A Hope Not Hopeless But Unhopeful
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Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time  September 25, 2016

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?
— Romans 8:24

Scripture Introduction

We are about to hear a story about the prophet Jeremiah buying a piece of land. He is not speculating or trying to make a buck, but he is investing. The details of the transaction are spelled out, to make clear that Jeremiah is not going to try to weasel out of this purchase later, in some sneaky fashion. The prophet puts his money where his mouth is. Jeremiah is investing in this land. And the land is part of Israel, which is about to be completely overrun by the Babylonians. The land is about to become worthless. Jeremiah invests in God’s promised future exactly when that future seems completely closed off. The king and his people want rescue. Their voice echoes when those at the cross want Jesus to be rescued. But hope is not about rescue; it’s about resurrection. Who hopes for what one sees?

So, Jeremiah, in buying this forsaken land, is making a statement about hope, about hope beyond what can be seen.

Scripture

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. ... Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me:

Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.” Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying,

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this

2 Walter Brueggemann, Jeremiah, p. 303.
open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.  

Jeremiah asked that the witness of his hope be put where they may last for a long time. I offer witness to my hope today: to Amy, Andy, and Jeremiah, to Du Bois and Coates and Havel—may they too be placed where they may last for a long time.

Amy. Amy Coen was my sister-in-law, my brother’s wife, who died of cancer in 2011 at the age of 61. I really wish you had known her. Amy was an ambassador for women’s education throughout the world. In her tireless years of promoting education for women internationally, she went into scores of countries. She went through more check-points and searches and border-crossings than we were able to count. She filled three passports with visas and stamps from across the world. We had them on display at her memorial services. Amy was a global emissary for women’s education and rights. She worked in contexts where they were still trying to end female genital mutilation; she went to the most oppressive, most impossible, contexts for women—places you could only describe as hopeless, where futures were closed off. And yet she was tireless, relentless. Amy… was a first-rate smuggler. Now, I promise to explain that last eventually.

Now, Andy. In Stephen King’s novella, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, a man named Andy Dufresne is an inmate in Shawshank Prison. Shawshank is a grey, oppressive penitentiary—full of violence, cruelty, and resignation; it is a place without music, without hope. Andy Dufresne is a redemptive presence. After six years of letter writing to the governor, Andy receives permission to create a small haven, a prison library, complete with albums and a record player. With the newly arrived books and records still in the warden’s office, and a guard otherwise occupied, Andy discovers a recording of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*. He locks the door to the warden’s office and broadcasts a soprano duet across the entire prison. Everywhere, prisoners stop in their tracks stock-still, silent, transported.

Andy’s friend, Red, later testifies: “I have no idea to this day what them two Italian ladies were singin’ about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singin’ about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. …I tell you, those voices soared. Higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made these walls dissolve away…and for the briefest of moments—every last man at Shawshank felt free.”

Andy is punished for broadcasting the music and given two weeks in solitary, in the hole, but, when he gets out, Andy declares to his fellow inmates, “Easiest time I ever did.”

“No such thing as easy time in the hole [Andy]. A week seems like a year.”

“I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. Hardly felt the time at all.”

Oh, they let you tote that record player down there, huh? I could’a swore they confiscated that stuff.

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(Andy taps his heart, his head)—“The music was here...and here. That's the one thing they can’t confiscate, not ever. That's the beauty of it. Haven't you ever felt that way about music, Red?”

“Played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost my taste for it. Didn’t make much sense on the inside.”

“Here's where it makes most sense, [Red]. We need it so we don’t forget.”

“Forget?”

“That there are things in this world not carved out of gray stone. That there’s a small place inside of us they can never lock away, [never take away], and that place is called hope.”

“Hope is a dangerous thing, Andy. Drive a man insane. It's got no place here. Better get used to the idea.”

And Jeremiah. If I can think of Amy as a smuggler (of sorts—I will explain), I can then think of Jeremiah as a real estate investor (of sorts). Jeremiah buys a piece of land that will soon be overrun by Israel’s enemies in war. The land will be worthless, no good to anyone. Babylon is bearing down on them, and Jeremiah has prophesied that they will be swept away in that war. Nevertheless, in the end, Jeremiah promises that houses will again be bought and sold on it someday. But it’s clear that when the time comes for the land to have value again, none of those hearing this promise will be alive. The promise must sound quite empty to them; their future seems completely closed off. Jeremiah’s purchase does not tell them of hope for themselves. Israel might agree with Andy’s friend, Red: hope’s got no place here.

Amy, in real, repressive Uganda, and Andy, in fictional, oppressive Shawshank, were in precisely the bleak places for Jeremiah’s prophecy. When I speak of the majesty of hope, I want to be careful not to conflate it or confuse it with optimism or a cheery outlook or being positive. Amy would never have gotten along on that. Hope is something far grander than these; real hope is an exalted reality.

We too cannot get along without that real hope: here is my witness. The Souls of Black Folk was the first non-fiction book I read on my sabbatical. It is a collection of essays by W.E.B. Du Bois first published in 1903. In these essays, he talks about the veil. The reference is important. For Du Bois, the veil refers to at least these two factors: the veil suggests white people’s lack of clarity to see Blacks as “true” Americans. And it refers to Blacks’ lack of clarity to see themselves outside of what white America describes and prescribes for them.⁴

At the birth of his son, Du Bois is ebullient. When he first hears someone referring to his “wife and child.” “Wife and child?” he repeats. “Up the stairs I ran to the wan mother and whimpering babe.... What is this tiny, formless thing, this newborn wail from an unknown world,—all head and voice? ... How beautiful he was... I held him in my arms....” This is a man in love.

But then in the next breath, Du Bois tells a harsh truth, “Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,—a Negro and a Negro's son. Holding in that little head...—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand...—to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes ... a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty is a lie.” So, the

⁴ http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug03/souls/defpg.html, paraphrased.
loving joy in Du Bois over his newborn son is immediately tempered, not with mere first-time father’s fears, but with the specific, generations-learned knowledge of his son’s future as a black man in America.

Du Bois barely has time to contemplate this joy and terror, when the baby falls ill. In a short ten days, his first-born son dies. Du Bois’ writes, “A perfect life was his, all joy and love… The world loved him; the women kissed his curls, the men looked gravely into his wonderful eyes, and the children hovered and fluttered about him. ... He knew no color line...,—and the Veil, though it shadowed him, had not yet darkened half his sun.”

“All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart,—nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil,—and my soul whispers ever to me, saying, “Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free.” Then finally, “Well sped, my boy, before the world had dubbed your ambition insolence, had held your ideal unattainable, and taught you to cringe and bow. Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you. ...Sleep, then, child,—... above the Veil.”

When I read those words, I thought of another black father speaking to his son: Ta-Nehisi Coates’ long letter, *Between the World and Me*, which I read just last year. It is a book in which he unmask “specious hope.” And when I hear Dr. Du Bois speak of a *hope not hopeless but unhopeful*, I think, “Yes, hope that is not specious hope.” One hundred and twelve years later, Coates is talking about the same thing. Thus, the bulletin cover today.

It is vital never to speak glibly of hope nor to decide that somehow optimism is what we need. It is not. Optimism is thin gruel, easily dashed, deceptive and insidious. Specious hope is what makes religion the opiate of the masses. Specious hope is dishonest. Real hope is what the world desperately needs.

But what then is it? What is real hope? Coates speaks against specious hope, but also for a kind of... animating power. In a profoundly vulnerable and honest passage in *Between the World and Me*—Coates’ letter to his son, he writes about Mable Jones, the mother of his dead friend, Prince Jones; she is a woman he greatly admires:

- As [Mable] talked of the church, I thought of your grandfather, ... and how his first intellectual adventures were found in the recitation of Bible passages. I thought of your mother, who did the same. And I thought of my own distance from an institution that has, so often, been the only support for our people. I often wonder if in that distance I’ve missed something, some notions of cosmic hope, some wisdom beyond my... perception of the world, something ..., that I might have transmitted to you. I wondered this, at that particular moment, because something beyond anything I have ever understood drove Mable Jones to an exceptional life.

As much as Ta-Nehisi Coates, I also want to be humble about what it is that drives an exceptional life too, what animates faithfulness in the face of realities that I will never have to face. But, when I heard Ta-Nehisi speak of Mable Jones, I thought of Amy. And we should think of Jeremiah. I repeat the words of W.E.B. Du

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5 Pp. 155-56

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Bois—we are called to a hope not hopeless (not hopeless—it is indeed a real hope), but also unhopeful (not optimistic, not pie-in-the-sky, not specious).

When W.E.B. Du Bois’ words from 1903 still ring true to black experience, and Coates’ words 112 years later seem only to echo them, little seems to be changing. Amid the intractable power of institutional racism, to which we now add Columbus, Tulsa, and Charlotte, as well as the brash ignorance and thoughtlessness amid white Grand Rapids as regards black experience, only real hope can sustain us. We are called to a hope like Jeremiah’s. We are called to invest precisely where it seems most hopeless. We continue to invest in Black Lives Matter. We invest in a future that seems closed off, which we do not see.

What is real hope? Vaclav Havel, poet and former president of the Czech Republic, has always helped to dispel my own specious hope with these words: “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out… Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. It is a dimension of the soul, and it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. …hope always comes, as it were, from elsewhere…”

Hope is not dependent on circumstances in the world but is anchored beyond its horizons. We may see no evidence; the future may seem completely closed off. All Israel can see is defeat. Charlotte may tell us that there is no reason to think that things are going to get better. There may be no reason whatsoever to be optimistic, but that never, ever removes the ground of real hope.

We simply do not look to the world for signs of hope.

[Tap head and heart] “It’s here...and here. That’s the one thing they can’t confiscate, not ever. That’s the beauty of it,” Andy said. … “That there’s a small place inside of us they can never lock away, and that place is called hope.”

And, “Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

Amy might be on an international team trying to develop a farming enterprise. They’d ask, “Oh, so is there any water around here for your project?” Answer, “No, the closest water is like forty miles away.” “Forty miles? That’s no problem. We can deal with that.” It is a quality that she had in abundance: hope. They all wanted Amy on their team. She was like our teachers in WCDC, tireless, showing up with it day after day.

My brother, Gerry, put it this way, “Wherever Amy was, there was hope.” Just as Mabel Jones practiced her compelling hope for Ta-Nehisi Coates, Amy did that for me. They each taught the character of real hope: [tapping] in here and in here—the only place that the witness will last for a long time.

I don’t know how many borders and customs checks Amy went through in her life. Her passports are testimony to a few of them. But everywhere she went, Amy was a smuggler. She was smuggling hope. Slipped right past them. Through the defenses of oppression and patriarchy, she smuggled hope into every one of the lives of those who met her. Hope. That’s the beauty of it. That’s the one thing they can’t confiscate, not ever.