



“Beyond the Bucket List”

Texts: Jeremiah 29:11-13; Acts 2:17-21

a sermon by Elder Andy Hubbard

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Three weeks ago, on Sunday October 1, 104-year-old Dorothy Hoffner got into a plane, ascended to 13,500 feet, and then stepped out. About 5 minutes later, she was softly touching down in the grass, the new Guinness world record holder for the oldest person to complete a parachute jump. YouTube and TikTok provide hundreds of stories, both heart-warming and heart-wrenching, of people with terminal diagnoses determined to squeeze all the marrow out of their remaining moments. Whether it is a young person meeting a pop star, or a grandparent making that last visit to see distant relatives, the 21st century term for all these plans, popularized by the 2007 movie of the same name, is *The Bucket List*. We see with greater clarity all the things we hope to do and places we hope to see, as the time to do them, and the time to see them, diminishes. It becomes a road map for *carpe diem*, seizing every moment, hour, and day as we race toward the end of our lives. The visions and hope expressed in these bucket lists help us move from existence to living.

But as Christians we have a higher calling than *carpe diem*. We work and pray so that all the ministries of church, including the worship, the community, the music, the mission, and so many others, not only thrive in the here and now, but continue until God’s kingdom comes “on earth as it is in heaven.” Our scripture readings talk of visions and hope, and so my question

to you this morning is: What's on your bucket list for First Presbyterian Church? And more specifically, what are the visions and the hope within your heart? What do we feel called to do and be as we move forward? These are big questions, so let us turn to our scripture passages for the morning, beginning with Jeremiah.

When we hear the 3 verses from Jeremiah by themselves, they have a very reassuring, "there-there" quality, reminding us of God's plans for us, and that God hears and listens to us. For 21st century, first-world Christians, it can feel like a bit of insurance, a fallback plan in case all our other plans somehow fail. In context, however, we are about to see it as a powerful promise to a people whose lot has just gone from bad to worse.

Nebuchadnezzar had taken the people of Israel into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. There were false prophets among the people, encouraging people not to serve the Babylonian King and suggesting they would return soon to Jerusalem. The reading from Jeremiah is part of a letter sent to the elders, priests, prophets and people who had been taken into exile. These words of Jeremiah come just after he tells the people in exile that their release from captivity is not imminent, despite what some among them are saying. In fact, this is what Jeremiah tells them. "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to [Jerusalem]". What? The people were hoping to hear "pack your bags, God's bringing us back to Jerusalem." Jeremiah's word from God comes like a punch in the gut: "only when seventy years are completed." The verses we read today follow that painful prophecy with a promise that only the youngest among the exiles would be alive to see.

And that puts the promise in a different light, doesn't it? It's not a promise to bring the current people out of exile. It's a promise to help them realize the vision of reunion in Jerusalem for their children, and their children's children. This is so much more than bucket list for the current generation. It is a hope and a vision for all of the people of Israel to come. So, how deep is your hope? How far can your vision see into the future of this community? Are you willing to help plant the trees under whose shade you will never sit? Does your reach exceed your grasp? Just like the people of Israel, we're way beyond the bucket list now.

Lest you think these questions are only the purview of the leaders of the church - sessions, deacons, elders, and pastors - consider the scripture from Acts. This passage paints a vivid picture of the day of Pentecost, traditionally held as the day the Law was given to the Jewish people. Violent wind, tongues of fire, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon those present gave them the gift of foreign languages, as though the story of the Tower of Babel had been reversed. Reactions from the crowd to this dramatic scene were varied, including confusion, and the assumption that they were drunk.

Peter then stands up to preach, denying their drunkenness, and declaring the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. The sermon is Peter's, but the words are Joel's - that is why the reading is in quotes in your bulletin. Peter wants them to understand that they are witnessing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people (not just the chosen, the clergy, or the leaders). That includes old and young, men and women, slave and free. God's promise of visions extends to all of us. What are your visions for First Presbyterian Church?

Hope and a far-reaching vision are only the beginning of course. To breathe life into these visions requires the time, talent, and treasure of God's people. Every week you hear opportunities to volunteer for our ministries that serve our church community and those around us. I encourage you to find one if you haven't already. And since we are talking about generosity this month, I am mindful of Jesus' words from the Gospel of Luke: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It's a brilliant, instant measure of our priorities, because it answers the question "Am I investing my time and money in the things I say are important to me?"

So, here's the TL: DR. For those of you not on social media and / or around my age and older, that stands for too long, didn't read. It means in case you missed everything I've said until now, a short summary is coming. Here we go. First, God has a good plan for our future, but we must be sensitive to the Spirit as God speaks to us and guides us into the future. Second, God wants us to envision a great future for ourselves and for our congregation. And finally, a question: How is God calling us to use our time, talent, and financial resources to bring these visions and hope to fruition?

Oh, and Dorothy - the 104-year-old parachuter I mentioned earlier? I suppose she could have put off her record-setting jump a few weeks or a month, but I'm glad she didn't. Because Dorothy passed away in her sleep at home on October 11, just 10 days after her jump. Millions of people have been touched by the video of her descent, all because of her vision and her willingness to make it a priority. I pray that our visions for First Presbyterian Church come to fruition and inspire generations we will never meet to do likewise. Amen.

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