

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Luke 17:11-19

“For the Long Haul”

I began reading stories in the Bible when I was very young. I especially liked the stories full of “blood and gore.” I would vividly see Jael sticking a nail through the head of Sisera as he slept in his tent or the little shepherd boy picking up five smooth stones from a stream and slinging one of them at the forehead of the giant Goliath, killing him instantly. And then there was Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho and Jezebel being eaten by the dogs, etcetera, etcetera.

Something else I did with the Bible stories (maybe a little different but definitely more positive) was to pretend that certain male characters were my grandfathers. We often refer to “Father Abraham” but to me he was “Grandfather Abraham.” Then there was “Granddad Joseph,” “Gramps Jacob” and “Papaw Moses,” etcetera, etcetera. I think I did this because I missed out on having grandfathers as role models. And since I now have grandchildren of my own, I can see what I missed. Grandpa “Binks” died when I was only two and Grandpa Willie died ten years before I was born.

The only thing I know about either of them is about Grandpa “Binks.” The story is that he liked his coffee very hot. Supposedly, he would drink it steaming hot right off the kitchen stove. I grew up hearing that “real men like their coffee very hot.” Naturally, I like my coffee very hot. Every morning, I pour my brewed coffee into a Contigo travel mug, although I’m not traveling anywhere. I just want to keep the coffee very hot. As it says on its web page,

“Contigos are for **the long haul**. The thermalock double-wall stainless steel insulation keeps drinks hot up to 7 hours.” I can attest that it is true. And I think that would make Grandpa “Binks” happy!

So, our first text is from old “Grandpa Jeremiah.” And here’s what he advises us in the 29th chapter of his book: “Build houses, settle down, plant gardens, and eat what you produce.” I can hear Gramps Jeremiah saying, “You will go through some very difficult times in life, hard times will come, but remember, sonny, you’re in it for **the long haul**. You won’t always live on easy street. Believe me, you never know what life might throw at you.”

You see, Jeremiah was writing to people who had been through incredibly tough times. They were exiled from their beloved city of Jerusalem to the foreign city of Babylon. They had seen their whole culture and way of life completely destroyed. Even their central place of worship is gone, Solomon’s legendary Jerusalem temple. By the way, there were numbers of “so called prophets” who rose up and started telling the exiles lies, saying something like “don’t worry, be happy, you’re going home soon.” But not Jeremiah. He knew differently. He also said, speaking for YAHWEH, “Work for the good of your country, to which I have exiled you. Pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its welfare yours depends.”

But you can’t blame the people for not wanting to hear his message. I can see old “Grandpa Jeremiah” now, walking around with an oxen yoke on his shoulders as he cried out the truth (often being called the “weeping prophet”). Kings came and went and they didn’t listen to him over a forty year period. He was a lonely man, who never married nor had any children (oh, oh, I guess I shouldn’t really call him “Grandpa,” but I can’t help it. Leave me to my imagination)! But he told the truth. Life’s not always simple. It gets very confusing at times. Often it seems like there are more “downs than ups.” Jeremiah even told his hearers to

work for the good of the place where they hated being. For through faith and belief in Yahweh, you can hear the Lord of hosts say, “For surely, I know the plans for you . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

But I have to say, the most unusual “grandfather” I ever visualized in the Bible was the leper, whose story is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. As I just visualized that “grandpa” recently, I am particularly touched by this story because I once visited the last leprosarium in the Continental United States in Carville, Louisiana. It closed in 2005, in large part due to leprosy becoming curable through medical efforts at Carville. Talking about trusting God for **the long haul** - wow! For example, in 1894, seven New Orleanians with Hansen’s Disease (leprosy) were forced at gunpoint in the middle of the night to this new location in Carville, to remain there for life. Residents there often took assumed names so their families would not be stigmatized by leprous relatives. When I visited Carville, there were folks with Hansen’s disease playing golf on a nine hole course, hitting the ball around with stubby and gnarled fingers. The score card from that golf course is one of my treasured possessions, putting so many things about my life in perspective.

But my “grandpa leper” in Luke was one of ten lepers. And he was a foreigner. He was a Samaritan. And he was hated as the folks in Babylon were by the exiles from Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day. This leper was doubly marginalized - a Samaritan and a leper! He was a man from a “borderland,” a “borderland” that Jesus chose to walk through, even among these hated Samaritans. The Samaritans were definitely unlovely outsiders, unappealingly different and unwelcome to any local gathering.

But I wonder, would I actually be proud of this “grandpa?” Would he be up there with my other Biblical grandpas, such as Ezekiel or Isaiah? Would I even want to recognize this

“marginalized man on the edge?” Or would I pass him by like he was an “invisible man?” It is a wonderful story of his running back to thank Jesus for his being healed and it does make me proud of him. The other nine lepers (the implication is that he was the only foreigner) did not come back. Maybe it would have been simpler if no leper had come back. Let them go! But Jesus honored the one who returned. The grateful leper! The exile, so to speak. But I do wonder how his family dealt with him, how his former friends treated him and what happened to him when he ran across non-Samaritans. I want to believe his new found faith grew and prepared him for **the long haul**, for whatever tough experiences he yet had to go through.

We might also want to consider those parts of ourselves, possibly hidden away in Babylon or in the “borderlands”: the unredeemed anger, the broken relationships, the hope for quick fixes. We may not want to be seen in our hatred of the “people of Babylon” nor of the “lepers” left hidden in the “borderlands” of ourselves. We may not want to be seen nor even touched but Jesus is not afraid of “borderlands” nor diseases of the soul. He is there for **the long haul** for us, even if we are exiled or leprous, and he does not mind meeting us in those places of exile and disease. And in those hidden places, I believe “our renewed faith” will save us through his amazing grace, indeed!⁴

AMEN!