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Pentecost 16, Year C , September 28, 2025
St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, OH

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

I have to admit that I struggled a bit with the appointed readings for this week. The theme for the Epistle reading and the Gospel seem so disparate, and the theme for the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah seems to be so buried in contemporary historical and cultural context that it is hard to even pin down. And so, as I prepared to preach this week, I must express my deep thanks to the Thursday morning Bible Study group. That group has on more than one occasion helped me see God speaking to us in our own time through the sacred words of Scripture. If you've never been to Thursday morning Bible study, I encourage you to drop in. I expressed my deepest thanks to this group, for they helped me pull a common theme for all of the readings- the theme of hope. Now, at first glance it might be hard to hear hope in the words we heard proclaimed this morning, but stick with me.

To start on this hunt for hope, we begin with the prophet Jeremiah. We meet up with the prophet in this 32nd chapter of his book when the Kingdom of Babylon was, we are told, besieging Jerusalem. The people of Judah are surrounded, encircled by an enemy who wants to overtake them. And not only are the people of Judah surrounded by would-be intruders, but the prophet Jeremiah is also surrounded- surrounded by the bars of his prison cell. In this story, we can feel the weight of oppression in the grim reality that both the nation of Judah felt and then that the prophet Jeremiah felt. And in the midst of this grim reality, what does the prophet Jeremiah do? Facing the almost certain outcome that the land and people Judah will be overtaken, Jeremiah buys land. In the midst of all hope being lost, Jeremiah looks to a future where, as he prophesies, "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah stores away the deed of sale in a jar for the day in the future where this deed would not be threatened by an invasion.

And this prophetic action points to hope that is always present in the prophetic tradition. The prophets Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and others, as mouthpieces for God, often used stern words to get a divine point across. But hope always follows these stern words- the theme often being something like "repent return to the Lord your God, and God will show mercy and have compassion." In this prophetic action, Jeremiah trusts in the mercy and compassion of God who will not leave God's people without hope.

Then in Paul's letter to Timothy, we get another vision of hope that we have in God. Paul counsels Timothy that our hope is not found in things of this world. Paul says, "we brought nothing into the world, so

that we can take nothing out of it”. I had the privilege of seeing some live theater this week, this time I saw *Our Town* by Cleveland Playhouse. You might remember in this story by Thornton Wilder, the play’s first Act walks through a simple day in the fictional town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. Folks are having coffee and stringing beans and working and planning their days. In the second act, the subject of love is examined through the lens of a love story and wedding of two of the main characters. Then, in the third act, we observe the graveyard for the town. A handful of the folks we have gotten to know in the previous two acts have now passed. Their spirits occupy the stage, including the young bride who got married in the second act. The stage manager, who acts as a story-teller for the play, reflecting on all that we have seen- the ordinary lives of the people in the first act, love in the second act, and death in the third act- reminds us that “We all know that *something* is eternal. Arid it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars ... everybody knows in their bones” he says “that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.”

I think this “something eternal” was what Paul was trying to get at in his letter to Timothy. Paul says to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” He says to shun evil rooted in money that leads to senseless and harmful desires and rather live into the things that are eternal, the fruits of our Christian lives that long outlive us- these things which build up the Kingdom of God right here and right now. Paul reminds us that, more than anything, our hope is in God, in God’s love and grace which undergirds our very lives.

And here’s the thing about hope: once we lay claim to it, it is a gift that we are called to inspire in others. In Luke’s Gospel, we hear about a rich man and Lazarus, both of whom have died. The rich man had lived his life to excess, while the only friend of Lazarus was a dog to tend to his wounds. We see in this story, that even in death, the rich man treats Lazarus as an object and as a means to accomplish his request. He asks that Lazarus go to his father’s house where his five brothers are that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment. Even in death, the rich man misses the mark and shows us what not to do. Inspired by the hope that we lay claim to in God’s love, we then plant seeds of hope in the hearts of those in need. We make this space- yes this very space- a place of welcome and shelter for all no matter where they are on their life’s journey, no matter what heavy loads they carry, no matter the failures or successes, status or no status or low status, those who have their lives together, and those whose lives are falling apart. We make this a place where all are truly welcomed and loved and treasured and where hope in God’s love for us inspires all we do and sing and pray.

Friends, let us cling to those things which are eternal and anchor ourselves in hope this day. And may we make this place a place of hope for all who enter our doors. Amen.