



"Stubborn"

Scripture – Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 23, 2022

Ten days ago, a young woman in Atlanta wrote: "How I'm living my worst life the best I can." This odd phrase helps her rise out of bed each day and keep moving since the recent death of her husband.

She wrote, "It's been gloomy in Atlanta lately, unrelentingly rainy and unseasonably warm. Each day is gray, gray, gray – both weather and mood-wise. Recently, I found myself exhausted by the idea of one more day stuck inside with our 14-month-old daughter. Like me – and, presumably, every other human being – her mood is greatly improved after spending time outdoors. And on this particular day, I wasn't going to let the rain stop us."¹

She prepared the two of them for the rain and headed out the door. While dodging puddles, she was reminded of "the motto she adopted not long after her husband died: to live her worst life the best she could. Her motto was a response to Oprah Winfrey's ubiquitous phrase: 'live your best life.' In the thick of her grief, that idea grated on her...she was annoyed by the pervasive 'live your best life' vibes that filled social media. She hated the way people flaunted their seemingly perfect existences...(while she) was living the life of a heartbroken young widow, grasping for any sense of normalcy...Instead of wishing for a reality she could not have, she embraced the terrible circumstances she was dealt."²

Most of us know what it is to grieve a loss – the loss of a loved one, a job, a marriage, a friendship, a healthy body. We may recall a time when we wished we could rewind the film and return to the time before the bottom collapsed. It is tempting to fantasize about life being different than it is and imagine that others live a perfect existence. However, such thinking can drive us deeper into gloom and blind us to moments of beauty and moments of grace.

This young woman's determination to make the best of her dismal plight keeps her from sinking. When she was filled with anger, she channeled her feelings through a sweaty night of volleyball. When she was sad, she took a warm bath and listened to soothing music. On what would have been her ninth wedding anniversary, she went to the beach with her close friends. She would have of course preferred to be there with her husband, but she found a degree of healing and joy through the support of her friends. And whenever her actions spark a moment of happiness, she takes note of the fact that all is not lost.

In today's passage from the Book of Nehemiah, we encounter a critical time in the life of the Hebrew people. It is a dismal, but all-is-not-lost moment. It helps to know that the people have recently returned to Jerusalem after living in exile for 70 years. Jerusalem had been destroyed, but Nehemiah had been granted permission to return

to the home of his ancestors before most of the people. He had begun to rebuild their decimated home, and after he had rebuilt part of the city, the people were freed and they joined him.

Most of those returning had only heard about home from their parents. They had actually been born in exile. We can imagine that the picture their parents painted might have been a bit rosy. They may have talked about the beauty and glory, but left out the imperfections.

The trauma of living in exile was fresh in their minds. While some rebuilding had begun, there was still an enormous amount of work to do. Further, they not only had to rebuild the physical structures of Jerusalem, they had to recreate a community. The challenge was daunting and their future was unclear. The people gather in the city square to hear the reading and interpretation of God's law, and it droned on for hours.

Upon hearing the reading of the law, the people wept. Why? We can imagine many reasons. They wept that the exile was finally over. They wept because the reading of the law reminded them how far they had strayed from right living. They wept because the challenges before them were daunting. They wept the losses they incurred. They wept because the future was a question mark. And they also wept because something that had nearly been blotted out was beginning to stir within them – hope.

The understatement of the year is that we are living in challenging – we might even say desperate – times. A global pandemic, a harsh political divide, threats to democracy, a refugee crisis, a widening income gap, racial tension, religious persecution, domestic terrorist attacks, cyber-attacks, economic uncertainty, school shootings, teenage suicides, melting ice, rising sea levels, devastating wildfires, catastrophic tornadoes and hurricanes.

It would be troubling to face three or four of these at once, but there are more than a dozen dark clouds swirling overhead providing multiple reasons for anxiety and despair. Is it any wonder why many people withdraw into their small, personal spheres? They no longer have hope that any of the major problems can be solved.

Jane Goodall has spent most of her life in the jungles of Tanzania learning about and living with chimpanzees. She travels the world telling about the urgent need to protect them from extinction and to take steps to avert an environmental crisis.³

She has witnessed so much poaching of innocent animals and destruction of jungles that she could despair about the future. However, she is a person of hope who believes that the future can be better. She says, "Like all people who live long enough, I have been through many dark periods and seen so much suffering. But each time I become depressed I think of all the amazing stories of the courage, steadfastness, and determination of those who are fighting the 'forces of evil.'...How much more powerful and inspirational are the voices of those who stand up against it. And even when they lose their lives, their voices still resonate long after they are gone, giving us inspiration and hope."⁴

Augustine said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

If you decide to try something you have never attempted before, it is because you possess hope that you will be able to do it. If you don't think there is any chance that you can learn to surf, you won't try. If you don't believe you can lose 15 pounds, you won't put your full effort into it. If you don't believe you can have an impact on climate change, why recycle or reduce your use of fossil fuels or give up beef or plant a tree?

Without hope, you feel helpless. However, if you possess hope that you can accomplish something, you will make the effort.

Goodall says, "Sometimes, I think, 'Why on Earth do I feel hopeful?' Because the problems facing the planet are huge. And if I analyze them carefully, they do sometimes seem absolutely impossible to solve. So why do I feel hopeful? Partly, because I'm obstinate. I just won't give in. But it's also partly because we cannot accurately predict what the future might bring."⁵

Like the young woman who is living her worst life the best she can, it helps to be a bit obstinate and to refuse to give in. All of us must do the best we can in our particular situation.

Cynicism is the easy choice. We can spend our days grumbling about how awful things are and that there is no hope for tomorrow. That way no one will think of us as naïve or foolish.

But it's also vital to remember that no one can accurately predict the future. Any student of history can tell you that there have been many times when people could not imagine better days. It helps to take a longer view and to realize that our efforts today might not come to fruition in our lifetimes, but may be the building blocks for a better tomorrow.

Many of the grand cathedrals in the world took more than 100 years to build. The sparkling white Milan Cathedral is the second largest in the world and it took 582 years to complete it. The architect who designed it and the initial engineers and stone masons knew that even though they would work on its construction for the rest of their lives, they would never see its completion. Neither would their children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

They undoubtedly had regrets that they would not see the completion of the magnificent edifice to which they gave their lives. But that did not prevent them from showing up day after day, month after month, year after year to make their contributions to what would one day be an amazing monument and a sacred place for thousands of future worshipers. How did they do it? They were driven by hope. Hope that their efforts would contribute to something remarkable.

Have we grown so accustomed to instant gratification that we have lost sight of the fact that great things often take more than a lifetime to accomplish?

What happens today and tomorrow is not simply a result of what has happened in the past. We are also drawn by our vision of the future – what kind of world we imagine. If our vision of the future is more of the same, then we will contribute to making it so. But if our vision of the world is of something better, we can focus our efforts on nudging the world in that direction.

In the long run, I believe progress toward justice and peace is inevitable because God constantly urges people toward treating others with the same respect and dignity that we wish for ourselves. But in the short run, we must resist and overcome those who are driven by greed, fear, and egocentricity, because those things invariably produce injustice, dissension, and strife.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes. But in spite of that I still have a dream, because you cannot give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose the courage to be, and the quality that helps you go on in spite of everything."

In the face of the many problems of our day, may we be obstinate and stubborn enough not to relinquish our hope in something better. May we be determined to do what we can to faithfully push for what is right and good. And may we remember that if we act in harmony with the ways of God, we are helping to build something remarkable.

Hibernate and despair. Or have hope and seize on a just cause or help someone in need. Be stubborn, my friends. Be stubborn.

NOTES

1. (author's name not given), *Theguardian.com*, January 14, 2022.
2. Ibid.
3. Janegoodall.org
4. Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Hope*, (New York: Celadon Books, a Division of Macmillan Publishers, 2021), p. xii.
5. Ibid., p. 26.