

"THE GOD OF HOPE?"
December 2, 1990

TEXT: Jeremiah 32:15 "For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

When I chose this morning's scripture I was well aware that it was not very likely to be everyone's all-time favorite Bible passage. But it has something important to say, and, if you will help me, I think together we can uncover what it is. So this morning I am asking you to help me preach this sermon. You do not have to say anything; I will take care of that. But, as I use my imagination to enlarge upon the story I have just read, I would ask you to use yours to pretend you are really there. Close your eyes if that will help, but try to experience what I am about to say. If you are ready, here we go.

We are in old Jerusalem about 2600 years ago. We are in that section of the palace known as the Court of the Guard. Over there to your left, sitting against the south wall, is the famous prophet, Jeremiah. He has been arrested for treason because he said that Babylon would conquer Jerusalem and carry her people off in captivity. He shows no desire to run away, so he is not in chains. Apparently he has the run of the courtyard, and sometimes he has visitors or speaks to people as they come and go.

Today the courtyard is crowded with people --as it has been now for months. Outside the city walls are the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. They have been there for some time now, laying siege to the city. And, as the situation grows more desperate, people seem to come to the Court of Guard in greater and greater numbers. Perhaps because it is well protected. Perhaps it is to see what Jeremiah will do. Perhaps it is just because they do not know where else to go or what else to do.

Through the gate to your far right comes a man who is obviously in a hurry. He weaves his way through the crowd over to the south wall and, Jeremiah. By their greeting, it is obvious that they are well acquainted, perhaps even relatives. We draw closer to hear what they are saying.

The newcomer speaks first. "Cousin Jeremiah," he begins, "you know my farm near Anathoth. If you wish, I will sell it to you, for you are my kinsman and have right of first refusal. What do you say? You can have it for only . . . seventeen shekels of silver."

Everyone around us laughs and pokes his neighbor knowingly. Buy it, indeed. And for seventeen shekels of silver. What does he think Jeremiah is? A fool? Seventeen shekels of silver? Perhaps it was worth that once --before the Babylonians came. But it is certainly worthless now. Are not the Babylonians in Anathoth this very minute? And has not Jeremiah, himself, foretold that Judah will fall and her people be taken captive. Seventeen shekels indeed.

No doubt this cousin has been approached by some speculator who has offered to buy his land, and not for seventeen shekels either. Probably for just a shekel or, maybe, even less. But the law demands that he offer the land to Jeremiah first before he can sell it outside of the family. When Jeremiah refuses, he will no doubt rush back to his speculator and close the deal.

All eyes are focused on Jeremiah. What will he do? Will he laugh? Will he tell his cousin to get lost? Or will he just refuse politely? But wait! Jeremiah is calling to his friend, Baruch. And Baruch is bringing him an old chest. Opening the chest, Jeremiah takes out some money. He is actually buying that worthless piece of property. And paying full price for it, too.

A murmur runs through the crowd. Then, as Jeremiah begins to speak, the crowd becomes very still. In a loud voice, Jeremiah proclaims, "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be possessed in the land."

In the stillness, his voice seems to echo and reecho through the courtyard. A shiver rises up your back. Your eyes fill with tears. For even now, when everything looks so bleak, this prophet of God, both by his actions and by his words is saying, "Listen to me! There is hope!"

That is the story. Perhaps this dramatization has made it a little more real to you. Perhaps it has brought Jeremiah's message home in a little more meaningful way. For as we come here today, at the beginning of Advent, I would burn into your hearts, and your minds, and your lives the promise of Jeremiah. "Listen to me! There is hope!"

Like those ancient Jews, huddled together in Jerusalem, many of us, too, find ourselves surrounded and besieged. Not by actual soldiers, of course, but by situations and attitudes which tempt us to look at the future through the eyes of fear and uncertainty.

Perhaps there are some of us here this morning who fear they may not be able to get into the college of their choice. Perhaps there are those whose job situations are depressing. Perhaps there are those who have had bad news from their doctor or who do not know how to cope with growing old.

Perhaps there are couples here this morning who no longer seem to get along the way they used to. Or parents who do not know how to relate to their children the way they would like. Perhaps there are some who have reached middle age --or later-- and who are beginning to feel they may never reach their life's ambitions, who wonder if --somehow-- life has not already passed them by. I know there are some of us who watch the developments in the Persian Gulf with more and more concern.

You see, most of us --at one time or another-- find ourselves besieged and threatened by change and uncertainty. Like those people in Jeremiah's Jerusalem, we, too, need to hear God saying, "Listen to me! There is hope!"

To them God spoke through the symbol of a land transfer. To us, He speaks through the symbols of Christmas. When I see the lights of Christmas, in the stores and along the city streets, I am reminded of Oliver Goldsmith's words:

"Hope, like the gleaming taper's light
Adorns and cheers our way.
And still, as darker grows the night,
Emits a brighter way."
"Listen to me! There is hope!"

When I hear the songs and see the scenes of Christmas, I am reminded of that first Christmas when angels spoke of good tidings and a great joy which shall be to all people. I remember that they sang of Glory to God and on earth peace on earth, goodwill toward men. And I hear God saying, "There is hope!"

When I see the Christmas trees with their evergreen branches, I am reminded of Peter's benediction: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (I Peter 1:3) And when I go to the store to look for gifts for those I love, or when I open the gifts they give to me, I recall Saint Paul's words that "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." (Romans 6:23)

At this special time of year, the symbols of the season are all about us. We can look at them, as many do, seeing only tradition and beauty. Or we look through the eyes of faith and see in them the means through which God says to us, as He said through Jeremiah centuries ago, "Listen to me! There is hope!"

"Hope of the world, thou Christ of great compassion,
Speak to our fearful hearts by conflict rent.
Save us, Thy people, from consuming passion,
Who by our own false hope and aims are spent.

"Hope of the world, God's gift from highest heaven,
Bringing to hungry souls the bread of life,
Still let Thy Spirit unto us be given
To heal life's wounds and end her bitter strife."
AMEN.