were, by the gods of the Babylonians. Instead, however, they concluded that YHWH, the one and only true god, was punishing them for their sins, for their disobedience under the covenant. For the Jews, the exile to Babylonia was tantamount to being thrown in prison.

²from Dunn’s commentary in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2000.

Daily Bible Readings

(passages about the accumulation and use of wealth)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Timothy 6:3-21 Dunn calls this entire passage, "Putting wealth in its place."</p>	<p>Day 2 James 5:1-5 James lashes out against exploitation by wealthy landowners who are probably not Christians.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 16:19-31 Jesus tells a story of a dramatic reversal. A rich man who is certainly <i>not</i> "ready to share" (1 Tim 6:18) finally must confront his lack of compassion.</p>	<p>Day 4 Haggai 1 Now that the Israelites are back on their land, living in "paneled houses," it is time that they rebuild God's temple.</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 4:1-14 Paul reflects on contentment in times of plenty and times of little.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins the week of March 28th

We've got a great schedule of classes! You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex.

Register on-line now -- go to www.standrewumc.org

"After *The Passion*: Bone Boxes and Resurrection"

Sunday, March 28th, 5:30 – 6:45 in Wesley Hall, with Scott Engle

What happened in the days immediately after Jesus' death on the cross? We'll learn about Jewish bone boxes and what they meant for the promise of resurrection. We'll gain a better sense of the shock and the power of the first Christians' claims that Jesus had been resurrected. Most importantly, we'll see what Jesus' resurrection means for our own!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Early in 1 Timothy, Paul writes "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for [immediate] family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (5:8). Let me get this straight: we are to place our trust in God, not in our bank accounts, yet we are to manage our money so that we can provide for those in our care and we are to be generous and ready to share all that we have. How do I sort through all this? What is God's will for us? Yet again, the Bible resists easy or simple answers to so many of our questions.

I do trust God. I do put my hope in God. But I'm also concerned that Patti and I do our best to provide for our own financial security and for those in our families who might need our help, like our Moms. How do we go about this? How do we know when we are really trusting in our 401k and not trusting in God? Patti and I try to be generous, even sacrificial, givers . . . but how far does God want us to go in this? Capital campaigns bring all these questions to the forefront, don't they? Of course, perhaps this really isn't an issue of financial security at all. Perhaps it is really a question of lifestyle. Perhaps I cling too tightly to some of the "stuff" and privileges that I enjoy.

Discuss how it is that we can begin to discern God's will for us in the use of our income and wealth. Share some stories with others about how you've made these decisions. Next week, we'll return to the subject of prayer. How can prayer help us to make good decisions about our giving?