

Hope In A Time of Abandonment

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA. on September 27, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

As we near the end of the twentieth century, many Christians sense that the world is growing darker. From violence in Kosovo to the multibillion dollar illegal drug industry; from shootings on school grounds to the seemingly relentless advance of sexual immorality, wherever we turn, we see a frightening disregard for human life. Ben Haden, Presbyterian minister in Chattanooga Tennessee writes, "If you ask the average American today what he most desires but finds hardest to discover it would be hope. And without it you're dead." The Bible is a book of hope. The Bible says that the future belongs to God. Therefore don't be anxious about our lives, timid over tomorrow, paralyzed by anxiety. Worry about the future gets us nowhere. Rather, trust that the future belongs to God.

This morning, we heard about the hope Jeremiah exercised when he bought property in ~~the town of Anathoth, a few miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was under siege. Jeremiah was in~~ prison for warning everybody, "Jerusalem is going to fall to the Babylonians." Then Jeremiah's cousin came and said, "Buy my field." Jeremiah bought the field. Now this is like an ethnic Albanian buying land in Kosovo today as the Serbian armies besiege the town. Jeremiah bought land in Anathoth as an expression of hope. The land would soon fall into the hands of the Babylonians. Nevertheless, he bought the land. He bought the land because the Lord had assured him, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah never lived to see God's promise fulfilled. Seventy years later, long after Jeremiah had died, the exiles return to Judah from Babylon. But when they returned the descendants of Jeremiah owned land in their ancestral city.

In the 1850's, when slavery was still the law of the land, the pastor of our church, Dr. John Miller Dickey, got the idea of educating Black people. Dr. Dickey tried to get a young Black man into a Presbyterian College. The faculty offered him a job as janitor. The White students rebelled. "Black people don't need to be educated. God made them to be servants and

hewers of wood.” Dickey tried to get him into nearly every college in the Union but got one rejection after another. But, like Jeremiah, Dr. Dickey hoped in God. He started his own academy to educate Black people - and so Lincoln University was born.

In the 1860s, during the Civil War, work began on the sanctuary of the Oxford Presbyterian Church. Workers built the sanctuary as men fell by the thousands at Gettysburg just 80 miles away. No one knew how the war was going to end. No one knew how safe Oxford was from the ravages of war. Not only that, religion and morals in Pennsylvania were in decline. The first and second Great Awakenings and the Finney revivals had come and gone. The war hastened the decline of church attendance and Sabbath keeping. The future looked bleak. Church records indicate that the number of people attending the Oxford Presbyterian church was about what it is now - yet a sanctuary was built to accommodate over 600 people. People passed the church while it was being built and laughed. “Those Presbyterians are crazy. Who’s going to fill that huge sanctuary? Whose going to pay for it?” But the elders hoped in God just as Jeremiah did.

Should we be any less hopeful? We have anxieties about our church building and its repair and upkeep and use but should we be any less hopeful than Dr. Dickey, or the elders who built during the Civil War, or Jeremiah who bought land while foreign enemies lay siege to the walls of Jerusalem? Hope in God! Hope in the face of suffering, perplexity, and all of the things that cause others to lose hope!

Look at Jeremiah buying land when enemy armies were at the gates! Look at us in similar circumstances when our future looks dark. When adversity comes, we tend to freeze up. We pull the covers over our head and simply give up. We do this not only in our personal lives but also in our social lives as well. We look at the state of public education or the drug epidemic or the disintegration of families and we say to ourselves, “I’m just one person, what can one person do to change things? Why fight a hopeless cause?” That’s a miserly way to live. Hope in God! Why? Because the future belongs to God. Therefore don’t be anxious about our lives,

timid over tomorrow, paralyzed by anxiety. Worry about the future gets us nowhere. Rather, hope in God! Trust that the future belongs to God!

What do we do when we hope? Lewis Smedes writes that human hope requires three things. *First, human hope requires desire.* We desire something we don't have yet - a baby, or a job, or a boy friend, or a girl friend, or to be healed. Merely *believing* something's going to happen isn't the same as *hoping* that it's going to happen. Desire is required. For example, when I was a boy I was scheduled, along with all of Mrs. Mapp's students, to give a piano recital in the Dubarry room of the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington but I didn't desire that recital to take place. I dreaded those recitals. I *believed* the recital would come but I didn't *hope* for that day. Hoping requires desiring. *Secondly, hoping requires believing.* We believe that what we want may actually happen. If I know for sure that I *can't* be cured, I give up hoping for a cure. If I know for sure that I *will* be cured, I don't need to hope. I hope only as long as I believe that what I want is possible, even though it's not inevitable. *Thirdly, when we hope we doubt.* We can't help doubting because we can't be sure if what we desire will really happen. Doubt is the third dimension of hoping. For example, I hope Penn State will beat Ohio State next Saturday. It's possible. It's also possible for Penn State to lose. I'm not sure if they'll win. I have my doubts but I hope they win. Human hope is always a risk. Human hope involves doubt.

So human hope requires desire, belief, and involves doubt. But Smedes makes a distinction between *human hope* and *Christian hope*. Christian hope, he claims, is a conviction about what is sure. Christian hope is a gift of certainty that what God promises God will most assuredly give. Jeremiah bought the property in Anathoth just before the Babylonian armies invaded because he hoped in God. In a time of abandonment, when human hope failed, Jeremiah hoped in God. His hope was a certain hope even though he never lived to see it fulfilled in this life.

Let me try to explain a little better Smedes' distinction between human hope and Christian hope and see if you agree or disagree. *I hope with human hope* that my sister's retarded daughter will become an intelligent adult, but I doubt she will. *I hope, with Christian*

hope that her present handicap is a brief prelude to real life as a person of limitless creative intelligence. *I hope with human hope* for the United States government to adopt a policy of universal health care but I doubt it will happen. *I hope with Christian hope* for the time when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, when the lame man shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb sing.” *I hope with human hope* for peace in the Balkans and in the Middle East, but I doubt if I will live to see it. *I hope with Christian hope* that one day swords will be beaten into plowshares. *I hope with human hope* for my friend to be healed of her leukemia, but I’m not sure if she will. *I hope with Christian hope* that the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible. *I hope with human hope* to see our sanctuary filled Sunday after Sunday. *I hope with Christian hope* for the day when ever knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father. There’s a distinction between human hope and Christian hope.

This morning we baptize Zachary. The baptismal font is a font of hope. We hope with ~~human hope that his parents and this congregation will be faithful in our vows.~~ We hope with Christian hope that Zachary will be born again by the washing of water and by the Word and that he will grow up knowing, trusting, and following Jesus Christ and serving him within the church throughout his life. Next Sunday we come to the Lord’s table. The Lord’s Table is a table of hope. “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till He come.” Come next week to the Lord’s table! Come trusting in every thing that Jesus has done for us by dying and rising again. Come to the Table bringing all our human hopes and dreams. Come hoping with Christian hope for everything Christ has promised to do for you and in you and for the whole world. Amen.

Almighty God, give us such a vision of your purpose and such an assurance of your love and power, that we may ever hold fast the hope which is in Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.