

Practicing Hope

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Jeremiah 51: 52-64

In one of her sermons Fleming Rutledge tells about something that happened when she went to a screening of a documentary film. The film was about the White Rose movement in Nazi Germany. The White Rose movement was a group of devoutly Christian university students who resisted the Nazi regime. Out of their Christian faith, they secretly wrote pamphlets that spoke out against Hitler's government and they distributed them all over the country. The movie focused on one of the leaders of the movement, a young woman named Sophie Scholl. Ms. Scholl was captured by the Nazis in 1943 and, along with her brother Hans, she was put on trial and executed for her witness. The movie celebrated their resistance and their sacrifice. When the movie was over, people gathered for a discussion of the film. The discussion started off with positive comments. Audience members admired the students' courage. But then a man stood up and offered a very different perspective. He was angry. "What good did these students do!? They distributed a bunch of papers, they got caught, and then they died. Did they save one life!? Did their actions shorten the war one day!?" The man gave his opinion and then stalked out leaving the theater in stunned silence.

Did they do any good, those students with their pamphlets, with their words? The same question might fairly be asked of Jeremiah. In our passage Jeremiah writes his own pamphlet and makes his own protest against an evil regime. Only his protest isn't against the Nazis, it's against Babylon. Babylon is the nation who destroys the city of Jerusalem. The Babylonian armies come into the city and they kill women and children, they set homes on fire, they enter the temple of the Lord and burn it down, and then in the middle of the burning ruins, they shout the praises of their god Marduk. It's something God allows because of Judah's sin. You probably know that most of the book of Jeremiah consists of prophecies that warn Judah about her sin. But now, after all those warnings, Jeremiah turns his attention in a new direction. He has one final prophecy and it's not against Judah, it's against Babylon. In chapters 50-51 he proclaims God's judgement on this violent nation. For its sin, for its swaggering pride, for its brutality, for its cruelty, for its idolatry, Babylon will be utterly destroyed. We heard the end of Jeremiah's long prophecy at the beginning of our passage. God will pay back. He will bring justice.

Jeremiah writes this judgment on a scroll and he gives it to a priest named Seraiah. "*Take this scroll with you to Babylon, go to the banks of the Euphrates River, right in the middle of the city, right in the middle of the tall buildings. Then read the words of the scroll out loud and when you are done reading, tie a rock to the scroll and throw it into the Euphrates river.*" So that's what Seraiah does. He brings the scroll to the city and in the middle of all the great buildings of Babylon, he reads it, then he ties a stone to it, and throws it in the river. Down it goes. Glub glub glub. All the way to the bottom.

Such a strange thing to do. You can kind of see what Jeremiah's aiming at. It's a creative bit of protest, a symbolic act of resistance. But we could ask the same question that that man asked in the theater at the White Rose movie. "*What good did this do! Did this scroll at the bottom of the Euphrates save even one life!? Did this scroll at the bottom of the Euphrates make the exile one day shorter?!*" That's our question for today: Does Jeremiah's act bring any real hope? Or is it a brave, but pointless gesture?

It's an important question. In fact, we are asking a version of this question all the time. Every day we are called to go out into the world as agents of God's kingdom. We go out into the world and we encounter injustice, we encounter temptation and moral failure, we encounter despair. And most of us, in one way or another, try to stand up against that evil. Sometimes we do that with large initiatives that try to bring justice on a large scale, sometimes we do that with small, kitchen-table acts of kindness and forgiveness. And that's good. It's what we are called to do. We are called to be light in the darkness.

But sometimes, after we've done our little bit of work to bring God's kingdom, we wonder if what we're doing is actually making a difference, or whether we're just throwing scrolls into the bottom of the river and watching them sink. Glub glub glub.

You get involved in a mentoring program at church and you start working with a child from the local school. Pretty soon you find out that this child's life is really complicated. Her home life is a disaster, she already shows signs of emotional trauma, it looks like she might have learning disabilities too. But you show up every week to mentor and you try to connect and you try to show love, but it's hard to see if anything is happening. In fact, as the year goes on, her behavior seems to get a little worse instead of a little better and at the year's end you find out that she's been pulled out of the school and moved.

You wonder: Did I create any hope here? Or did all my work just sink to the bottom of the Euphrates river. Glub glub glub.

You come to church on Sunday morning. Before you left you watched the news. Big mistake. You feel the tension of the deep divides in our country and the deep angers that simmer beneath the surface. You get a sense of the huge problems that have to be fixed. Already stressed, you fight with your kids to get them in the car on time, and you and your wife end up snapping at each other, so the ride is tense and quiet. As you drive to church, you go right past the homeless people as a kind of testament to the overwhelming need right in your own town. More problems that seem beyond our ability to solve. And then you spend an hour in the service. The minister preaches a sermon that you just can't follow and you sing these songs one of which you've never heard before and the other is played way slow. And your kids are restless and unengaged. When you get home you wonder, we spend so much energy on those services!!!! Is any of this doing any good? Are we creating any hope here? Or are we just throwing scrolls into the bottom of the river and watching them sink.

So, what about it? Are these actions great examples of practicing hope or are they just wastes of time and energy? It all depends on where you think our help comes from. It all depends on where you think our hope comes from. If you think that it's up to us to convert all the heathen, and it's up to us to defeat all the evil powers, and it's up to us to fix all society's problems, then Jeremiah's scroll is just a waste of energy. Because it doesn't save any lives, it doesn't cause anyone to repent, and it doesn't shorten the exile even one day. But if we know the truth that Scripture proclaims, if we know that our hope and our help is in the name of the Lord the maker of heaven and earth, if we know that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us, then Jeremiah's hope is not worthless at all! Then Jeremiah's little act of resistance is of great value because it points to the power of God who will accomplish all his purposes.

That's how the scroll functions for Judah during the exile – it points to her true hope. Jeremiah throws the scroll into the bottom of the Euphrates, and you can't see any tangible results. From a human perspective, that scroll isn't doing anything at the bottom of the river. But from God's perspective *a seed has been planted in the heart of Babylon*. A seed of the truth. A seed which proclaims the reign of the one true God and the certainty of his justice. That scroll

sitting there at the bottom of the river testifies to all the exiles that while they might have no power, there is a hope and a justice that rolls down from God like a mighty river, like an ever-rolling stream, and that hope will sweep away all swaggering pride, and that hope will make all things new. There in the middle of Babylonian power, right beside the temple of Marduk, right beside the palace of Nebuchadnezzar a seed of God's truth had been planted. 70 years later that seed would sprout and the idols of Babylon would be swept away by the justice of God. So that scroll doesn't do anything, but it points to the Lord who will do everything.

In fact, Jeremiah's act reminds us of something else God would do 600 years later. God will plant a different seed, he will plant his one and only Son. Jesus comes to this world and He allows himself to be thrown into the river of death. Glub glub glub right to the bottom. God lets his son be crucified and planted in a tomb. And on the day it happened, there were those who thought it was a waste, there were those who thought it was the end of hope. But in the death of Jesus God was planting the seed of a new creation. On Easter morning that seed would sprout and something new has started in the world and it won't stop until every knee shall bow and everything shall be made new.

Let that shape how we practice our hope. Sometimes we do things for the kingdom that God uses to bring peace and justice and conversion right now. Peter gets up on Pentecost and he preaches to the crowd in Jerusalem and people are cut to the heart. They come to Jesus by the thousands. Sometimes we do things for the kingdom that, humanly speaking accomplish nothing: In Acts 7 Stephen stands up in front of the Sanhedrin and gives his testimony and no one is converted. They all become enraged and they kill him. So it is with us. Sometimes our kingdom work makes an obvious difference, and sometimes it seems to sink. But either way, whether it feels like success or failure, whether we see a difference or not, when our words and our actions point to the true King, they are a sign of Hope in this world. In the middle of the darkness they shine an everlasting light.

Eric Liddell experienced both kinds of hope in his life. You know that name? Eric Liddell is the Olympic athlete from Scotland whose story is told in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell, a devout Christian, chooses not to run in his favorite race, the 100 meters, because it falls on a Sunday and he doesn't want to race on Sunday. Instead he enters a race he's much less familiar with, the 400 meters, and he wins! His act of faithfulness and hope bears immediate fruit.

If only things always worked that way. I wonder how many of you know about the end of Liddell's life. Liddell became a missionary in China, and when China was taken over by Japan in WW2, Liddell ended up in an Internment camp. It's the same internment camp that Langdon Gilkey writes about in his excellent book the *Shantung Compound*. Shantung Compound is not about Eric Liddell, but it ends up telling his story. Shantung Compound is about the way men and women behave when they are in a situation of deprivation and pressure. If you're a Christian, it's a depressing book that confirms the doctrine of total depravity, because Gilkey finds that, once they are in the camp, good Christian people become selfish, nasty and mean. In fact, some of the nastiest and most selfish of the people in the camp were the Christian missionaries and ministers.

With the exception of Eric Liddell. There in a place of imprisonment and hunger, Liddell practiced hope. Here's how Tim Keller describes Gilkey's account: "*The other missionaries and clergy in the camp were fully as selfish and ungenerous as others, and in many cases more so, because they often accompanied their behavior with sanctimony. But Liddell was different. Gilkey makes a startling statement about him: "It is rare indeed when a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known."* Liddell was

especially concerned to minister to the teenagers of the camp. He cooked for them and supervised recreation for them and poured himself out for them. More than anyone else there he was overflowing with humor, love of life, sacrificial kindness for others, and inward peace.”

In the middle of this internment Eric Liddell got a brain tumor and died. The crabby missionaries survived and he died. It doesn't feel like a triumph; it feels like a waste. And yet in some ways Liddell's second act feels more glorious than the first, because in the camp he practiced his hope in the face of the darkness. He practiced his hope even when it wasn't clear that it would bear any immediate fruit. He practiced the kind of hope that had nothing to do with human success or power, and everything to do with the unshakeable love of God that cannot be stopped.

Good people, go out into the world this week in the power of his hope and where ever you go practice this kind of hope. Do Justice, love kindness, speak the name of Jesus and speak it with joy, let your life point to the one who *will* make all things new.

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