

Sermon for 25 September 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Scriptures: Jeremiah 32:1-3a. 6-15; Psalter: (*Insert: alternate leader and people*):Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31  
**“Now”**

The problem with having a God who talks to us is how rough words can be.

Today the first three lessons speak tenderly of hope, trust, steadiness ... and then along comes Luke with Lazarus and Father Abraham and a great chasm separating them from the rich man.

We should be sure this isn't the same Lazarus Jesus loved, along with his sisters Mary and Martha. This, in fact, seems to have been a familiar story about the afterlife among people of the ancient Near East, where the Bible was written.

The rich man is in terrible shape, and gets no sympathy, not even from Luke, who is usually the soft-hearted one among the four Gospel writers.

Why would Jesus quote this story?

After prayer, and Bible study, and advice from numerous Bible scholars, plus living with this text for all my adult life, all I can come up with is his sense of urgency.

If we don't turn to God now...."dot ..dot..dot..."

You remember we United Methodists are not much on divine retribution.

After John Wesley, the preacher's son, an Oxford graduate and an ordained Church of England priest, with years of experience that included going to Georgia to convert the Indians without much joy or evident success, felt his heart "strangely warmed" at a prayer meeting held by Moravian Christians one spring evening back in England, he never spent much time on doom. The whole movement he and his brother launched was, like my sermon title, focused on the present opportunity. Like Jeremiah, the Wesleys were most interested in what knowing God could do for each of us...

Susannah Wesley, the boys John and Charles's mother, taught neighbors in her kitchen the same thing. Now is the acceptable time. This moment is the only one to consider...

Psalm 91 does more of the same thing for us today. I often find myself talking back to the author when I read, "Those who love me, I will deliver..." I feel like asking, "What about the Holocaust? Did that save them from Hitler?" Isn't the psalmist running ahead of God here, trying to train God on

what to do? Scripture isn't some royal guarantee we pull out every time we're in trouble.

It's sawdust and wood chips, evidence of risking a moment of belief, or just trying to believe, between us and God.

Same goes for the reading from I Timothy. Here's a young fellow in training to help churches in the early days when everything about faith is being tested against human experience, especially group experience ... and here is Timothy repeating in all the ways he can, and likely in all the languages he can, to reach the different nationalities who have latched onto this young fellowship ... "Do it because it comforts you..." and of course, from his view, that helps the rest of the church...."Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us..." Isn't that church, week by week?

How many ways can I ask God for help? I've lost count. I just know I learned a new way this morning ... and for the moment, it's working... and it's such a relief, since the way I was doing it had worn thin by yesterday afternoon, and then I had to go through last evening trying something fresh... and making it very clear to God that I couldn't do it on my own, I really couldn't ...

A conversation I had with someone, or a session with my therapist, or a narrow escape on the beltway, or after paying a whole slough of bills last night, or a scene from an old movie I remembered when I woke up from a nap..This faith walk we're on is as variable as teaching kindergartners, or making love to the same partner again, or arguing with my relatives over something that really matters which I know I shouldn't have brought up yet again.

Now.

Are you walking? How can I help you?

Let us pray.

Now.

Amen.