

INTRODUCTION to Jeremiah 32.1-3a, 6-15 and Luke 16.19-31

If you have the time to read over the bulletin before worship or see an article about upcoming services, you may wonder sometimes about the selection of sermon titles. “What was the preacher thinking and why that title with this scripture?”

When I was in preaching class, I was taught that the title is an important window into the sermon. And I was told a story, which you may have heard before, and which I will modify slightly for this morning, about a class of preaching students being taught that same thing – about the vital nature of the title. They were given an assignment to come back to their next class with a title that, if people were riding a bus past the church on Sunday and read the sign, they would want to get off that bus to come in to hear. So the diligent students returned with their carefully crafted ideas. The one memorable title, the one sure to empty the whole bus into the sanctuary, went something like this: “There’s a Skunk on Your Bus!”

All this is to suggest that sometimes the title is significant; at others it may have nothing to do with the text! I hope this morning’s title falls into the former category. “Carpe diem.” I bet you know what that means. [pause] Yes, seize the day – take advantage of the now. Apparently this aphorism is attributed to the Roman poet Horace, in his book *Odes*, written in 23BC. And if you translate it literally, it means “pluck the day,” (as it is ripe) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carpe_diem, which fits perfectly words of Jeremiah, who, God instructed to “pluck up and pull down, to build and to plant.”

Carpe diem. In today’s passage from Jeremiah, we’ll hear an odd story about a land deal. Jeremiah’s cousin, Hanamel, has a cash flow problem and offers to sell a piece of land to Jeremiah, to keep something precious given by God in the family. But it’s a

ridiculous time to buy property. Judah is under siege, surrounded by Babylonia troops on all sides and being starved into submission. Jeremiah is in trouble with the Judean king, Zedekiah, and in captivity in the court. And yet he buys the land in a very public ceremony as a symbolic gesture that he has faith in God to redeem the chosen people, to free them to live abundant and liberated lives, to make the land valuable at some point in the future. He seizes the opportunity, and transforms the presently worthless parcel into a time capsule of hope.

The gospel story is a familiar one about the rich man and poor Lazarus, which comes at the end of a longer discussion about economic disparity, and how riches cannot save us. Because the story is set in a time after both the rich man and Lazarus have died, and set in two worlds – a place of comfort and a place of suffering – a switcheroo for the two men between their earthly experiences and the afterlife – Luke is making the point that it's important to seize the day to live into justice and right relationship while we can, because once we die it's too late for us to change ourselves or those we love.

Listen now to the word of God as it may come to us this morning in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and of the gospel writer, Luke.

[READER]

Readings: Jeremiah 32.1-3a, 6-15
Luke 16.19-31
C PENTECOST 19/Emmanuel Friedens Pulpit Swap
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“Carpe Diem”

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Each day we wake up, we are given a gift. We are given the gift of a new beginning. We are given the opportunity to see our world in a new way. We are given the chance to alter old behavior, bad attitudes, broken relationships. The past is past, the future not yet born. There is only today to live into the faith we profess, only today to feel the breath of God in our lungs and on our faces, only today to grab hold of the love of Christ and to carry it into the world where we find ourselves. Whatever our condition, whatever our circumstance, whatever our body’s strength or mind’s clarity or soul’s longing, today is the day to be bearers of hope, lovers of justice, embodiments of mercy, prophets of peace.

Last Sunday, I read in a facebook post that a church I served in the late 1990’s had celebrated its last service in the building which had been its home for its whole life. Although I can imagine how things came to this, I do not know the details. I was touched to see pictures of people I had known while I was there, and I could feel the bittersweetness that surely mingled in the emotions of leaving the good old days behind along with the burden of an aging, costly edifice. This Sunday the congregation will take hold of the gift of life and gather to worship. The church is not dead. The congregation is moving across the street and what once was surely once a great divide to worship in the community hall of the Catholic church with whom they’ve been friendly for years. They are living into the new covenant of Jeremiah, where geography and tradition and practice are not what defines them as God’s people, but rather the faith in their hearts. They, like

Jeremiah buying the land at Anathoth, are living into the wisdom expressed by Maxine Hong Kingston, “In a time of destruction, create something.” Perhaps your resources and the world you have known are not the same. But *carpe diem*. Now is the time, to bear witness that God is still God. Now is the time to grab the hand of Jesus who brings life out of death. Now is the time to live in hope of what yet can be.

There are some who question whether new life really is possible. Jesus’ parable leaves us hanging. The rich man has died, and now he lies in the bed he’s made for himself. There are consequences to the blindness of privilege. It isn’t the privilege alone that’s the problem. The rich man simply doesn’t see Lazarus at all there in the gate, covered with sores, with only dogs to minister to him. He doesn’t see, doesn’t bother to see. And so it comes as no surprise when we hear Father Abraham’s declaration that Lazarus cannot go back to warn the rich man’s brothers. They wouldn’t pay attention to a poor man returned from the dead, he insists. And besides they already have all the material they need, all the wisdom that can be imparted, at their fingertips and in their hearing and perhaps on their doorposts and in their hearts, if they will only heed it. Father Abraham seems to feel it’s unlikely that they will bother to see, though. It may be hopeless to overcome the dangers of wealth in this lifetime.

Except. Except that every day is new. Except that with God all things are possible. Except that with God hearts are broken open and the world can be reborn. Except that we have a guide, God incarnate in Jesus, to show us the way to what is possible. And so we can pluck the possibility out of this day, the possibility that we and the world can be transformed into the fullness of God’s hope for us.

Transformation is hard work. The transition from what has been to what is can be costly. It means leaving things behind: literal things, items we cherish, and figurative ones: beliefs, attitudes, comfort levels. It can mean leaping out into the great unknown, trusting that even if we never see the fruits of our hopes and dreams, that signs of our faithfulness will live on: in our children or our church or our community. Just as wealth and privilege can be infectious and cause ignorance, once we begin to open our minds to the potential and life-changing power of God's radical, leveling love, that too can be contagious.

A couple weeks ago, a member of FRCS who is in seminary was meeting with me and asked what I thought about Colin Kaepernick's actions. I had to confess I'd heard of them but didn't know much, and so couldn't comment at the time. Since then, I've made it a point to learn more. I know that Colin Kaepernick is real person, with sincere opinions, a career, a community, a history. He's also an interesting figure with feet in more than one world: the privilege of professional sports and the reality of being a person of color in a racist society; he's bi-racial, who identifies as black and was raised by adoptive white parents; he's a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and a man willing to risk a political statement. In speaking of his faith, he once said: "I think God guides me through every day and helps me take the right steps and has helped me to get to where I'm at. When I step on the field, I always say a prayer, say I am thankful to be able to wake up that morning and go out there and try to glorify the Lord with what I do on the field. I think if you go out and try to do that, no matter what you do on the field, you can be happy about what you did." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colin_Kaepernick)

These days he glorified God by taking a knee in silent witness to justice denied and hope for change.

Clarence Jordan, the civil rights era preacher, once observed about the story of the rich man and Lazarus that the chasm between the two worlds is as deep as the wall around the rich man's property and privilege is high. Colin Kaepernick has seized the day and is doing his part to take one wall which divides us down one piece at a time. Against the Leviathan of racism and white privilege, he has begun his witness alone. Many who are too blind to see complain, some with frightening vitriol. Yet some who unlike the rich man and Lazarus still remain on this side of the veil between life and death have joined him. Football players on his team, and others teams, have joined his quiet kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem. In last Saturday's Gazette, a writer from the Palm Beach Herald defended the actions of members of the Miami Dolphins and their coaches for taking a knee at their games. A Southern white graduate of Clemson University, a woman, has written an equally articulate defense now being shared on Facebook. There are girls on soccer teams, and fans in the stands who have also been plucked out of ignorance and apathy. If the police violence against black men experienced in Chicago and Cleveland and Minneapolis and Tulsa and Charlotte is to end, now is the time for witness, for our collective witness of anger, pain and hope – even if the fruits of peace we are planting and long to savor now do not come to full maturity in our lifetimes.

“In a time of destruction, create something.”

Emmanuel Friedens, you have given years to witness, years to planting hope in this city and region, even when the going has been hard and sometimes, I'm sure, felt

hopeless. Thank you for that witness. Thank you for building community over brunch once a month, and making a redistribution of the abundance of clothing enjoyed by some possible for those in need. Thank you for speaking out and for taking steps – literally – to demand that the wall between wealthy and poor school districts be leveled and educational spending be distributed equitably. Thank you for opening your hearts to Syrian refugees and for partnering across denominational and municipal lines. I pray this church will continue to find creative ways to seize the day as it dawns, especially in challenging times , to proclaim with action and story that God’s redemption is coming. Hope is alive. Quiet love creates transformation, when taken one step at a time. Now is the time for justice. Let us seize the day. Amen.