

Message: A Light in the Darkness

“A 2 1/2-year-old boy was struck by a train. The parents were in shock. One said, ‘It was as if time stood still. I heard a voice that was neither male nor female say, “He’s going to be all right, but it’s going to take a long time.” The prognosis wasn’t good. We were told that if he survived, he would be a vegetable.

But I believed in the voice. 40 years later, my son has a successful life, lives on his own and has a good job. It was a very long time before I told anyone about the voice and what it said.”¹

It’s hard to share our experience of God when we aren’t sure what people are going to say.

That family was suffering. The future was uncertain. They were living in the shadow of death. That’s an experience shared by many people across the world, in our neighborhoods and in our church family. Many of us are looking for a path, the way to go. God’s voice reassured them and gave them strength for the journey ahead. God will do the same for anyone who is in need and willing to listen.

Jeremiah is a good example of someone who listened to God in the middle of a dark time. We read three verses earlier (Jeremiah 33:14-16). Jeremiah is called the “weeping prophet.” He wrote the OT book that carries his name and is credited with writing the OT book of Lamentations. Even if you haven’t read any of his writings, you get the idea that things were difficult.

Here’s a synopsis of what Israel and the prophet were facing:

- **Jeremiah was an only child**, the son of Hilkiah, a Jewish priest (1:4). He served under five kings of Israel. He was called by the Lord in 626 BC and served until Jerusalem was overrun (587 BC). That’s 39 years. So he was an older, unpopular person.
- **King Zedekiah was a poor ruler.** He played bad politics and didn’t keep his word – he angered Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/when-god-speaks>

His epitaph is “*He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord*” (2 Kings 24:19-20; Jeremiah 52:2-3).

- **The king didn’t like Jeremiah.** He threw him in prison several times and also put Jeremiah in a cistern filled with mud until he was buried to his armpits (38:6). Zedekiah’s reason: “*How dare you preach, saying, ‘God says, I’m warning you’*” (32:3). Jeremiah was in jail for the second time when he wrote this portion of his book (32:1).
- **Jeremiah wrote what he heard God say** during the 10th year of Zedekiah’s rule (32:1). Jerusalem was nearing the end of an eighteen-month siege. There was famine in the city, plague in the outskirts and people in the nearby cities had been killed in the streets (32:24-25). The end of Jerusalem was near. These were dark times.

God revealed something special to Jeremiah. And he was listening! God said, “*Watch for this: The time is coming when I will keep the promise I made I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the [family of David]. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. [Things] will be secure and [you] live in safety. The motto ... will be, “GOD Has Set Things Right for Us”*” (Jeremiah 33:14-16, MSG)

We need help navigating the journey ahead. The first step on that path is to recall, remember and hold onto God’s promise, no matter what odds we face. This isn’t an intellectual exercise. It’s not something we have to study. It’s even beyond the ability of words to describe. It’s something that’s way down in the deepest part of our soul. That’s where the journey starts, with the first spark of light in our spirit. That spark comes from God first, and then we respond. That’s when it flickers and becomes a spiritual light in darkness. That’s real hope.

Have you ever heard God’s voice? Guideposts magazine did a poll in November 2016, asking that question. 2,000 people responded with different stories and conclusions. The majority (68%) believed they heard God’s voice. They acted - immediately. They didn’t all hear the same thing. It wasn’t always a voice. They heard what they needed to hear.

God’s voice offers guidance. One person said, *“I have heard the still small whisper a few times. Once, an altercation was settled because the Lord told me what to say, and I said it. The Spirit told me, ‘Mention your service.’ As soon as I mentioned my military service, the man's entire body language changed. He relaxed and even though he was drunk and armed, he calmed down. I didn't know he was armed until later.”*²

This time of year is difficult for some people. There are those who have experienced a painful loss. The season brings up memories filled with difficult emotions; their healing is still in process. Some of us are in the middle of a painful episode. There are those who have had a bad experience. Perhaps we’re struggling financially or with inner challenges – depression, addiction, bad decisions or maybe our pride and ego. We need to hear God’s voice, but we may not be ready or in the right frame of mind to accept God’s grace.

In my experience, Advent and Christmas are bittersweet. I learned this my first year as a pastor. One of the long-time members of the congregation died two days before Christmas. I was with the family. We experienced the pain of loss while celebrating the birth of Jesus. Even when things are darkest, there’s always hope. There’s the gentle love of Christ waiting – quietly, patiently and silently, to shine spiritual light into the corners of our heart. Every year I have been a pastor has been the same; a bittersweet time of remembrance and joy.

God speaks to reassure us, give guidance, alert us and talk straight. One young, unmarried woman said this: *“My son was a sweet, active boy of three, and he was asleep. I was alone in the kitchen beginning to fry some chicken. Thinking about my life situation, I yelled out to God that I wanted to get married.*

*I was so distraught I wasn't even shocked to hear God speak in my mind. I heard God say, ‘Are you hungry?’ Still busy cooking, in my mind I said out of curiosity, ‘Yes.’ Then I heard God ask, ‘Is the chicken ready?’ ‘No,’ I said, still curious. Then I heard the voice say sweetly, ‘Neither are you.’”*³

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

That’s straight talk. Sometimes that’s exactly what we need.

Jesus speaks to us, through Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit and other people. We don’t have to “hear voices.” We don’t need a dramatic salvation story. Quiet, confident faith in our relationship opens us to Jesus’ prompting. The Holy Spirit reassures us, gives guidance, alerts us and talks straight when we need it. Our spiritual pilot light is ready to be lit.

Today’s reading from Luke 21:25-36 is a good example.

It’s important to read this in context. Jesus was teaching in the temple. People were trying to trap him with a question about taxes, and the Sadducees and others who were showing off. His disciples were admiring the stonework of the temple when Jesus made a startling statement, “...*the time is coming when every stone in that building will end up in a heap of rubble*” (v6, MSG).

Jesus warned us about “doomsday deceivers” (v8). He tells us that we’re going to see a lot of things before he returns. There will be wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution and more (vv10-12). Family members will turn us in for our faith. There will be great rage. People will be dragged off to prison. Everything will come to a head.

Jesus made the greatest promise: He will return in full glory! (v27) There won’t be any doubt. Everyone will see. We can stand tall. God’s promise will be completed. This message isn’t for the future, but for all of us. The stars and earth will wear out before Jesus’ words fail (v33).

Jesus gives us a warning, “*Be on guard. Don’t let ... your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping.... Don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray ... that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before me*” (vv34-36, MSG).

I don’t know about you, but I need a little help with that.

The best place to start? Listen. Listen for God’s voice when you’re in life’s shadows. As one person said, “*It was a voice telling me what to do when I dislocated my artificial hip in a situation where I was miles from anywhere and couldn’t get any help. No idea if it was God, but it was a*

being's voice telling me authoritatively what to do to get my femur to go back into the hip socket - on my own, something I would never ever have known to do otherwise. I was in shock at the dislocation, about the voice and also the fact that what I was told worked.”⁴

Sounds like a miracle to me. I believe God does many, small miracles every day. We just have to listen, watch ... and ask.

**Trust God. Believe in God’s promise.
Follow the first light to real life.**

Let us pray ...

Lord, we are a people living in the shadows of life. We see your light, but there are dark things weighing down our souls. Our will is not completely focused on you. Our minds are filled with habits and patterns we need to un-learn. Our bodies are tired. We’re under stress and easily fall into unhealthy behaviors. Worst of all, we’re focused on our own, selfish needs. We forget to put other’s needs first. And then, when we do, we find ourselves overwhelmed even more. We need a spark, Lord. We need you to light a spark of faith, hope and love in our souls. When you do, we find nourishment, firm footing for today, love we can share with others. That’s worth preparing ourselves to receive. Help us to live that way, today and every day during this season. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

⁴ *Ibid*

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (CEB)

The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called:

The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

Luke 21:25-36 (CEB)

There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

Take care that your hearts aren’t dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don’t let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One.”

(The Message) – Jeremiah 33:14-18

“Watch for this: The time is coming’ - GOD’s Decree - ‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, “GOD Has Set Things Right for Us.” GOD has made it clear that there will always be a descendant of David ruling the people of Israel and that there will always be Levitical priests on hand to offer burnt offerings, present grain offerings, and carry on the sacrificial worship in my honor.’”

(The Message) – Luke 21:25-38

It will seem like all hell has broken loose - sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

“And then - then! - they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style - a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!”

He told them a story. “Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. The same here - when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. Don’t brush this off: I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too - these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.

But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”