

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 3, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-18
Mark 6: 34-44**

Sermon: Profound Hope (Advent 1)

Have you ever heard the story about the three stone-masons? Once upon a time there were three medieval stone masons working on building a cathedral. A brother from the nearby monastery came to see how the work on the building was going. Once he had surveyed all the architectural aspects of the construction project, he said to the foreman: What is the impact on the builders, being involved in doing God's work this way?

And the foreman said: "Well, why don't you talk to my three stone masons over there? They do the same work day by day, but one is slower, one is working a normal pace, and one is doing great work, but much faster than the others."

So the monk went to the three masons and noticed that they were all working from the same stone, all using the same tools and technique – but one pile of finished stone was much smaller, one was medium high and one was much taller.

So he said to the first stonemason, the one with the lowest pile of cut stone. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, the same thing I've done for months and years already. Cutting the stone, hauling the stone, it's going to be decades before this job is done. Oh, my aching back."

The monk then approached the second mason, the one with a middling pile of cut stone and asked him the same question: "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I'm using my tools and showing everyone what a good stonemason I am," he said. "That way people will know to hire me for other jobs."

Finally the monk approached the last mason, the one with the tallest pile of cut stone. After seeing how quickly and efficiently the stone mason worked, he asked him the same question as his two co-workers: "What are you doing here?"

The stonemason turned to him with a face that was alight with joy: "I'm building a house for God!" he said "Can you imagine that?" And he looked up at the scaffolding and the bare frames and the half laid stone walls as if he could see the cathedral in its final form, as if he was entering the door of that great building in awe and wonder. "I **hope** someday I will see it finished."

What IS hope?

In the time of that monk and stone masons, it usually took at least 50 years to build even a small cathedral – some great cathedrals took centuries. Few of the stonemasons or carpenters, architects, bishops who worked on them or planned them expected to see the cathedral finished during their lifetimes. Being involved or being inspired in the construction of a cathedral, then, required a willingness to be part of a process that was larger than oneself.

For the third stone mason in the story, it was that willingness to be part of something larger than himself that made the work go more quickly and made the workday more fulfilling. For the first stonemason, it was his inability to see beyond the large pile of stone that were still waiting to be cut that made his day feel long and pointless.

Today in our scripture readings, we have heard the prophecy of Jeremiah reminding the people of Judah to have hope.

Hope must have seemed pretty unlikely in the time and place where Jeremiah was preaching. This was another century or more after the time of good king Josiah whom Steve preached about last week. A series of less faithful kings had followed Josiah, Kings and priests and politicians who always put the building of palaces and amassing their personal wealth, high above the needs of the people, many who were starving in the streets. The powerful also kept trying to manipulate the bigger nations around them: playing fast and loose with the Egyptians to the south, then with the Assyrians to the east.

Eventually the Assyrians took offense and put Jerusalem under siege, cutting off all food and water within her walls. Finally the Babylonians came and finished them off, taking the best of the refugees off as slaves to exile.

So, Jeremiah, what does Hope look like in those circumstances?

For Jeremiah, hope was the knowledge that STILL God had not abandoned them. That someday God would raise up a leader who would bring justice and righteousness in the land. “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” Jeremiah imagined that future as springing forth in the most natural and yet unexpected way, like the sprouts and saplings that grow up out of a stump after a tree has been cut down.

Another story of hope from the bible is found in the gospels where Jesus fed the multitudes. This one of the few stories about Jesus that all four gospels found it important to tell.

Jesus and the disciples had been teaching, and as the day grew longer the crowd only grew bigger. I don't know who's stomach growled first, but eventually the disciples told Jesus it was time to wrap it up and go get some supper.

“But these people are hungry too.” Said Jesus, “How about we all eat together?”

“We only have five loaves and two fishes!” complained the disciples “Send them away to find their own supper.”

But Jesus told them to start sharing the loaves and fishes “as if” they had enough for everyone. A chunk of bread here, a bite of fish there, pass it along to the next row. What do you mean “the next row? Asked the disciples, We will run out after the first family! And then there will be none left for us.”

But the food baskets, amazingly, kept going, kicked off by that first act of sharing, that first act of opening their hearts and hands, they made sure that no one went without food, and Jesus kept multiplying what they had in front of them, transforming it into something they could not see the end of.

Because in the gospel, Hope isn't just about what's in your head. The logistics and the predictions, the expectations and the worries – they are not as important as **how you act**. **Act** like you are generous instead of fearful. **Act** like you are going to live to see the cathedral completed, instead of it only being your great-grandchildren. **Act** like love can win out over hate, even when the haters seem to have more of everything. **Act** like life doesn't end with death but that everlasting life is renewed within the great expanse of God's love for us.

I used to use this children's story idea when it was a Sunday that told the story of the loaves and fishes. I would bring a big Kaiser bun to church, and I would tell the children that with that one bun we were going to feed the whole congregation. I would rip a piece off and hand to which ever kid was closest, then tell them to do the same and so on and so on, till all the kids had some. Then we would take it up to the choir and then the whole congregation.

This was before COVID of course! We were used to eating from a common loaf for communion, and so it didn't seem unsanitary to be passing bread from hand to hand and then eating it. Nowadays it seems like risky business.

But my point is this: people wanted to believe in the miracle, and because I told them it could happen – it changed the way they acted. I did this with a congregation of 50, and with a congregation of closer to a hundred. It didn't matter the number – people wanted the miracle to work and so they took less and less for themselves, until everybody had at least a crumb of that bread.

And if we didn't fill their bellies, it was still a story of hope that they took with them. That sharing, and looking out for the next person, made miracles happen.

Jeremiah's prophecy and the story of feeding the multitudes. These are both stories of what it feels like to be on this side, on our side of death and hunger and despair. But they are also stories of what happens when we choose to act with profound Hope. When the space between our fears and our faith is bridged by a profound Hope in God that this is not the end of the story. When we believe that God is always working in our

midst to bring about the fulfilment of justice and peace that was always intended for all creation, then we have hope for the future and for one another.

Naturally there are times when we are overwhelmed and hope seems far away. That is why we gather in faith community, to hold the Christ light for one another. That is why we tell the same stories of hope again and again. To give us the courage to live like hope is always in our midst.

Thanks be to God.