

Upside Living in a Downside Economy: Planning for our future in the middle of a troubled present.

November 15, 2009

Jeremiah 32: 1-16 & 31-40, James 4:13-16

We have been studying the book of James in our Tuesday night Bible Study and we are just one week from its completion. All in all, it has been a great study, with lots of insights for living gleaned from James' wonderful letter. But there are times when we are taken aback by James. Take for instance the beginning of his letter. James begins by encouraging his readers, and us, to consider it all Joy when we encourage various trials and tribulations, because we know that these difficulties will have a positive result in our lives and faith. James knows that God is with us in the midst of all of life, especially the hard times, and that God uses these difficult times to teach us and help us grow. It is often in the most difficult times in our lives that our values...what is really important to us...become really clear. We are reminded of what really matters, and our relationships become stronger. Did you know that during this time of recession the divorce rate actually has gone down. Experts predicted that it would go up, with all the stress on marriages...but it is in the stressful times that couples pull together! And it is in these times that God uses the difficulties to strengthen our faith. The trials produce perseverance, perseverance produces endurance and endurance produces hope, so we may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. That we may become more mature and complete in our faith...and take on more of the character of Christ.

James knows that as we exercise our faith, it becomes stronger. In the easy times of life, we don't really need to trust God much. It is in the hard times, the illness, the recession, the scary times that we cry out to God and he answers us...that his Spirit comes close and we sense his presence and experience his peace in new ways that help us get through the long and difficult seasons of grief and loss....it is then that our faith becomes real and strong.

But is it easy? NO. Is it fun? NO. James begins his letter by saying we should consider it all JOY. That is hard to do, friends. Very hard to do. I must confess, I am not quite mature enough to consider my trials and hardships joy yet. Maybe someday...but not yet. I don't say Oh Joy, a recession that has taken a huge chunk of our life savings! Joy! Or O Joy, a disability and chronic medical condition! Oh boy!

But, I am very grateful for God's presence and power through it all.

Some would ask why God allows such things to happen to his people. God does not do such things to us, of course. That is clear in the letter of James. God is incapable of anything evil James says, and God is the source of all good gifts, all of them. Let that soak in for awhile some day...God is full of love and mercy and generosity. And many of the calamities of our age are caused by people and their sinful desires and actions. Look at the recession and economic collapse we are suffering through. We can see that it is caused by plain old vanilla greed and irresponsibility. The bankers and Wall Streeters were greedy for profits at any cost, making riskier and riskier deals. The congress, who received their political contributions, decided it was best to allow the fox to guard the henhouse and largely deregulated the industry to allow even riskier and more complex deals to be created that very few people understood.

To make a long story short, we can see that this is not God's fault...but our own. Not yours and mine, but people's.

But what are we to do in the midst of a crisis like this, or some other crisis? What would God have us do? There are several things we can and should do.

First, draw near to God. This is key. God is near to us always, especially during the difficult times in our lives. He does not desert us nor abandon us. He is always with us. That was one of Jesus' constant promises to his disciples...that he would be with them always. He is with us here now, and with each of us individually. So as we go through

the tough times in life, draw near to him. Talk to him...you don't have to pray formally, just talk to Jesus. Pour out your heart, the fears your feeling, the hurts and hopes and fears...give it all to him. And he will lift you up. Really. Draw near to him, and he will draw near to you...

Second, know the plans he has for you. One of my favorite verse comes from Jeremiah 29: verse 11. It is on this picture that sits on the side of my desk. Susan gave it to me years ago when I was going through a particularly rough time. The Church had suffered a set back in the building plans, the vintage tower looked like it was not going to go through, my mother had died of cancer, and I was feeling discouraged...

"I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a HOPE and a FUTURE."

Let's say it together. How does this change your view of the future? Even when you're in the middle of a difficult time, if you know that God has good things in store for you...it changes your attitude about the future and about life in general. Know that the future is never written, and God is always planning good things for us there.

It was like the scripture we read this morning. God gave a word through Jeremiah to the people before the Babylonian exile. He had Jeremiah buy a piece of property from his cousin and register it with the court of records. The people were still going to go through a rough time, still going to go to exile for their sins...but God would not abandon them there...God was going with them, and would bring them back in time to their homeland. They would come home, this was not the end of them as a people. Jeremiah was told to buy property for the future in Jerusalem.

Third, God wants us to plan for the future. But make sure to put God into those plans. James shares about those who in pride make plans for what THEY will do—without God. They are so smart, talented, have so much money, ability, etc. that they are making plans to expand and

take on the world. But James reminds them and us that we never know what tomorrow holds. Our lives are like a mist in the morning...it fades away quickly sometimes! We never know when we will be called home...

So don't lose today by worrying about tomorrow....each day has enough worry of its own.

And don't lose today in so planning tomorrow...you can't live in tomorrow, it is not here yet.

There are priorities for today that we should take care of. your kids will only be this age once. Your grand kids...life is short, you may not get next year, next decade...

We are to make plans, of course, but we should plan in a way that invites God in. That acknowledges the realities of life, and balances the needs of today and the possibilities of tomorrow. Never mortgage today for the uncertain future. You can't live in the future. God is with us, to help us here and now, and to lead us into the future without fear. Don't be so worried about the future that we squeeze all the joy out of today...what are we planning and saving for then?

We need a balance...

Remember, God has a plan for you...plans to prosper you...plans to give you a Hope and a Future.

Relax and enjoy them. Rest in his spirit. Rejoice in the Lord