

Unflagging hope

Jeremiah 23:1-8

November 23, 2025

I begin my sermon today with a spoiler. To those of you who were in this sanctuary last Sunday or who joined us via Zoom, to all of you who heard Elaine's message, I must say that the message I will share with you this morning is a repeat. I will use different words and tell the story in a different way, but the story will be the same. If you listen carefully, you will hear echoes of what has already been said and said so well. You will hear the same message a second time, but I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

When I was in seminary, I read a text on the art of preaching that suggested that every preacher has seven sermons, seven central themes, seven key elements of the gospel story, seven vital lessons to be learned and shared and lived, to which they return again and again. As an experiment, I tried to determine what my seven sermons might be and ended up sharing the list during my ordination examination.

But what if there are not seven sermons? What if there is just one sermon to which all of us preachers return again and again and again, trying to get it right — trying to express the inexpressible, trying to hint at the ineffable, trying to point to what we all so need to see, to what I believe we all so yearn to see? That's how I like to think of my job as a preacher: not expounding or explaining or exhorting, but pointing, saying "Look! Look! Can you see it?" What if there is just one sermon that all of us practice, practice, practice, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, until ...

If that is true, if there is just one sermon, its theme is unflagging hope. The theme of the story we rehearse Sunday by Sunday, season by season, year by year, is unflagging hope.

What message did Elaine send us home with last Sunday?

For I am convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What is Zechariah's message, rehearsed in the canticle we sang together moments ago?

The dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on all those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

What is Jeremiah's message?

The days are surely coming ... The days are surely coming ...

The inalienable love of God. A breaking dawn. Days that are surely coming. Unflagging hope.

I want to focus on Jeremiah's message of hope this morning, but first, a brief philosophy lesson. Now don't be alarmed! I majored in philosophy as an undergraduate and I know its secret: philosophy is really just the art of stating the obvious. If a philosopher makes a carefully worded and undoubtedly profound statement and you think, "Well, that's obvious," then she has done her job very well. Philosophy's purpose is to paint a clear picture of what is true, to allow us to appreciate and understand and confirm what is obvious, because sometimes something may be so obvious that we overlook it or fail to appreciate its full significance.

Today's philosophy lesson is about existence and time, about existence and its relationship to time. We begin with this question: when do you exist? Isn't it true that you exist, that you are alive, only in this one single moment? You were alive yesterday, you will be alive tomorrow, Lord willing, but you are alive only in this one present moment. The past is what was once and the future is what has yet to be. What is is only now. To exist, to be alive, means to move through a series of distinct present moments, all of which become instantly past, moments in which you no longer live, moving always toward those moments in which you do not yet live.

So what gives our lives shape and meaning? What keeps our lives from being a disjointed series of unrelated and momentary and fleeting events? Memory and imagination. The past is part of our existence only through memory and the future is part of our existence only through imagination. It is by memory and imagination that we connect this present moment to past and future moments and give our lives shape and meaning.

It is memory that gives us identity. Memory permits us to bring with us a particular history and character and wisdom into each new present moment. When we lose our memory, we lose our identity.

It is imagination that gives our lives meaning and vitality. When imagination fails, when we cease to live into the future with intention, we start to die. We talk about people who live only in the past, about people who have given up on life -- what we mean is that when their imaginations have shut down, they may be alive, but they aren't living any more. We are truly alive and our lives are truly meaningful as we live in this one moment at the intersection of memory and imagination.

So back to Jeremiah.

The moment in which Jeremiah and the people of Judah lived was an especially bleak one. Theirs was a failed state, a state no longer able to control its own destiny, a land and a people subject to the whims of their powerful neighbor to the north. Jeremiah watched as the nation was literally torn apart, its peoples forcibly removed from homes and homeland, taken into exile in Babylon. Soon he would watch too as the Jerusalem monarchy, the line of David would come to an end, the city ransacked and the temple destroyed: lives lost, a nation lost, a heritage lost, freedom and dignity and hope lost.

Jeremiah is no pollyanna. He tells it like it is. He laments the faithlessness and profligacy and injustice of the people of Judah, especially of their leaders, their kings, their shepherds, to whom he lays most of the blame for the nation's demise. He will not tell them, the people or their shepherds: "Don't worry, things are not as bad as they seem." Things are as bad as they seem, worse even than the people themselves realize or are willing to admit!

But Jeremiah is a witness, a witness to the unwavering faithfulness of God. Your leaders scatter, he tells them, but God will gather. Your leaders do injustice, but God will be just. Your leaders fail you, but God will save you.

Jeremiah offers a message of hope by putting the present moment in context, by reminding the people of Judah that this present moment exists at the intersection of memory and imagination.

Memory ... Jeremiah reminds the people of Judah of what God has done. God brought them out of slavery in the land of Egypt. God delivered them from a powerful oppressor and gave them their home. That past is their identity: they are the people the living God brought out of the land of Egypt.

Imagination ... Jeremiah assures them of what God will do. God will gather them from the countries to which they are scattered and will bring them home. God will bring them home and give them a ruler who will do what is right and just, who will protect them and bring them peace. That future provides them meaning and motivation, a reason to live and a way to live.

In both contexts, Jeremiah refers to God as the Lord who lives. The God you have known, the God you will know, is the God who lives now, who is with you now, who will strengthen you and give you courage and show you the way now. It is this now that Jeremiah is interested in — encouraging a disheartened people, giving new hope to a people in despair — and he does so by prodding their memory and stirring their imagination and getting them ready to meet the living God in their own time and place, now!

The days are surely coming when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,” but As the Lord lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north ...

The God whom you know from the past will be the God you will know in the future, and the God of yesterday and tomorrow is the God whom you can know and trust today. In the face of despair, unflinching hope.

In the face of despair, unflinching hope. Do you suppose this might be a timely message? I must confess these days a powerful temptation to despair. Or, perhaps, a better word for what I am experiencing is the word Elaine used last Sunday — resignation. Resignation comes after an accumulation of losses, a piling up of affronts and indignities, a seemingly never-ending series of attacks on so much of what I hold dear. Resignation is a numbness, a dulling of my capacity for moral outrage, a overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Resignation is a giving up.

Do I attribute my distress to the deeds of the present administration, to the shepherds of our nation who destroy and scatter? Yes! Yes, I do, but it is more than that. A deeper distress, a more disturbing aspect of this present moment for me, is the failure of the church and its leaders. So much of the community of Christ with whom I identify seems to have lost its way, no longer offering good news to the poor, to the stranger, the sinner, the outsider, a church seemingly more interested in protecting its own assets, spiritual and material and political, than in offering itself up for the sake of those who are hurting and lost, more interested in vilifying its enemies than in reconciling with them, more about winning the day than about making peace.

What would Jeremiah say to us? “Don’t worry, things are not as bad as they seem?” No, indeed! Things are as bad as they seem, even worse than we are willing to admit. Jeremiah would remind us that we live now at the intersection of memory and imagination.

Who are we? What is our identity? If the people of Israel are the people whom God brought out of slavery in Egypt to make them God’s own, who are we? We are the people for whom the power of sin has been broken, for whom the power of death has been broken, through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Yes, sin still besets us, from within and without, but its power has been broken. Through Christ we can resist it. In Christ we are delivered from its mastery over us.

And, yes, death still comes, to those we love and to us and to so many whose lost lives we lament, but its power has been broken. Through Christ and in Christ, we can live without fear, living fully and joyfully, taking risks, sharing

not hoarding, offering not guarding, not cowering before any who might claim power over our lives.

Memory brings us this assurance, that we are children of God, servants of the true King, ones to whom life is given as a gift, to be cherished and shared with generosity and courage and love, God-like love, Christ-like love. And imagination reminds us that the Christ by whose name we are called is the image of the invisible God, that Christ is before and above all things — before and above all other kings and presidents, dictators and would-be dictators — and that in Christ all things hold together. In a world that seems to be coming apart at the seams, imagination reminds us that in Christ all things hold together, and that through Christ, God is reconciling all things to himself. Through Christ, God is making peace.

Another word for imagination is faith, faith that gives us a reason to live and a way to live. The reason to live is Christ and the way to live is peace. Christ is King and we offer testimony to his kingdom by living by its rules, not by the rules of this world, not by the rules of zero-sum conflict, winners and losers, us and them, self-preservation, self-aggrandizement, self-first. Hope gives us a way to live and living in that way strengthens our hope.

In the face of despair, in the face of resignation, unflagging hope. Unflagging hope now, because it is now, in this present moment, that God meets us. “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” Jesus said to the one hanging on a cross beside him. Not tomorrow, not one day, but today. In that moment.

Jesus is not making a promise of heaven. Paradise is not heaven, but a garden, a garden that is the place of beauty and goodness, the place of God’s presence with us, here on earth. The important part of Jesus’ promise is the “with me. The dying man is not alone, not abandoned, not without hope, because Immanuel — God is with us.

In the same way, our hope is not an escape from this cruel world to the heaven of our dreams, because that is a kind of resignation, too. No, God is with us, here. Christ is among us, living in us, living through us, here. With the aid of memory and imagination, we live to transform this world here and now, in unflagging hope.

The Rev. Timothy Ensworth