

**Hope is an Action Verb  
(Letters from Jail)  
Jeremiah 32:2-12**

Ten days ago, right before my son Andres was due back at college,  
he and I went to the movies together,  
a last bit of mother-son bonding time.

We chose to see 'The Butler.'

No, that's not true.

I **announced** that we would be seeing The Butler.

19 year old boys don't respond all that well to edicts,

so Andres was grumbling all the way into the theater --

*this is going to be so boring, Mom, it's like a history lesson or something,  
and I've already taken history.*

Truth is, he didn't budge from his seat;

like me, Andres was gripped by the story that unfolded on the screen before  
us;

the story of this nation's struggle with racial oppression,

and the journey toward civil rights,

all told from the vantage point of the man who lived through it all as a  
butler in the White House.

It is beautifully and powerfully told,

and yes, it is *like a history lesson or something,*

but a history lesson each one of us needs to see and remember over and  
over again.

The movie spans many decades, a number of which I've been alive for --  
and so Andres was eager to know what I remembered, or what our family  
might have been a part of.

When the march from Selma to Montgomery took place,

I leaned over and whispered "David's dad was there," and he thought that  
was pretty cool.

And towards the end of the movie,

there's a scene in which students are shown protesting outside the South  
African embassy in Washington,

demanding an end to apartheid, getting themselves arrested.

So I leaned over again and said "I did that. I protested apartheid."

"Did you get arrested?" Andres asked.

And, you know, I was embarrassed to tell my son the answer.

**No. No, son,** I didn't get arrested.

Here we were, at the end of a movie in which we'd watched people sitting down at lunch counters only to have hot coffee thrown in their faces, being pummeled with firehoses on the streets of Selma, and bitten by police dogs, and thrown in jail, all of them, again and again and again ...

And there I was, admitting

"no, son, I didn't have the gumption to go to jail."

It was 1984, and a group of us from Yale Divinity School were protesting in downtown New Haven, along with hundreds of other Yale students, demanding that Yale divest from South Africa.

The organizers had told us that if we stayed on the sidewalks, we'd be left alone;

but anyone who stepped into streets and blocked traffic would automatically be arrested by the New Haven Police.

And they hoped a lot of people **would** do that, so the protest would be noticed.

So my friend Susan took a deep breath, stepped off the sidewalk and walked into the street. She looked back at me.

But I, I panicked. I stayed on the sidewalk, waving my sign, and thinking "I can't get arrested. I gotta get a job."

There's some moral courage for you.

**Not.**

Meanwhile, seven thousand miles away, Nelson Mandela was sitting in jail, where he'd been for *two decades*, in a prison cell on Robben Island, off the coast of Capetown, South Africa, praying that the world would do something.

Folks -- with a lot more courage than I -- made sure, finally, that the world **did** do something;

and when Mandela finally emerged from Robben Island, years later,

what was astonishing and powerful to see was that he had never lost hope.

All that time in a cell, all that time waiting,  
 this was someone who had believed that his country could change and  
 would,  
 that people of faith would be at work to build the world God intended.  
 He emerged with hope.

I think of him --  
 and of every courageous protester that the movie bore witness to --  
 when I read the scripture passage that Betsy shared with you this morning.

It's not a well-known piece of scripture.  
 It's the story of .... a real-estate deal.  
 What appears to be a pretty *bad* real estate deal.  
 Here's how it goes.  
 Jeremiah the prophet is sitting in a jail cell in Jerusalem  
 in the year 594 BC.  
 And his cousin Hanamel comes to visit him with a financial proposition.  
 "Jeremiah," he says, "I've got this field I thought you might want to buy.  
 Nice piece of property, back in your hometown of Anathoth."

Now here's what you need to know about Jeremiah's situation.  
 He was in jail because he had incurred the wrath of every important  
 politician in Jerusalem,  
 up to and including the King.  
 And he'd done this by having the courage to point out to anyone who'd  
 listen  
 that the country of Israel was headed the wrong direction.  
 The poor were hurting, and hurting worse each year,  
 and no one was doing a darn thing about it.

So Jeremiah had said this - I'm going to paraphrase here -- he said -  
 "People, this country's days are numbered, Promised Land or not.  
 Right over there are the Babylonians,  
 looking to take over this place, and honestly, we probably deserve it.  
 If we don't shape up,  
 if we don't start treating people better, well, I'm telling you,  
 the barbarians are literally at the gate,  
 and Jerusalem as we know it is going to disappear."

**Treason!** said the king, and threw Jeremiah in jail.

So here's Jeremiah, sitting in jail in Jerusalem,  
 knowing, *knowing* that Jerusalem was about to be overtaken,  
 knowing -- and he was right about this -- that his beloved country was  
 about to fall.

And what does he do next?

He buys property.

He **buys** that field that his cousin Hanamel is offering for sale.

A field in a land about to be conquered by the bad guys.

A piece of property in a country about to be no more.

Jeremiah knows all this.

But still he says "Sure. I'll take it. Seventeen shekels? You got it."

Now, the prison guards watching this, they're astonished.

They gather around in amazement.

The Voice of Doom himself is investing in land in Israel?

"Yeah, I'm buying that field," Jeremiah tells them,

"I'm buying that field because here's what I believe.

I believe that with God nothing is impossible.

I believe that one day fields and houses and vineyards  
 will again be bought in this land."

When it comes right down to it, it wasn't so much a piece of **land** Jeremiah  
 was buying as a piece of **hope**.

What he did proclaimed hope to everyone who witnessed it,  
 and most of all, gave *himself* hope.

Gave himself hope for what someday would be.

Jeremiah lived on the vision of what God's world would be,

just like Nelson Mandela centuries later,

just like every freedom rider

and civil rights marcher

and protester brave enough to lay their lives on the line.

Jeremiah -- and all who followed him --

lived and breathed hope.

This week, I sat down and read a letter written in another jail cell --

I sat and read Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham jail,

written in April of 1963.

If, like me, it's been a long time -- or never -- since you read it,  
 Google it this afternoon and read it.  
 Now, it **is** long. As King himself says in his last paragraph, with wry humor,  
*this would have been shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable  
 desk,  
 rather than alone in a jail cell with nothing to do but pray and write.*  
 But it's worth reading every word.  
 It is a powerful reminder of how deeply rooted in faith the civil rights  
 movement was,  
 how every brave and beaten occupant of a Birmingham jail cell  
 were themselves the Jeremiahs of our time,  
 speaking as courageously for the oppressed.

It is also *painful* to read. The letter was written in response to an open  
 letter published by *clergy*,  
 clergy who denounced Rev. King as an extremist,  
 and condemned the non-violent protesters for stirring up trouble.  
 So King's letter is a letter written by a Christian pastor working for justice  
 responding to the condemnation of -- Christian pastors.  
 You see our faith both at its most inspiring -- and at its most disheartening.

But there is nothing disheartened about the words that King writes.  
 From a jail cell, he writes this:  
 "I have no despair about the future.  
 I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle.  
 We will reach the goal of freedom, because the goal of America is freedom.  
 We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation  
 and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.  
 And in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and  
 brotherhood  
 will shine over our great nation."  
 Like Jeremiah, King stakes his claim on a land that will **someday** be.

My husband David always knows well enough ahead of time what his  
 sermons are about  
 to be able to give them a title we can print in the Sunday bulletin --  
 something for you to look at when you arrive here,  
 giving you a clue of what to expect.  
 As you'll notice, I never have a title, can't give you a clue,

because frankly, I don't always **have** a clue where I'm headed.  
 But if I **did** have a title for today's sermon,  
 sure seems like it would have to be something like "lessons from the lock-  
 up."

From Jeremiah to the Freedom Riders, from Mandela to King to my friend  
 Susan,  
 every one of my stories today, you notice, has had someone in a jail cell.

Well, maybe that would be the *subtitle*.

But what this sermon is **really** about is **hope**.

Not *sitting around waiting for something good to happen* hope,  
 not *I sure hope someone takes care of this* hope.

But hope that **does** something.

In God's kingdom, hope is an action verb.

Jeremiah spoke out for justice with hope,  
 bought that field from his cousin as a statement of hope,  
 as an act of hope.

The Freedom Riders of the 60's boarded buses in hope,  
 their brothers and sisters marched in hope.

Nelson Mandela spoke and sang and marched -- and went to prison -- in  
 hope.

Hope, for all of them, was an action verb, a doing verb.

Because the hope of our faith **is** an action verb.

Not wishful thinking,  
 not "someday maybe"

The hope our faith calls us to is a doing verb --

Everyone who does anything to bring about God's kingdom  
 is actively, faithfully, hoping.

So I'll close with a story about one of your sisters in faith in this church  
 who is hoping every day.

*Actively* hoping.

Living, breathing, **doing** hope.

Courtney Ruble, Mike and Peggy's daughter,

child of this church, Junior Deacon,

well, right now she's in Senegal,

a Peace Corps Volunteer in month 4 of a 27 month assignment.

On her online blog, across the top of the page,

is a quote that pretty much sums it up:

"If you think you're too small to make a difference,  
 you've obviously never been in bed with a mosquito."  
 Courtney, who is one tiny young woman,  
 is out there making a difference --  
 She is motivated by her faith,  
 and by the compassion that all of us have seen in her for as long as we've  
 known her.

**And** she is spurred on, as she writes in her blog,  
 by "*that fear that I won't make an impact on this earth.*"  
 That's not something Courtney has to worry about anymore.  
 She is living in an African village,  
 working to combat malnutrition,  
 a Fairfield County girl who just celebrated the end of Ramadan with her  
 Muslim family and neighbors.  
 And if the kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace and of justice,  
 where children grow in safety and love,  
 then there is no question that Courtney is building that kingdom --  
 in hope, and courage,  
 and, judging by the pictures, with a whole lot of joy too.  
 Hope is an action verb.  
 Courtney's figured that out.

Realistically,  
 most of us here aren't going to end up in jail for our faith,  
 or Senegal --  
 although we'll be darn proud of you if you do.  
 But all of us need to turn hope into an action verb.  
 We need to **do** hope, **be** hope, **act** in hope.  
 We need to be constantly, actively, at work in this world because there is  
 plenty left to do,  
 Lord knows,  
 so much left to do to build the kingdom of God.

May we be courageous in our hoping,  
 tireless in our hoping,  
 and most of all, active in our hoping.  
 Amen.