

5 Lent, Year B  
Jeremiah 31:31-34  
St. Augustine's, Croton  
April 2, 2006

I.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.  
I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;  
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . .  
I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

There's no mistaking the point of our reading  
from the prophet Jeremiah--  
God is promising to do a new thing  
for the people of Israel and the people of Judah.

And a "new thing" is exactly what these people can use.

Without getting into all of the particulars  
of Old Testament history,  
we can nonetheless paint a pretty clear picture  
about what life was like for the people of Israel and the people of  
Judah.

Things were bleak.  
It was Israel's darkest hour.

You see, these people have suffered  
invasion, war, defeat, deportation, and exile.

They have lost most everything--  
home, land, the central places of worship,  
their political and social institutions,  
and their freedom.

Yes, these folks could use a new thing--  
they could use a literal infusion of hope just now.

And that's exactly what this section of Jeremiah sets out to do--  
it offers some hope by intruding into a space  
where it looks as if there is no room for hope,  
and asking the people to imagine something  
completely different from their present reality.

That's why this section of Jeremiah--  
and the few chapters surrounding it--  
have been nicknamed "The Little Book of Hope."

II.  
Hope. . .  
it's such an abstract word, really.

I wonder how abstract and remote and distant  
Jeremiah's words of hope  
must have seemed to the people of Israel.

Hope is a word that rarely stands alone in our language.

We have hope, get hope, lose hope;  
we are sometimes told not "to get our hopes up"--  
at all, much less "too high."

Hope seems belongs to the realm of poetry and philosophy.

According to Greek myth, hope is an evil  
that comes out of Pandora's box  
to confuse the human spirit.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast,"

wrote Alexander Pope.

And there's Dante and his famous words,  
posted above the entrance gates to Hell itself:  
"Abandon hope, ye who enter here."

Our human experience has given rise  
to various common-sensical proverbs about hope--  
"Hoping and waiting makes many a fool."

And it seems that someone is always somewhere around us,  
waiting to caution us about our hoping.

If our sights are set off in the distance,  
our dreams so projected into the future,  
well, we miss the chances of the present.

No wonder we live in a time  
when there seems to be crisis of hope.

III.

"There days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.  
I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it on their hearts;  
and I will be their God, and they will be my people.  
I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Not only were the people of Israel living in exile--  
not only had they lost their homes and their land  
and everything else central to their very identity as a people--  
the people of Israel were also living with the reality of failure in their lives.

And their failure was no ordinary, garden-variety kind of failure.

These people had failed themselves--  
and they had ultimately failed the God  
who loved them and chose them and called them into being.

Their failure was off-the-charts BAD.

And between such failure and such exile,  
I would imagine that it was pretty hard for them  
to imagine a different kind of future for themselves.

There could surely be no way for them to forge ahead,  
to make a new and different reality for themselves.

Hoping for a fresh start and a "turning of the corner"  
must have not only been abstract--but impossible.

But we must pay careful attention  
to Jeremiah's "Little Book of Hope;"  
we must notice the language, the arrangement of words.

We must diagram his sentences. . .  
here a subject and there a verb. . .  
and see what spiritual sense might lie therein.

We must notice that the emphasis in this "Little Book of Hope"  
is on what *God* does--  
for God is the powerful subject of powerful verbs of action and will:

"I *will make* a new covenant,"  
"I *will put* my law"  
"I *will write*," "I *will be* their God,"  
"I *will forgive*," "I *will remember* no longer."

What Jeremiah describes is not human achievement,  
but gift--sheer gift;  
and it is God who is the giver of these gifts.

The hope that Jeremiah writes about  
is the hope that God has authored.

This "Little Book of Hope" is a text of God's creation,  
a text that God has written--tattooed on their hearts.

IV.

The Feast of Mary of Egypt is celebrated in the Eastern tradition  
on this Sunday, the fifth Sunday in Lent.

The story of this Mary is a powerful one--  
one that we would do well to learn and to tell.

Mary of Egypt lived in the 5th century Alexandria.

She was an actress and courtesan--  
which is a fancy way of describing her profession.

Mary was a prostitute.  
She was known far and wide for leading a very sinful life.

The story goes that, when she was 29 years old,  
Mary joined a group of pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem,  
just out of sheer curiosity.

The pilgrims traveled to the Holy Sepulcher,  
the supposed burial site of Jesus.

While at the Holy Sepulcher, Mary had a conversion experience.

It seems that a voice told her that if she repented of her sin  
and crossed the Jordon River,  
forgiveness and rest awaited her there.

Mary spent the remainder of her life as a hermit;  
and she shared hospitality with spiritual seekers  
who came to meet here there in the Judean wilderness.

Why has the Church preserved the story of Mary of Egypt?

Certainly because it is a story  
that witnesses to the possibility of change,  
and that openness to God is the crack that lets in the light.

And perhaps because it is a story  
that puts some skin on a seemingly abstract word like "hope;"  
that gives it a holy, sacred context. . .

that reminds us that it is possible to imagine  
different futures for ourselves and for others. . .  
futures that only God can give and that only God can author.

V.

As Christians, we are called to be people of hope.

We are to call attention to the single blooming redbud  
in a forest of gray, leafless trees.

We are to pick of the rocks in our paths  
and look for the evidence of new life  
where it seems that there could be no life at all.

Hope. . .

it is the expectation of a good future  
awakened through God's promise  
and supported by trust in that God.

It is not mere wishful thinking or casual optimism.

It does detach the human spirit  
    from the present moment through delusion--  
Rather, it pulls the promised future into the present  
    and places the experienced present in the dawn of God's future.

Which is a big way of saying that hope is really about God's time, not ours.  
    It is about God's past and present and future.

It is about God's being and becoming with us and alongside us.

Hope. . .  
    it *is* an abstract word.

But it is born of very concrete, tangible realities.

It is the gift of a God who remembers us  
    and forgets our failures and sin;  
who risks restored relationship with us,  
    and who invites us to step across the River into a new kind of future.

It is the stuff of stars and rainbows,  
    of wind and lightening,  
    of vows broken and renewed.

It is the stuff of wooden crosses and empty tombs.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
    when I will make a new covenant  
    the the House of Israel and the House of Judah.  
I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it on their hearts;  
    and I will be their God, and they will be my people. . . .  
for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

That is the language, the grammar, of hope--  
    We would do will to diagram it. . .  
    here a subject and there a verb. . .

Powerful, divine subjects of powerful active verbs. . .

Subjects and verbs of which we are always the cherished objects--

Objects of God's desire and longing and passion.

Hope does spring eternal from the human breast--

It is the stuff of the human heart,

for God has lovingly etched it there.

Such is the "Little Book of Hope"--

the biggest little book I know.