

What We Fail to See

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Zedekiah had said, “Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it?”

Jeremiah said, “The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.’ Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out the silver to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the silver on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' Abraham said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

What We Fail to See

There was once a rich man ...

He wore purple cloth—the most expensive textile of his day—and fine linen—the same material the priests wore when they served in the Tabernacle. But where the priests wore their fine linen to worship, our rich man wore his every day as he feasted sumptuously—feasting being the Greek term used to describe what happened at the major religious festivals, times when the entire community gathered before God to celebrate. But festivals were special occasions set in place by God with the explicit instruction to include the slaves, strangers, widows, orphans, and foreigners in their midst (Deut. 6:11), and our rich man is not feasting sumptuously in celebration of God. Nor is he, it seems safe to assume, including the slaves, strangers, widows, orphans or foreigners in his midst, except perhaps insofar as they prepare, serve, and clean up from his feasts.

And, just in case the details in the very first line of the parable don't tip us off to the likely fate of this rich character, the story offers us an immediate contrast—"there was a rich man and there was a poor man." And in this story, it is the poor man who is given a name, Lazarus, while the rich man remains anonymous, ubiquitous, a stereotype.

Lazarus, the Greek text says, was laid at the gate of the rich man, covered in sores. The story doesn't tell us how Lazarus got to the rich man's gate or why he was there, but the fact that he was laid there seems to imply that other people were involved—perhaps friends who knew the man behind the gate had wealth to spare. After all, the Jewish law is quite clear: those who have wealth are meant to look after, and care for, those who do not.

So there was a rich man, and at his gate lay a poor man, Lazarus, covered in sores, longing for crumbs from the table. But instead of crumbs, dogs came and licked his sores.

The parable paints the contrast in stark detail: Lazarus covered in sores, longing for crumbs, while the rich man reclines in purple linen, feasting sumptuously. Purple cloth may no longer be a sign of wealth, but its equivalents aren't hard to spot: multi-million-dollar weddings that shut down cities, parties that cost more than whole neighborhoods will see in a lifetime—wealth so excessive it becomes its own headline, wealth that fails to recognize the affront it creates in the face of a world that has so much need.

And so part of us, I suspect, appreciates where this particular parable goes. We want, if not to see the rich suffer, then at least to feel like there is some fairness, some balance, some justice, even if only in the life to come.

Because it comes to pass that the rich man and Lazarus both die, and in their deaths their fortunes are reversed: Lazarus finds himself lying not at the gate of an indifferent rich man, but in the bosom of Abraham—a Greek phrase used to indicate a place of honor and love at a feast—and the rich man finds himself in Hades, tormented and suffering.

Seeing Lazarus lounging against the Patriarch of the Jewish faith, the rich man calls out to Abraham saying, “Father, send Lazarus down to me with a drop of water to quench my thirst.” But Abraham only responds, “child, you had your comfort in life and now it is Lazarus’ turn.” The rich man nevertheless persists and calls out to Abraham again asking him to send Lazarus, this time to warn his brothers who are still alive, that they might escape this suffering. But again, Abraham refuses, reminding the rich man that his brothers have all that they need to guide them in the Law and the Prophets.

Even in death the rich man remains blind—unable to see Lazarus as someone he has wronged. “Send Lazarus,” the rich man implores Abraham, “have him bring me something to quench my thirst.” The rich man does not even address Lazarus, but instead assumes he is still subordinate, someone to be put into service for the sake of his own comfort.

And when Abraham explains why things are the way they are, the rich man still does not make the connection between his current suffering and the suffering Lazarus endured outside his gates. He addresses Abraham as father, but he cannot see that Lazarus was his brother. Instead, he is worried about his biological brothers and their future comfort.

There was once a rich man whose wealth blinded him to the suffering at his gate. And in another time and another place, there was a prophet whose faith enabled him to see a future worth investing in, even when the world around him was collapsing.

Our passage from Jeremiah this morning tells the story of the prophet receiving instructions from God to purchase a field. It's a strange anecdote on the face of it. We don't normally hear God weighing in on real estate matters. It is stranger still when we take into consideration the circumstances: Jerusalem was under siege, the Babylonian army was at the gates, and Jeremiah himself was in prison for daring to speak the truth of what was coming. Land values had collapsed, families were starving, and the city's fall was all but certain. And yet Jeremiah is called to purchase property.

By every worldly measure, the field Jeremiah purchased was worthless. What good is farmland when the enemy is marching across it? What value is soil that cannot be planted, harvests that cannot be gathered? No deed can secure land when the city itself is about to fall. And yet, Jeremiah weighed out the silver, signed the deed, sealed it, and placed it in a clay jar for safekeeping—an act of radical stewardship, an investment in God's future when no one else could see beyond the chaos.

There was once a rich man whose wealth blinded him to the suffering at his gate. And in another time and another place, there was a prophet whose faith enabled him to see hope where others saw only ruin, provision where others feared there would not be enough.

Two lives, two choices. The stories are ancient, but their truths are uncomfortably present. Wealth still has the ability to cloud our vision. It can obscure the ties between us, making it hard to see the marginalized and those weighed down by misfortune as our equals. And, our faith still challenges us to see things differently. When we look around and see scarcity, our faith insists on a God of abundance, a God who provides.

In our baptisms, we remind ourselves that we are loved into existence, that God knew us before we were even conceived, that God has chosen us no matter who we will become or what we will accomplish. And when we die, Paul reminds us that even in death the goodness of God cannot be taken from us, that we belong to God, that nothing can separate us from God's love. We begin and end in a bounty of unearned abundance, but in the middle, it is all too easy to lose sight of the wealth that surrounds us.

And yet, when we take a step back, when we look above and beyond our own culture, our own society, there's no denying that we are incredibly wealthy. By global standards, an income of \$60,000 places you in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest.¹ But we rarely see it that way. Our culture keeps our eyes fixed on those who have more—more money, more time, more security—until we are convinced that we will never have enough. We are steeped in stories of scarcity, stories that urge us to grab our share before someone else does, no matter who pays the price.

And it makes us uncomfortably similar to the rich man who had more than he needed and yet failed to see the person right outside his gate who didn't have enough to eat.

¹ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2023/9/15/23874111/charity-philanthropy-americans-global-rich>

These stories of scarcity are the air we breathe, the water we swim in, confirmed daily by what our eyes can see and our ears can hear. But our faith asks more of us than this—it asks us to believe in things unseen, to trust in things uncertain, to act in ways unwise. Buying land in the middle of a siege is nothing if not unwise. And yet Jeremiah’s “foolish” act proclaimed the deepest wisdom of faith: that God provides, that hope has a future even when everything seems lost. This, I think, is what stewardship asks of us, to spend, give and live in ways the world may call foolish, but which bear witness to God’s abundance.

There was once a rich man whose wealth blinded him to the suffering at his gate. And there was a prophet who bought a field no one wanted, trusting that God’s promises still held. One story warns us of the danger of holding so tightly to what we have that we grow blind to our neighbors. The other invites us to see with the eyes of faith—to glimpse God’s promise where others see only scarcity, to spot hope in a field of rubble, and to stake our lives and our resources on the abundance of God’s future. The rich man clutched what he had and grew blind. Jeremiah invested in God’s promise and saw hope. We face the same choice, to close our eyes in fear, or to open them in faith and glimpse the future God has promised—a future with hope.

Amen