

Delivered

A sermon for August 21, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 13:10-17

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Have you ever been in a tight spot? Stuck between a rock and a hard place? Clueless as to how things might end up better? Tied down? Captive to your circumstances? Sick and tired of being sick and tired?

Being in a difficult situation happens often enough for many among us, but the worst... the worst is when you feel forgotten and alone. Usually when this happens, the cruel irony is that your life is filled with people. Somehow, however, these people seem either not to know or not to care about your plight. Perhaps they cared at one point. But now, it would seem, they've gotten "compassion fatigue." The world moves on while you languish with the same problem you've been having for weeks, months, or years-- grief, chronic sickness, depression, poverty, homelessness. Sometimes the worst part about our long-term problems is that they are so isolating, even within our own communities.

And as we face real or perceived isolation we begin to ask questions. "These people around me want my circumstances to change, don't they? They don't actually have the means to fix my situation, do they? I wonder if they'd even be happy for me if things got better..."

In these situations, we're captive. We ache to be set free. We yearn to be delivered. At least at first. But when help doesn't come, we eventually settle into our captivity. We stop asking for help, and we can even stop hoping.

I take our story from Luke 13 as a case in point.

On first glance, this story looks like one of the healing or exorcism stories that we've come to expect from Jesus, and so it's easy to pass over without paying it much attention. We've seen it before. We can move on.

You may remember that Jesus and his disciples were traveling together proclaiming and enacting the arrival of the kingdom of God. One Sabbath day, on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, where he will be betrayed and executed, he stops to teach in a village synagogue.

The other people who came to the synagogue that day likely would have known each other quite well. In a village like this, everyone's life was public knowledge, so people would have known the story about the woman who had been doubled over for 18 years.

We're not told much about her. We don't even know her name. It's remarkable though, that unlike so many other healings that Jesus performs, neither the woman nor the people around her ask for Jesus' help. There is nothing to indicate to us that she expected to be helped-- save for one thing: she walked into the presence of Jesus.

And when she does that, Jesus takes notice of her. Jesus knows that she has been languishing in her situation for 18 years. And Jesus sees her situation for what it is-- one of captivity.

And so he stops teaching-- he stops everything! He calls out to her, "come over to me." Then without show or fanfare, he tells her that she is

set free, and then he lays hands on her. Immediately her back is straighten and she praises God.

But someone has a problem with this: The leader of the synagogue. This guy's job was to be, more or less, a worship committee and altar guild of one. He makes sure that things are ready for worship on the Sabbath. He cares for the scrolls of the Law and the Prophets. And he arranges who will be the reader, who will lead the prayers, and who will teach and explain the scriptures.

This man would have been the one to give the "okay" to Jesus. "Okay itinerant preacher, you're on for teaching duty this Sabbath." And so when Jesus breaks with the normal flow of things and stops teaching, it creates a power struggle. The synagogue leader feels upstaged as Jesus decides to privilege a person over a protocol.

With his pride wounded, the synagogue leader tries to control the crowd by denouncing what Jesus has done as doing prohibited work on the Sabbath. "Come back some other day and get healed!" he says to the crowd, condemning Jesus' work.

But Jesus sees the man for what he is: an actor impersonating a holy person. And so he says to him, "Don't you untie your donkey on the Sabbath and lead it to water? How much more should I untie this woman, a daughter of Abraham-- a member of God's chosen people-- who has been bound by Satan for 18 long years!?"

For the synagogue leader, this woman is an nuisance. Her appearance is an untimely reminder of the existence of so many people whose plight inconveniences those of us who think we have better things to do. For

him, one woman in need is not a reason to stop the show. The act must continue!

But for Jesus, healing this one woman is a way of bringing the kingdom of God. It's like planting a mustard seed-- the smallest of all the seeds-- and watching it grow into a large plant. It's like putting a little bit of yeast in the dough so that it might expand and grow into the whole batch. It's a small ask of deliverance. But this is how the kingdom of God comes: one person at a time.

God is up to something. God is setting free those whose circumstances hold them captive. God is freeing people from the grip of Satan-- the one who holds Israel-as-a-whole captive, but against whom Jesus has won an initial victory.¹ And with every act of healing and liberation, the kingdom of God advances. For Jesus, hurting people are not inconveniences; they are the captives whose release Jesus proclaims and effects.

This past week, in my consumption of news, there were many *inconvenient* realities in the world.

Along with many others, I was moved by a picture of Omran Daqneesh, a 5-year-old boy who lives in Aleppo, Syria. Video and still images were captured of Omran after he was pulled out of a pile of rubble that used to be his house. His dusty gray exterior seems a fitting match for his emotionless stare, which is unable to process even his own blood-reddened face, let alone the full enormity of the horror he's been through.

¹ See Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 167.

Omran's rescue serves as an *inconvenient* reminder of the captivity of so many Syrians in their war-torn country. As we look at this boy, it occurs to us that this is what "lucky" looks like in Syria: the hope that *when* your house is blown up, someone will pull you out of the rubble alive.

This picture arrived roughly a year after another awful picture tugged on the heart-strings of the world: Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy was pictured lying facedown on a Turkish beach, having failed to safely flee Syria. At the time, the world was stuck by the horror of the impossible choices that Syrians faced: stay and risk being the victim of an airstrike, or flee and risk that you and your family won't survive the journey. As it were, they were stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea.

However, apparently many families feel that the option to flee is no longer even open to them, as so many countries appear to the Syrians to have [closed their doors to more refugees](#). Of the two choices, then, they must choose the devil. For years the Syrians have languished through their conflict. Many, it would seem, find themselves in the same position as the woman in the synagogue-- they've been ignored for so long that they don't even bother ask for help anymore.

And then there is the devastating flooding that Louisiana is facing. The flooding was not the result of a glamorous, catastrophic hurricane, but rather a sustained torrential downpour, where 1 ½ to 2 feet of rain fell in some 15 hours. Because of the nature and the timing of the rain, it didn't tend to make the nation's headlines, leaving many in Louisiana to feel forgotten in their plight. Some literally sat on their roofs and in their attics, waiting to be delivered from their flooded houses. Many Americans, however, were simply more interested in the antics of

olympic swimmers and the latest escapades of Donald Trump than in the plight of the 40 to 60 thousand families displaced from their flooded homes.

What do we have to say, as followers of Jesus, to people who are bent over? Who do we want to be as a community of Christians?

First, we have a message of final hope in the midst of bad circumstances. God's sends a message of coming deliverance.

Look at the power of this message. Look at the power of the word of God. When God calls Jeremiah to prophetic ministry, God says, “Now I have put *my words* in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

God gives Jeremiah the authority to uproot and tear the powers of oppression and injustice. It is good news that God is working against the injustices of the world. Although we tend to get scared off by the word “judgment”, when God is the judge, it's a good thing! Christ will come and convict those who oppress others. God will set things right.

In Jeremiah's case, things will get worse before they get better. The old Jerusalem must be pulled down. Invading armies would come and destroy the city, taking its people captive.

But that's not where God leaves the situation. He also gives Jeremiah the authority to build and to plant. The New Jerusalem is coming. The reign of God is coming to earth. It's already here, but its fullness is yet to come. The seeds of the kingdom are being sown.

What do we have to offer those who are doubled over? The second thing, I believe, is not just a word of hope, but *enacted hope*.

Let's take the case of the Syrian crisis, for example. This time last year political tensions were very high surrounding refugees. Well, like it or not-- and I think you should like it-- they've been coming to the United States. A group called the International Rescue Committee in Baltimore (the IRC) is contracted by the state to help incoming refugees get set up in housing and get some minimal training on how to be effective in society. Just this past July, the IRC in Baltimore received [148 new arrivals](#).

When refugees arrive, they have virtually nothing but the clothes on their backs. They have been completely uprooted from their homes, and they must now plant themselves in a foreign culture where they don't speak the language and initially lack the skills to succeed in our economy. The government gives each person a small sum of money for everything they need: housing, food, clothes. The longer that money can stretch, the longer that someone can take classes to learn English and train to get a job. And the more that those things happen, the more they are likely to flourish in their new environment.

My brothers and sisters, I see here an opportunity to enact hope. As a church [we could outfit a refugee family's apartment](#) with everything

they need to get started, and help them to stretch their government dollar.

This would send a message to this family. “We know that you’ve been uprooted. God wants to plant you here. We know that your lives have been torn down, but God wants to build you up. We know that there are a lot of people who curse you for being here-- for your religion, or simply because you’re an inconvenience-- but know that there are people here who value you as human beings of sacred worth. We know that you feel forgotten and alone, but you aren’t.”

What do we have to offer those who are bent over? Perhaps the most immediate thing is our presence, seasoned with gracious words and actions. If you’re a regular here, who used to sit near you that you haven’t seen in awhile? Reach out to them. Maybe they’re silently languishing. They need to know that their church hasn’t forgotten them. They need to know that their God hasn’t forgotten them. Write a card to one of our shut-ins, or just give them a call. Ask them how they’re doing, and care about their response.

And after you’ve thought about those who used to be here, ask yourself another question: who in our community isn’t here? Who has never been here? Who are we leaving out? Who is inconvenient? Who is worth stopping the worship service for (don’t y’all jump up at once now)?

What do we have to offer? We have the healing, liberating person of Christ. The hope of deliverance. The hope of transformation. Not just that the numbers might be tallied differently on God’s ledger, but that by God’s transforming power, we might finally be able to stand up straight.