

“Spair” (28Nov21)
Jer33:14-16, Lk21:25-36

I wind up mentioning the BYOB Bible study fairly often. You may get sick of hearing about them, like being overfed on pumpkin pie. Or maybe eavesdropping a bit is enjoyable to you, even with a little perverse delight.

However it is for you, it show I’m grateful for the group. It’s good for me to hear how they’re thinking about the Bible readings for the week. I’m part of a text study with other pastors that meets at the Vintage brewpub on Tuesday afternoons, but pastor schedules can get crazy, so I am prone to miss, and there’s plenty of other stuff to talk about these days when we are together, so the Bible readings can fall by the wayside.

This past Monday evening, I was late to BYOB Bible study. A Building and Grounds Team meeting to discuss scheduling for needed upcoming maintenance projects was my fourth meeting of the day, and I left from that Zoom room to go to the monthly Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice board meeting, which included adopting our budget and fundraising goals, and when that was finished, I got to jump in 40 minutes late to BYOB.

They were on the Jeremiah reading, and I tuned in just in time to hear somebody declare that it’s about hope, and that’s what we need. It’s about hope, and that’s what we need. I like it. I agree. See? It’s helpful to hear what BYOB folks have to say.

And just after I arrived and got to hear the declaration that hope is what we need, it became even more apparent, because the conversation directly turned to Waukesha and the immense sadness and shock, and then on to anti-vaxxers and politics and the rest. We need the hope, because there doesn’t seem to be much in our present reality otherwise. We’re mired in much that’s hopeless, which is of course exactly when we need hope. The word despair has the root meaning “without hope.” So it’s just when we’d despair that we need some spair, some hope.

And, of course, it’s always this way.

For example, those three little verses of Jeremiah went by fast and had the odd Advent imagery of the branch sprouting from David’s tree. The surrounding verses and chapters in Jeremiah are pretty darn bleak: there’s stuff about child sacrifices (32:35) and those who refused to free slaves will have “their corpses become food for the birds of the air” (34:20) and still more death for others “by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (32:36). Their neighbors had been exiled. Jeremiah himself is in jail (33:1). There’s the overwhelmed overstatement that “King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms of the earth and all the peoples under his dominion were fighting against Jerusalem” (34:1). Just when you start to feel a little better by getting to say a fun name like Nebuchadrezzar, then you get swamped in the dire implications of what it would be to be besieged by every army on earth. The people are feeling so onslaught and slaughtered, their homeland so desolated, that they evidently were saying “It is a waste without human beings or animals” (33:10a).

But against that saying, the refrain describing their present state, instead God declares “there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing” (33:10b-11).

And, again, we can relate. We recall a year of pandemic when there were practically no weddings, when life itself seemed to be on hold. We still might feel too little of the voices of mirth and gladness, including as we’re unable to sing some of our favorite melodies with the carols of the season. We need an assurance that it’ll be okay, that God is looking out for us, that we have safety with a Savior who saves us (as all three words were in the Jeremiah reading). We need confidence in the promise, which is why just after those verses God declares that it’s so unshakeable that you could just as well try to break God’s

covenant with the day and night, that just as sure as you can be that dawn follows night, you can be absolutely sure that God keeps God's promises for you.

Jesus, too, refers to sun, moon, stars as indicators, and then he adapts the image to seasons and cycles of plant life, that you can witness those and trust.

Jesus fear and foreboding and worries and maybe the destruction of earth itself. And he suggest you should be alert, be on guard.

We don't need him to tell us that. We've felt under attack and trying to keep up our defenses through months of the pandemic, with the newly horrifying sensation for most of us that it's not safe to go places. In the past week, we've also been confronted with whether it's safe to go to a protest, or if we'll get shot, and whether it's safe to go to a Christmas parade or if we'll get run over, whether our planet is safe or if we're doomed careening toward climate catastrophes. Of course, many others who are oppressed spend their whole lives wondering whether it's safe for them, whether they can even come into church. We don't need Jesus to tell us to keep alert. Our despair does that for us.

And yet, what we do need is to keep alert for hope. Despair is almost always ready to engulf us, so how do we come up for a breath of air? How do we turn back for some spair, for the hope we need?