

Twinbrook Baptist Church
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Radical Hope

Jeremiah 32:1-16

Toward the end of his life, Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Nation of American Indians, sat down with a trusted trapper from Montana named Frank Linderman and told him the story of his people. In what became a book with Linderman as author, there is a note toward the end in which Linderman says that he was unable to get Plenty Coups to talk about what had happened after the Crow were confined to a reservation. He writes: "Plenty Coups refused to speak of his life after the passing of the buffalo, so that his story seems to have been broken off, leaving many years unaccounted for. 'I have not told you half of what happened when I was young,' he said, when urged to go on. 'I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing. But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this, nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere. 'Besides,' he added sorrowfully, 'you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away.'"¹

"After this, nothing happened." It is a telling statement from the Crow chief. More than an old chief expressing nostalgia or feeling depressed, this statement reflects a real change in a way of living. The old Crow world—of following the buffalo and preparing meals, of war bonnets and bravery proved in battle, of preparing for the hunt and traveling with the seasons—that world was now gone. "After this," Plenty Coups said, "nothing happened."

Jeremiah found himself imprisoned in the guardhouse of the royal palace. The king, Zedekiah, did not like Jeremiah's words. You see, Jerusalem was under siege from the Babylonian army. Hebrew national identity, their way of life as they had known it, was under threat. They were facing an uncertain and unknown future, and they did not know if they would even have a place in it. Jeremiah had spoken truth to the King and others when he said that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians, and that Zedekiah would be taken into exile in Babylon. For speaking his truth, and not explaining his message in a way that was more favorable to the king, Jeremiah was imprisoned. And yet, his words about the coming end of things for the Hebrew people struck a chord of truth, and they raised the anxious possibility of wondering and fearing what might come next.

Endings of all kinds come into our lives. Some we choose; some we don't. Our job ends or we retire; we suffer a break with someone we have cared for or we stand over the grave of a loved one; a child is born into our family and changes it forever or a child leaves home and things are somehow different; we move from a place that is familiar or we face an medical diagnosis that threatens to alter our lives in ways we cannot see; we come to the place where we can no longer drive on our own or walk on our own; a way of living we have known no longer works for us. Endings of all kinds come into our lives, and I think the hardest part of such pivotal moments is found in the fact that we cannot see the future. We cannot look over the hill and see in advance exactly what awaits us and how we will handle it. This is what makes it so difficult for us to let go and move forward in such times. So we cling tenaciously to what we have known, no matter how much denial we embrace or how destructive it might become, because, to borrow an old saying, the devil we know is better than the one we don't. And yet endings are a real part of life, from Plenty Coups' understanding of the history of the Crow Nation to those in Jeremiah's day who had such a hard time hearing his truthful words about their future.

Jeremiah's honest message that the present way of things would change and give way to an unknown future was hard to come to terms with. For one thing, it meant the possibility of a future without God, at least that would have been the assumption of those days. You see, the Hebrew people believed that God was with them as long as they were in the land of promise, and as long as there was a temple to house God's presence

in worship and ritual. With this assumption, to be taken into exile is to be separated from God altogether. They most certainly felt they were not just facing a crisis with an unknown future, but also a future without God in it.

Sometimes, I think we share a similar assumption about God's presence or lack of it when we face difficult times. We tend to associate God with good moments and joyful times, and that is a good thing. But we can also confine God only to those emotional places in our lives. Then the temptation is to believe that God has abandoned us when a crisis or difficult ending comes. With such assumptions, in such situations, it's harder for us to believe in any kind of future with God in it.

Like so many of the prophets, Jeremiah's story does not end on a note of resignation to fate and despair. It came to him as a possibility from God that Hanemel, his cousin, was going to approach him as next of kin with the right of buying his field at Anathoth, some nearby land. Now, in one sense, this was foolishness to the point of being humorous. Who would want to buy land that would be controlled by an enemy? Land they would never receive, much less get to live on? It would be like hearing from that suspect relative who wants to sell you the Brooklyn Bridge or some ocean-front property in North Dakota. It would be a foolhardy thing to do, to say the least. And yet, Jeremiah sees in this moment a word of hope from God. So, in the presence of a number of people in the court of the palace guardhouse, he weighs out the silver on the scales. He signs and seals the deed of purchase and had it witnessed. And he gave the copies to his friend and loyal assistant Baruch. With a number of people listening, Jeremiah instructs Baruch to take these copies and place them in an earthenware jar where they will be kept and protected for a long time. It was a modern day equivalent of putting them in a safe for safekeeping. Then Jeremiah says for all to hear: "the time will come when houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought and sold in this land."

It was an act of radical hope. To meet an unseen future with a positive gesture declaring that whatever happens things will be alright ultimately. You see we hope for all kinds of things we can pretty much foresee, things both large and small. We hope for good weather after we've heard a positive weather report. We hope for a good retirement, after we've heard a good word from our financial planner. We hope for a good day at work, knowing on most days pretty much how it will go. In other words, these kinds of hopes are the ones we can pretty well see and shape. But hope that is seen is not hope at its deepest. There is a deeper, more radical hope that can undergird our lives, and we are confronted with its possibility when endings come our way, and we can't see over the next horizon to know what is coming. That is where real hope can find its place in our lives. Hope finds its claim when we are confronted by a future that we cannot predict or control. This is what Jeremiah was reminding the people of God about. Confronted with the ending of the living they had known, they did not know how things would go, and they could not predict or control the outcome, ultimately. But Jeremiah's gesture of purchasing some land and saving the deed reminded them of the place of hope in their lives. It didn't take away the challenges they were facing, but it did give them a way to move forward.

In mentioning Chief Plenty Coups earlier, I want to say that even though he had a keen sense of ending for the way of life his people had known, there were also signs that he could look forward and trust a future he could not always see or understand. He encouraged the making of peace treaties with the U.S., even though this was often handled badly by govt. officials and others. And he encouraged his people to seek education in order to understand the White Man's world. And then there was this. In 1921, the United States inaugurated a dedication to The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Officials were invited from all over the world to attend this ceremony, and military leaders from places as far away as Europe and Japan came to participate. Chief Plenty Coups was also invited to attend as a representative of the Crow Nation. One person described the scene this way:

"After the chaplain had completed his prayers, Plenty Coups stepped forward. Dressed in brilliantly beaded buckskin, carrying a coup stick [a sign of honor and identity], and wearing an eagle-feather headdress, the seventy-two-year-old warrior's presence was a stunning match for the European generals and the officers from the Mikado's navy who stood in the front ranks of the audience in their polished boots and gold braid. The huge crowd watched in absolute silence as the . . . leader—who had first come to Washington with Pretty Eagle and Medicine Crow more than forty years before—removed his war bonnet and laid it on the sarcophagus along side his coup stick [filled with the feathers of his bravery]."ⁱⁱ

It was an act of radical hope, of letting go, but also realizing that he needed to move into a still unseen future. For us today, as people of faith, we face a similar challenge in our lives when endings come and the future is confronting us.

The kind of deeper hope Jeremiah calls us to always has an element of trust in it. It says I trust that there will be a future even if I cannot see it now. It says I trust that God will be part of that future, whatever may happen. It says I trust that with God, I can handle whatever comes my way. This is basic trust, and it seems that in the journey of faith we are always learning and relearning this simple yet profound truth. Is my hope rooted in the solid ground of basic trust or is it built upon the shifting sands of passing impulses? It takes time and spiritual discipline to develop this kind of trust in God. We don't get it by occasionally dipping into church or prayer or religious activities. It involves learning that we can trust God in and through our experiences, and integrating those experiences into our character.

As we seek radical hope, it is always a challenge to make hope happen at the right time and pace. If we try to get out ahead of things too far, become too controlling or set too many expectations, then we are diminished and lose something of our hope. On the other hand, if we become too passive, allow things to happen without any initiative or goals and gestures on our part, then we become diminished and lose the active sense of radical hope. Walking with God in hope has its own pace. Part of faith is finding and learning that pace.

Let us remember and mark it on our hearts: with God we can handle whatever may come; when we find ourselves at an ending—with God we can handle whatever may come; when we cannot see the future—with God we can handle whatever may come; on our best days and on our worst—with God we can handle whatever may come. This is trust, this is faith, this is radical hope.

i. This is episode is taken from Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2006).

ii. Quoted in Lear's book.