

Butterflies and the Last Straw
Jeremiah 31:1-6, 10-13, 17a; John 11:17-44
Rev. Dr. Nancy E. J. Gladden

The Scripture passages this morning are about life. So, let's think about what we already know about life, or to approach the topic from another angle – how not to lose your life. When a woman I know is going through a difficult time, she always says, "I figure if I keep sucking air, things will get better." In those times, there is still life, but it seems kind of tenuous.

We're told all the facts about diet and its role in a good life. But doesn't it seem like the rules keep changing about what we should and shouldn't eat? The experts keep identifying the "power foods" and suddenly everybody's on them like they've been offered a magic pill. And then, my friends, there are the fast-food restaurants – those bad-for-you places. However, I want to point out something I have noticed. Every morning, the parking lot at Hardee's in Wallace is full. It's pretty much the same crowd every morning, and there is important keep-the-world-spinning conversation going on. If you go in there you will notice these people are not spring chickens. And what are they eating? Fast food! If it's so bad for you, then why are these people still around? As my children used to say, "I'm just saying!"

Speaking of children, here's another observation about having a good life. You walk into your child's bedroom, and it looks like there was an explosion of nuclear proportions. And so, you indicate how unacceptable it is and ask that it be cleaned up. The next time you go in obviously nothing has been done and it appears a hazmat or disaster assistance team may be needed. This time you remind your child that you said the room needed to be cleaned up and you weren't just making a suggestion. When you come back the third time and still nothing has been done, the parent's blood pressure begins to exceed healthy limits. Then the child now needs to understand his or her life is in imminent danger!

That's kind of along the same lines as when the wife tries on a new dress in the store and asks her husband, "Does this dress make me look fat?" If the husband wants to live, the correct answer would be a quick "No". However, if the wife buys the dress, puts it on to wear the first time, looks in the mirror, turns an evil eye to the husband and says, "Why did you let me buy this dress? It makes me look huge!" then the husband's life is in imminent danger, and his only hope is to turn to God and pray, "Lord, you're going to have to help me here!"

Obviously, there are lots of ways of thinking about life – a healthy life, a long life, a quality life, eternal life. Do you, or someone you know, find yourselves waiting for *real life* to begin, longing for fullness of life in the midst of a seemingly barren present? What are you, or they, waiting for? Lazarus being in a tomb was a cause of grief in a lot of lives. You know, there are a lot of "tombs" that can imprison us and deaden our spirits well before the grave. What "tombs" keep you or people you love from fullness of life in the present?

In Jeremiah, God gives the assurance “there is hope for your future.” In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” Butterflies and the last straw can help us to answer that.

The people to whom Jeremiah prophesied were people who knew from personal experience all the harsh, life-draining realities of exile. Their land was occupied, their homes were gone, their place of worship, which was the heart of their life together, was gone. Their fields were growing up with weeds, and they were trying to exist in a foreign land where there was little reason to hope. But the word God gives Jeremiah is good news for the people. God’s love is an everlasting love, and so he says he has continued his faithfulness to his people. And he makes promises: they will have homes again, there will be reasons to celebrate and have parties, the fields will be planted again with vineyards. Not only will the vineyards be planted, but the people will also get to enjoy the harvest. And maybe best of all, there will again be a time when people are called to come to worship, and there will be a place of worship for them to go to. Jeremiah tells them God cares for them like a shepherd cares for a flock. He says their life will become like a watered garden, and they won’t be wilted and drooping any more. Thus says the Lord, “There is hope for your future.”

There is a great story based on verse 17: “ ‘There is hope for your future’ says the Lord.” The story is called *Butterflies Under Our Hats* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. This is how it goes:

Once there was a town called Chelm where there was no luck. If something could go wrong, it did. The roofs of the houses always leaked. The sidewalks were cracked. The gardens grew only weeds. Nothing was ever right.

Some people said, “luck comes and goes.” But in Chelm’s case it never came; it only went. Others said, “There is no such thing as luck.” The people of Chelm were certain that luck was real, and somewhere they had lost it. They looked everywhere – in beds and in basements, in pant pockets and in pickle barrels, in water wells and wicker baskets. But as luck would have it, they never found any. “We never have any luck,” they sighed. And so they gave up. They stopped building houses, delayed repairing sidewalks, and quit planting gardens.

Then one day, a strange and beautiful woman came to town. No one had ever seen her before. She wore a large purple felt hat over her red hair and a long green dress that matched her eyes. She told the people of Chelm that there was something better than luck. Better than luck? The people weren’t sure they believed her, but they listened anyway. Having lost their luck, what else did they have to lose?

“Tomorrow at daybreak,” the strange woman with the purple hat and green eyes informed the town, “butterflies of hope are going to fly into the town square. If you can manage to cover the butterflies with your hats, you will have hope, and hope is better than luck.” Some of the townspeople thought the woman was crazy. Nothing was better than luck. But others weren’t so sure. The next morning, just as the sun began to rise, the people of Chelm who couldn’t find any luck, went into the town square, to look for hope. Just as the red-haired, green-eyed

woman had said, clouds of colorful butterflies appeared. They landed on the ground. For a few moments they just sat there; their wings fluttered softly. The people were very quiet. They gently placed their hats over the butterflies. There were silk top hats and woolen caps, black berets and bonnets with bows. There were felt fedoras and high hats with pink polka dots. There were fancy fur hats and silly straw hats with feathers – all covering the town square. “We have it!” they all exclaimed. “Now we have hope!”

But just as they said those words, it began to rain. The drizzle became a downpour and suddenly the people needed their hats. One by one they took their silk top hats and woolen caps, their black berets and bonnets with bows, their felt fedoras and high hats with pink polka dots, their fancy fur hats and their silly straw hats with feathers.

One by one the butterflies disappeared. They watched as the last person lifted his hat and the very last butterfly flapped its wings and rose into the sky. “Now not only don’t we have any luck,” they sighed. “We have lost hope as well.”

At that very moment the red-haired, green-eyed woman appeared once again. Her large brimmed purple felt hat collected the raindrops and kept her hair dry. “Look under your hats,” she whispered. The people were puzzled. They had seen the butterflies vanish into the clouds. They were certain that there was nothing under their hats – nothing under their black berets and bonnets with bows. The butterflies were gone and with them their last hope. As quickly as the rains had come, they stopped. The people lifted their hats – their fancy fur hats and silly straw ones with feathers – and looked inside. Just as they had thought, there were no butterflies. “Look,” they showed the mysterious woman, “Nothing! There is nothing under our hats!” “Look again,” she whispered and then disappeared.

The people looked under their hats – under their felt fedoras and high hats with polka dots. They could hardly believe it. The butterflies were gone, but they had left a trace...of something...a fine, faint powder. They saw it – the trace of the vanished butterflies. And that was all they needed – hope.

The people of Chelm started building houses, repairing sidewalks and planting gardens. Sometimes their roofs still leaked and their sidewalks still cracked, but not always. Their gardens grew weeds but also flowers. The people of Chelm no longer looked for luck. They found something much better. And it was there, all along, right under their hats.

“There is hope for your future,” says the Lord. Because of God’s love and power, the people of Israel were redeemed and given hope. This is what God does for us in Jesus Christ, and this is where we come to the last straw.

Jesus got word that his good friend Lazarus was critically ill. So, Jesus goes to Bethany, but because of delay after delay, he doesn’t arrive until Lazarus has been dead four days. He’s already in the tomb, there is no hope. The real heart of this story comes in the conversations Jesus has with Martha and Mary. Martha hears Jesus initial promise: “Your brother will rise

again” as general words of comfort – sort of a future consolation. But Jesus is offering much more than that, and so corrects the way she has taken his comment. He says, “I *am* the resurrection and the life.” It’s present tense. *Jesus is the one who brings fullness of life in relationship with God, both now and in the future.*

That is big news! It’s as though God is telling us, “Look under your hats again. There is hope for your future. There is hope for your now. Because my love is an everlasting love, I have redeemed you through Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life.” Friends, we have eternal life long before we get to the funeral home or the end of time. In the midst of everyday reality, we can experience a rich quality of life in relationship with God, by believing in Jesus. It’s not just about the future. It’s about a quality of life that begins now and continues forever, a life that knows the goodness and joy of God, a life that is full and rich and enduring. And Jesus tells Martha and Mary, and us, that this life is available right now through him. “Do you believe this?” Jesus asked.

Then he demonstrated what being the resurrection and life means through the raising of Lazarus. And that’s the last straw. It was the decisive act that sent the religious authorities over the edge and set in motion the actions that put Jesus in the tomb.

But that last straw was used to bring about our redemption. We have been shown just how loving and powerful God is. We have been given real hope for the realities of our lives. A relationship with God brings to bear on our lives the same power and love that raised Lazarus from the tomb, it frees us from whatever “tombs” imprison us, it sets us free for life where the last straw turns out to be more precious than gold, and butterfly traces of hope are always there.

Sources:

Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus – Stories in the Gospel of John*
Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Butterflies Under Our Hats* Paraclete Press 2006