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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Jeremiah 28:5-13, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42
The Duty to Hope

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Most times my opening text is from one of our Bible Lessons. Nearly always. But this time I want to begin by lifting up the appointed “Prayer of the Day” for this, the Second Sunday after Pentecost. These are often ancient prayers, these Prayers of the Day. Often they go back long before the Reformation, and we Lutherans simply join the rest of the Church in the solemn prayer at the start of the liturgy. Listen to this morning’s fine prayer again:

O God, you have prepared for those who love you *joys beyond understanding*. Pour into our hearts such love for you that, loving you above all things, we may obtain your promises, which *exceed all that we can desire*; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

If you have been feeling low these days, then try to take some heart from these lovely words and apply them to yourself: The Lord is preparing for *you* “joys beyond understand.” He is preparing joys “which exceed all that we can desire.” This prayer invites us to lift up our eyes if they have been too long focused on the ground, lost in depressing thoughts. The prayer invites us to look farther on down the road, when the troubles and setbacks of this present life will give way to a better world, a better future.

So, this morning’s sermon is about hope. I call the sermon “The Duty to Hope.” Now, that is a strange phrase, I admit: “the duty to hope.” We tend to think of “hope” as a grace in life, not as a duty. If we can wake up in the morning with some expectation that the day is going to bring some good, then we are blessed with hope for that day. But if the morning does not bring hope with it, well, most times we get up anyway and set off to do what needs to be done. Often, hope is thought to be like icing on the cake. It is nice to have hope, but even if we do not, we should remain calm and carry on.

But in the moral tradition of the Church, hope is not simply a grace, but also a virtue and a duty. Hope has to do with the future -- with setting the soul in proper alignment with the future. A full human life is properly ordered to the future.

Hope is the solemn duty to ask ourselves the question, “What can really stand in the day of the Lord? This present way of life: does it have a future?” We should try to develop the habit of asking these sorts of questions, both for our encouragement and for our correction.

Let me give you an example. This past week, Carol and I visited with my brother Philip. It about breaks our heart to see how disabled my little brother has

become. He has fought the good fight against his affliction for many years now, with good medical care, with good diet and exercise, but he has become so disabled that he has had to announce his retirement and go on disability. He is a librarian. But I continue to have hope for my brother's health one day. I ask myself the question, "Can this affliction stand? Does it have a future?" Glad to say, it does not. For we are heading toward God's Kingdom where the lame man will leap like a deer with great joy. There is more to life than these present hard times.

Likewise, can our former pastor Raymond Schulze continue to lie in his little wooden casket forever. No way. That has no future, for Jesus has power over life and death, and Jesus is good!

Likewise, can it stand that you should be a victim of injustice or neglect or loneliness or poverty? No, it cannot stand. It has no future and therefore you should fight against it now and hold your head up. You are destined for better times and are worthy of dignity even now along the way to those better times.

On the other hand, if you are not so much the *victim* of sin, but rather the *sinner* himself or herself, then that cannot stand it either and it is time to turn away from the sin. Sin and meanness and injustice are like building your house on shifting sand. The storm will come and that house will fall.

This is what leads us to today's First Lesson, from Jeremiah 28. There is a false prophet in this story. His name is Hananiah. One way to explain what ails the man is that he is not living in hope -- not in real hope, that is. He is not living according to God's Word, but according to his own dreams and his imagination. He is playing fast and loose with the future. He is not really paying attention to what the Lord is doing nor what the Lord is saying. And the terrible outcome of his disordered hope is that he invites the people of God to trust in a lie, which is a terrible thing for a preacher to do. This, in turn, leads to a disaster, both for him and for the people.

Let me place these things in context. This confrontation between the two prophets took place in the year 594/93 B.C.¹ It happened midway through a restless, fitful, rebellious decade for Judah. At the start of the decade, Judah was humbled before the mighty empire new on the scene: the Babylonian Empire. Back then, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Judah, swept Judah's young king Jehoiachin into exile, along with other nobles and treasures from the temple, and installed a vassal king, Zedekiah, on Judah's throne. It was a humiliation for Judah, but at least she still retained some semblance of self-rule and national life. But by the end of the decade, all was left in ruin. Judah tried her hand at rebellion against Babylon, with the result that the Babylonian returned, torched the city, leveled the walls, executed many of the officials, and deported much of the population to Babylon. Thus Judah came to an end. (587 BC)

¹ John Bright, *Jeremiah*, in *The Anchor Bible* (Doubleday & Company: Garden City, NY, 1965), pages XLVI-LIII.

In our text, Hananiah is stirring up the nationalistic hopes of Judah, while Jeremiah is urging King Zedekiah and the people to submit to the rule of Babylon and thus to live. Jeremiah was trying to be faithful to the word of the Lord. In the preceding chapter, Jeremiah 27, we read that the Lord commanded Jeremiah to fashion himself a wooden yoke, to place it on his shoulders as if he were an oxen, and to go around preaching to the people, begging them to submit to the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar.

But the prophet Hananiah also claimed to have a word from the Lord, only his word was contrary to Jeremiah's. Hananiah preached that Babylon was on her last legs and that Judah could look to throw off Babylon's dominion. To dramatize his preaching, Hananiah removed Jeremiah's yoke, dashed it to the ground, and broke it.

This is amazing to me, for I try to be a humble preacher. It is amazing to me to imagine the self-confidence and gusto with which Hananiah claimed to have the Word of God when he did not! He seems to have been preaching not the Word of God, but rather what he *thought* the Word of God *ought* to be. And that is a very different thing from humbly preaching the Word.

As it turned out, Jeremiah was right. Hananiah had misled the people:

¹²Then the word of the LORD came unto Jeremiah the prophet, after that Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, ¹³Go and tell Hananiah, saying, Thus saith the LORD; *Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron.* ¹⁴For thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him: and I have given him the beasts of the field also. ¹⁵Then said the prophet Jeremiah unto Hananiah the prophet, Hear now, Hananiah; The LORD hath not sent thee; but thou makest this people to trust in a lie. ¹⁶Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will cast thee from off the face of the earth: this year thou shalt die, because thou hast taught rebellion against the LORD. ¹⁷So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month. (Jeremiah 28:12-17, KJV)

“Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron.” And that, my friends, is a very poor exchange. The outcome of this affair was that Hananiah fanned the fires of nationalism, which eventually led to the destruction of Judah and Hananiah's own death.

What ailed Hananiah is that he was careless about the future and he was careless about the Word of God. He said, “Peace, peace,” when there was no peace. He said that all would be well when all was not well. His great error was in not paying attention to what the LORD was actually doing.

Like a parent who loves the little one, the LORD was chastising Judah for her sins, to get recall her to piety. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, the discipline of the Lord is part of his love:

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, (Hebrews 12:6, KJV)

It is the part of the children then to humble themselves and accept the discipline:

⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? (Hebrews 12:7-9, NRSV)

Judah's part was to yield to the discipline, to submit to the rule of Babylon, and thus to live. But it all ended in rebellion and failure, and Hananiah had a part to play in that disaster. He had been careless about what the future is really like.

Let me turn to a more modern example of hope's proper ordering toward the future. In 1979 in South Africa, those who fought against apartheid were becoming discouraged, worn out, and cynical. They could see no reason for encouragement. Everything remained the same and they were tempted to give up. But a theologian among them name John de Gruchy urged them to remember that the Lord still reigns, the Lord still is still working toward his kingdom, and the Lord still needs them to work with him in that direction. De Gruchy urged his readers to work toward God's good future and to not be "consumed by the present moment."²

Being "consumed by the present moment" makes our life poorer. It tempts us to imagine that God is not in charge of his creation. It deprives people of the hope

² "In 1979, when apartheid policies still dominated, de Gruchy wrote *The Church Struggle in South Africa* and then seconded it with *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* in 1984. In the South Africa of 1979 there had not been many reasons for those seeking liberation to put much energy into hoping for better times. Among the leaders, however, de Gruchy chose to cite the Bonhoeffer letters to inspire hope. He reminded his readers that Bonhoeffer, in an even more deadly situation than theirs, criticized cynics who, he wrote, 'think that meaning of present events is chaos, disorder and catastrophe.' They thought so in part, he wrote, because they had no concern for the future but were instead 'consumed by the present moment.'" (Martin Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2011), pg. 193.)

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for “joys beyond understand” which the Lord is preparing for us. Aye, and it threatens to make us a danger to our neighbors too.

The heart desires wealth, let us say, and is restless with the fair and square ways of gaining it. So, the heart is tempted to leap ahead, and to grasp now the wealth it wants, even if it must break the law to do so.

One way to describe the problem here is that it is a failure of hope. Hope teaches us that we do not need to grasp everything now because Jesus is risen and he can be trusted to give us what we need in due season. After all, he is the one who taught us to lay up treasure in heaven. So he promised to the rich young man, trying to keep the young man from bending the knee before money:

²¹Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. ²²But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:21-22, KJV)

Likewise with the rich man and his barns. He was not taking sufficient thought for tomorrow. He was not being rich toward God, but toward himself, and that, in the end, is a kind of madness:

¹⁸And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. ²⁰But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? ²¹So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:18-21, KJV)

Again, one way to describe the problem with the rich man and Lazarus at his door is that the rich man failed to exercise hope. Hope, remember, takes account of the future. Hope strives for the good and relaxes its hold on the bad precisely because it does not have to bend the knee before death, but has a higher Lord³, even Jesus Christ. I mean, if all there is ahead of the rich man is death, then I guess he can afford to ignore poor Lazarus lying at his door. But if what is really ahead is not death but Lazarus at peace in the bosom of father Abraham, then it is high time to start being nice to Lazarus. Hope teaches us that we are destined for beatitude with our neighbors. Greed can never teach us such a thing, but hope can.

The human heart is wild. It is no respecter of boundaries. It goes where it will, even if it should trespass in the going. That is why we cannot let our lives be run

³ This fine phrase about Christians that they “know a Lord greater than death” comes from George Hunsinger in the Lectionary Commentary on this morning’s Epistle Lesson from Romans 6. The problem with sin is that it bends the knee before death. It looks at death, is appalled by it, and concludes that it must grasp everything now, before death comes. But Christians know a Lord greater than death, and so it makes no sense to continue as if our real Lord is death.

by our feelings. So, consider that one who has fallen in love with someone he or she ought not to love. Why, that one is already married! Then leave that one alone. But in hope he *can* leave the one he loves alone, she can give up her desire, for we can trust matters of the heart over to God. If for this life only we hope, we are, as St. Paul said, “the most miserable” of creatures:

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:19, KJV)

But Jesus is risen, and therefore it is reasonable to wait for him to sort these things out, to wipe all tears from the eyes, and to await peace someday.

Hope makes all the difference in the world. It keeps us from demanding everything now! And so it keeps us from making a wreck of things. Hananiah can preach however he will, but do not listen to him, for he is a cruel, cruel man. It is better to stick to God’s Word and to wait for his kingdom.

“Seize the hope that is set before you.” That is the lovely exhortation of Hebrews 12. As Abraham lived in hope based on the promises of God, so should we. We do not need to wreck the world, for we have hope through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.