

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The passage that we read in the Book of Jeremiah today may seem, at first, like an odd choice. In fact, the chapter that comes before the one we heard this morning deals with restoration and the new covenant and may seem a far more popular and applicable passage. But there is something about this story of an ordinary exchange of land that goes beyond a simple field—it is a story of hope for the future and trusting in God’s promises.

The prophet Jeremiah was a captive of the King of Judah. The field in question had an army camped on it as they laid siege to the city. The land was completely worthless and stripped of anything valuable. Yet Jeremiah bought it, not because it was of any current use to him, but because of the promise it held. God promised that one day that occupied field would once again be a growing vineyard. So, Jeremiah bought the field and took the jar and sealed the deed in it because he wanted to keep it safe.

There is something about this moment in time that just captures my heart. Jeremiah safely sealed the deed away because he had hope for the future. He wanted the deed to be safe and last as long as it took. So, it was not a question of IF God’s promises would be fulfilled but WHEN they would be fulfilled. It could be during Jeremiah’s time, it could be 100 years from then—but Jeremiah had faith in God’s promise, even if it would take years to come to fruition. In the previous verses Jeremiah had already prophesied that this siege would turn into 70 years of Babylonian rule. But he made it clear that he believed God’s promise that the land would be restored to the people. Fields would be bought and sold again. Vineyards would be grown there again.

I wonder at that moment of hope. At the strength of Jeremiah who did what must have seemed crazy at the time. He did not question God; he just trusted in God’s promise and had hope for something more. By buying the field, he put this hope into action.

From week to week we read excerpts of scripture. While we tend to follow some of the books over several weeks, we still miss pieces. When we take the Bible as a whole, we quickly see that within its pages, throughout centuries and generations, there is a story of love and hope. Not the human side of love and hope, but rather that of a creator who has remained faithful to creation. God’s love changes everything for us as individuals and as a community, and it is in that love that we find hope for the future. That hope gives us the courage to live out God’s call in our lives.

Time and again throughout history God’s people have been asked to do the impossible. The Israelites once stood at the edge of the Red Sea, with an army pressing against their back while Moses asked them to take a step in faith. The prophets preached hope every day while they waited for God’s promises to be fulfilled. When the time came, and people were returned to their lands after being held captive, they often found themselves standing before a ruin of their former lives. But God always helped them to rebuild. When Nehemiah finally convinced King Artaxerxes to allow his people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the ruined walls, they were surrounded by enemies who did not want them to succeed. Yet they managed to rebuild the walls in 52 days. In the New Testament we read story after story of the lame walking, the blind seeing, the leper being cleansed, and demons being cast out. How many times did Jesus stand before the body of someone who was dead and then do the impossible and call them back to life? Just ask Lazarus about that.

Through the love of God, the impossible gives way to the possibility of something much more. The only reason God’s people have the faith to do what seems impossible, to face difficult odds, is because they believe at their core that they are known and loved by God. Through that love they find hope, even in the face of invading armies, occupied territory, or the question of whether a vineyard will be replanted.

As Jeremiah proved, it just takes one person to have hope. It took one deed, one jar, one act of faith. All these little actions put together created something much bigger: room for God's work to continue to come to fruition.

Today is Presbyterians Sharing Sunday. Today, we celebrate all of the incredible ministries we support both here in Canada and around the world with the gifts we give to Presbyterians Sharing. Our prayers, our money, our support—all come together to bless countless ministries and share the love of Christ.

This morning I would like to share a few stories with you—stories of hope, vision, passion, and call. Stories of people like Jeremiah, one by one summoning their courage and putting their hope into action, faithfully working to share God's love and build God's kingdom in the world.

Working with refugees

Stephanie Chunoo is a young woman from Leaside Presbyterian Church. After graduating with a degree in Communications and a certificate in refugee and migration studies from York University, Stephanie wondered if there was something she could do to serve the church. She was accepted to the PCC's one-year young adult internship program, which receives support from gifts to Presbyterians Sharing.

Stephanie was assigned to work for a year with the Kalunba Social Services, a ministry of the Reformed Church in Hungary, that helps refugees and asylum seekers integrate into Hungarian society. It's a challenging and even dangerous time to be helping refugees in Hungary. Many Hungarians are suspicious of newcomers, especially since the Hungarian government regularly portrays migrants and refugees as people linked to crime and terrorism. This provokes fear among the people, many of whom are convinced that their Christian country will turn increasingly Islamic with each incoming migrant. The prime minister strongly supports an anti-migration platform, and in April, Hungary's parliament passed laws which make claims for asylum almost impossible and criminalize individuals or groups who offer to help a person who has claimed asylum. The legislation was passed in defiance of the European Union regulations and human rights groups.

Yet in the midst of fear, Stephanie and the staff and volunteers at Kalunba continue to serve the refugees who come to them, providing them with Hungarian language classes and support in their search for employment and housing. Among her many tasks, Stephanie offers child care, English classes, advocacy services and helps plan activities for the children. She recently wrote, "The work here is very stressful, but these situations remind me why God has put this opportunity in my path." Like Jeremiah, Stephanie and the others at Kalunba have hope for a world where one day all will be welcomed. They are putting their hope into action, with the support of Presbyterians Sharing.

Translating the Word of God in Taiwan

In 1982, during his final year at Knox College, the Rev. Dr. Paul McLean and his wife Mary Beth felt God's call to be partners in mission with the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, living and serving among the minority Hakka people.

Paul and Mary Beth soon found themselves in Taiwan, living in the Hakka countryside, literally on the edge of a rice field. There were 40,000 Hakka people in the town, and only one church with about 80 members. With much love, patience and good humour, the Rev. Hiû San-hiung and members of the church taught Paul and Mary Beth how to speak the difficult Hakka language. During that first year of intensive language study, Paul would stare at his bookcase and wonder why he bothered to bring his Hebrew and Greek Bibles, lexica, grammars and commentaries. Then, one day Rev. Hiû brought a draft

translation of Mark's Gospel to Paul's Hakka language class and when Paul discovered some typos and mistakes in the translation, he was invited to join the PCT's newly formed translation team. At that moment, Paul knew why God had called him to Taiwan. In 1984, he joined Rev. Hiû and others in translating the Bible into Hakka. It was challenging work that required much patience—but the team persevered and in 2012, 28 years later, they finished translating the entire Bible. Paul shares, "Over the years that I served on the Hakka Bible translation project, God taught me lessons in teamwork. As each member on the team humbly offered their various gifts back to God, as we prayed and worked together with the same goal in mind, as we looked to the Lord for insights, we discovered that God the Holy Spirit could do wonderful things."

After the Hakka Bible was published, Paul wondered what he would do next. He wondered about pastoral ministry in Canada. But God had other plans. The Bible Society in Taiwan and leaders in the PCT approached him to serve as a translation advisor to several PCT indigenous teams who are trying to complete their Bibles. Even though he didn't know all of those languages, he could help the teams work through the lessons and principles he had learned while translating the Hakka bible. So, since 2012, he has had the great joy of serving with brilliant indigenous pastors and elders, deacons and lay people, men and women, who are faithfully using their God-given gifts to translate the whole Bible, each into their own minority languages.

Like Jeremiah, Paul and his translation teams look to the future with hope. Even knowing that it will take many years, they are putting their hope into action, word by word, as they translate the Bible into these endangered languages – so people can read and hear the word of God in the language of their hearts. Presbyterians Sharing is helping to make this dream a reality.

Renewing congregations

It can be hard for congregations to discern how they can share God's love and hope in our changing world. A number of new programs supported by Presbyterians Sharing are creating renewal and new growth by helping congregations across Canada assess their potential for vital ministry. Over 60 congregations have participated in the discipleship, coaching and group discernment processes of ReVision, *New Beginnings*, Cyclical and the Presbyterian Evangelism Network.

Two congregations of the Kensington-St. John's, New London pastoral charge in P.E.I.—were experiencing the downward trends seen in many mainline churches: aging members, dwindling numbers and few young families. The Rev. Torrey Griffiths shares, "You could hardly blame us if we resigned ourselves to our fate and lived out our remaining years doing what we've always done. But there was a burning desire to try new things and to see what God had in store."

Through the ReVision program they used small group devotions, discussions and visioning to learn how to discern the Spirit's calling and direction. A coach helped guide them through the process. Torrey explains, "There's no doubt the Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald was sent by God to help, encourage and gently nudge us along our journey." It wasn't an easy process and the church struggled to recruit leadership team members that represented a cross-section of the congregations, find leaders that had the gifts, time and willingness to serve the small groups, and sort out technical things like printing devotionals. But they persevered and saw God at work as they experienced new hope and energy. There was genuine excitement and hope for what God had in store.

At their first congregational summit meeting they discussed and identified the congregation's gifts and passions. So many ideas were generated that the participants had to prayerfully consider the options. They came up with a short list of potential ministries: start an adult Sunday School; host free lunches every Thursday for the Junior/Senior High students in Kensington; install a lift to make the building accessible so they could host more activities for the congregation and the community; and

create a new Outreach Team with the focus of making the churches more relevant by reaching out to their communities with God's love. Four teams were created to explore details such as costs, logistics, timeframes, needs and interest for each option. In November, each group shared their proposals and after much prayer and discernment the participants identified which of the options they felt called to support. In the end, they decided to move forward with all four! Although the small congregations still face challenges, as a pastoral charge they find themselves moving forward in faith and in hope as they implement the new initiatives. God is at work.

It's a time of change for the church, and our gifts to Presbyterians Sharing are helping congregations experiment and dream of new things—putting their hope into action and making concrete changes.

Seeing hope for the future is what Presbyterians Sharing is all about. It's more than just the financial gifts that congregations and individuals share to support mission and ministry across Canada and around the world—it's the time people invest in committees, working groups and planning teams, the skills shared by coaches and mentors, the prayers offered for the work we do together, and so much more. Together we are acting in hope for the future—hope for a church that shares the love of God locally, nationally and internationally.

We can't see the future. It is easy to become overwhelmed with the challenges facing our communities, our country, our world. But, like Jeremiah, we choose hope over despair. We choose to see God at work, building something new in the midst of change. All of our individual actions, put together, are creating something much bigger: room for God's work to continue to come to fruition. Together we are building God's kingdom as we share God's love, in Canada and around the world. Amen.