

INVESTING IN HOPE¹
Jeremiah 33: 14-16
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Have you ever heard of Stan Ovshinsky? If you are quietly asking, "Who in the world is that?" that is one more thing we have in common! I learned about Mr. Ovshinsky from an article by Bob Herbert in the New York Times this week.²

I

He lives in Detroit, a city with 28.9% unemployment. Three in ten residents of Detroit need a job. That translates to over 113,000 people in that city who are without work. The murder rate is soaring; the schools are in receivership; the city treasury is \$300 million in the red; thousands of houses are abandoned; even their professional football team, the Detroit Lions, was winless all last year (that's 0-16!), and they lost the first eight games this year until they finally defeated the Cleveland Browns by one point last Sunday.

The sense of hopelessness in the city of Detroit is symbolized by the fact that many people cannot even afford to bury their loved ones who have died. The city morgue has a huge freezer that is filled with body bags of

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, November 25, 2009.

² Bob Herbert, "Signs of Hope," New York Times, November 24, 2009.

people whose loved ones can't afford a funeral. The despair of that city is described by one reporter as almost apocalyptic in scope.³

Into that kind of hopelessness comes a gentleman named Stan Ovshinsky. He has invented a machine about the length of a football field that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, turning out mile after mile of thin, flexible solar energy material, from which solar panels can be sliced and diced. This thin-film photovoltaic solar panel was just one of his ideas. He also invented the nickel metal hydride battery that is in virtually all hybrid vehicles on the road today. He has created a prototype of a car in which the gas tank has been replaced with a safe solid-state hydrogen storage system that he invented. It creates a car that produces zero pollution. Here is a man driven by the desire to use science and technology to solve the real world problems that he sees all around him in Detroit. All he is waiting for is the nation to invest in these kinds of solutions to produce an industrial renaissance in Detroit and a cleaner planet for us all.

II

Stan Ovshinsky represents in science and technology

³ Timesonline.co.uk, November 21, 2009.

precisely what the church is called to do in the world of religion. There are some churches that look like the giant Fisher Body Plant in Detroit that made Buicks and Cadillacs. Once it was teeming with workers, but now it is largely abandoned.

The present generation has rarely witnessed a time when people feel more in need of hope from the church. Vast numbers of people have been disillusioned by the church, hurt by the church, rejected by the church, and ignored by the church. When the church stopped offering them hope, they either ignored the church altogether or made the church into an entertainment, a kind of mass hypnotism that provides an emotional outlet with a spiritual flavor.

But I have never noticed anywhere in the New Testament that Jesus said, *“Come, entertain for me.”* He spoke of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. Not once did he say that the way to relate to them was to entertain them. *Truly, I say to you, as you entertained one of the least of these, you entertained me!* No, of course not! Entertainment is a poor substitute for Christian faith. Thoughtful people know deep down that church must be something more than entertainment. The business of the church is hope, based on reaching out to others in love.

It is no accident that the annual retelling of the story of Jesus starts on the first Sunday of Advent with biblical texts that speak of hope in the midst of hopelessness. This year's text is no exception. *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made....* Such a statement only makes sense if it is addressed to people in despair. And that is precisely the context.

The prophet Jeremiah was speaking to a people who had given up to despair. Years before they had watched in disbelief as the Babylonian army had destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, the city they had believed would be forever safe in the protection of God – not unlike some unemployed today who thought their jobs and their pensions would be forever safe in the protection of their company. Their magnificent temple, built by Solomon himself, had been reduced to a pile of rubble. With their homes burning behind them, they were rounded up and marched to an unknown and unwelcoming land. Jerusalem was left a ghost town: streets deserted, the marketplace empty.

They were force marched to Babylon, where they spent their days in servitude and their nights in tears. Despair lingered over them as they questioned everything they had ever been taught. It was the despair of Africans ripped from their homeland and sold into slavery; Cherokees

driven from their homes in the smoky mountains to a reservation in Oklahoma, only one of the best known removals of Native American populations westward in the 1800s; the Jews fleeing Hitler; children sold by their parents into the underground sex trade; the cloud of despair spreads wide over the centuries.

The problem confronting Jeremiah was more than exile. It was a sense of alienation. The people to whom he was writing had lost their religious bearings. They had depended on the temple and its rites and ceremonies. Life didn't make sense. They had no place they could really call home, not even in their own skin. Some people here may know exactly how that feels.

So the words articulated by Jeremiah remain contemporary and critical. They are directed to people who feel lonely, cut off, isolated, disconnected. Exile comes in many forms.

III

Here is what he said as he spoke God's words: *The days are surely coming...when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah....*

Biblical scholars call this section of Jeremiah ~~the~~ the little book of consolation+because it is a word of hope in the midst of a despairing

people. It is a candle lit against the darkness. It is like the first candle of the Advent wreath. Hope is optimism rooted in God. Hope is the capacity to be surprised by grace. Are you surprisable? Will you open yourself to the unexpected possibility that God has promised? Hope is not giving up on yourself or the future. Hope flies upward into the unknown future.

That's the image Emily Dickenson had of hope:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune—without the words,
And never stops at all....⁴*

Think of that: it never stops singing even if it doesn't know the words!

Advent starts with hope. The great Advent hymns are sung in the language of hope:

*O come, Desire of Nations,
Bind all peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Do you see that hope? Do you feel that hope? It is hope that is based, not on the lure of entertainment and not on the magnetism of a charismatic leader, but on the promises of God.

⁴ Emily Dickenson, #254.

It is hope that envisions a new world where the old world divisions of fear and distrust and anxiety are put away, and something new is dawning. It is a world of justice, where unity is measured not by uniformity and not by the tyranny of the majority, but where black and white and all shades of brown, rich and poor, male and female, every identity of people on God's good earth, can be a part of what Martin Luther King called *the Beloved Community*.

Until that day, we never lose the dream; we work toward that vision and we live into that hope.

IV

An authentic church is an investment with guaranteed returns! *The days are surely coming, says the Lord. Do not doubt it for a minute! For Advent quietly transitions into the birth of a child who will grow up to say, YOU [yes, you!] are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others.*⁵

⁵ Matthew 5: 14-16.