

Title: Get on the Arc!

Date: 9/25/2022 (Proper 21, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#); [Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16](#); [1 Timothy 6:6-19](#); [Luke 16:19-31](#)

Video Link: [https://youtu.be/0w\\_QrwgOAok?t=1422](https://youtu.be/0w_QrwgOAok?t=1422)

I shall say to the Lord,  
“[Y]ou are my refuge and my stronghold,  
my God in whom I put my trust (Ps 91:2).  
Amen.

A month ago, we began reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah told us that God had appointed him over nations and kingdoms, and with the words God put in his mouth, he was charged to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (Jer 1:9-10).

In the readings we have been assigned since that first Sunday, Jeremiah has:  
accused the people of God of turning away from God to go after worthless things, and thus became worthless themselves (Jer 2:5).

He compared the people of Israel to a vessel of clay that was spoiled and needed to be reworked into another vessel (Jer 18:1-11).

He called them stupid children who have no understanding (Jer 4:22).

He told them that because of what's happening with them, his joy is gone, and his heart is sick (Jer 8:18).

That is A LOT of plucking up and pulling down. He has been focused on destroying and overthrowing, landing jabs left and right. In today's reading, things take a turn.

After lamenting, after pointing out the ways in which they are falling short, he starts building and planting...by purchasing a piece of land...in a city under siege.

This is not the most obvious time and place to make a real estate investment, even to bail out a family member in financial difficulty. It's like buying a house in Flint, Michigan, and now Jackson, Mississippi, cities known for the lack of clean water for the most basic of necessities. It's like planning a vacation to Puerto Rico, which was hit so hard by Hurricane Fiona this week that the entire island lost power. It's like moving to Texas or Florida as their respective governors try to one-up each other, in a competition where women, transgender children and youth, and migrants are used as pawns and props.

Talk about an act of faith.

Talk about trusting that God has been at work and will continue to be at work for the sake of the people of Israel so that “[h]ouses and vineyards will once again be bought in this land.”

Talk about trusting that the moral arc of the universe is long but is ultimately bent toward justice.

In June 2020, I joined a Virtual Pilgrimage for Racial Justice. The opening session was a conversation with the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of Episcopal Divinity School. In her remarks, Dean Douglas repeatedly told everyone to just “get on the arc,” and those words have stayed with me ever since.

Dean Douglas said, “We don’t always have to be right, we don’t always have to know the right thing to do, but it means we get on the daggone arc that bends toward justice. Let’s just get on the arc!”

Then she went on to say, “Justice means we are committing ourselves to getting on the arc, to staying on the arc, right? Tithing, at least giving 10% of who we are toward this arc, moving, moving, moving, along the arc toward justice. To me, that’s what this pilgrimage is all about.”

Addressing the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed, she said, “You only know what justice looks like if you begin with the person on whose neck the knee is. You start there, and you get on the arc because otherwise we aren’t where Jesus is. I don’t care what you do, just get on the daggone arc.”<sup>1</sup>

When I heard those words, I had a mental image of this upward slope that would only start to bend as more people got on, as more people put the weight of their time, resources and energy against it so that it would start bending.

Whenever I’m frustrated with how slow things seem to be moving, I picture myself jumping up and down on the arc, in hopes of exerting a greater force so that it would bend now. But that’s not how things work.

Given the pushback whenever there is a push toward justice, think Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, the period of time we are in right now, perhaps the arc is more like a seesaw until enough people commit to getting on the arc, and to **staying** on the arc.

Jeremiah didn’t know how things will change. He had no idea how **long** it would take for things to change. He told his servant to put the deed of purchase and the open deed for the land in an earthenware jar, so that they will last a long time. Clearly he knew they wouldn’t need them any time soon.

Whether or not he would personally benefit from this purchase, he had faith that one day God will restore this city to the people of God. His goal wasn’t to make a profit; it was to show everyone around him how much faith he had that “[h]ouses and vineyards will once again be bought in this land.”

It may be an understatement to say that God is unhappy with God’s people at this moment, given what we heard in previous weeks. But Jeremiah knew that God will

never abandon them. God is with those who remain AND those who are carried into exile, God is with God's people when we suffer devastation AND when we experience restoration.

This is what he knew.

This is what he believed.

He didn't just repeat these words, he gave people proof of his belief, and he did this as publicly and in front of as many people as he could. Present were all the witnesses who signed the deeds of purchase and all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard...because by the way did I mention he was in **jail** at the time?

In the grand scheme of things, it's impossible to measure the impact of this one action. But it made a difference to Jeremiah, just as our own acts of faith can strengthen our faith and help affirm that we are on the right path.

It had an impact on the recipient, Hanamel, the relative from whom he bought the land. It may seem too slow or little to help one person or one family at a time, AND what we do makes a difference to that person, that family.

It had an impact on those who saw this act of faith, the witnesses and the guards. Whether this inspired them to do something right away, whether this became a seed that took root and grow over time, it made a difference. We are affected in the same way when we witness an unexpected act of compassion or grace over the course of a normal day.

On Friday, I saw a person drop off ice water and some takeout for a man sitting at the intersection. Since I had today's parable on my mind, the people who sell water or hold up cardboard signs at these intersections suddenly became Lazarus.

I may not live behind a gate, but my car separates me from them in a similar way. I don't know their stories and why they are standing there in the blistering heat. Similarly, we don't know Lazarus' story and how he came to be lying at the gate. This parable isn't about him; he doesn't do much or say anything at all.

The focus is on the rich man.

The rich man dresses in purple and fine linen and feasts sumptuously every day. He knows Lazarus by name, but he doesn't even offer him the crumbs from his table. After he dies, he takes his complaints straight to the manager.

He tries to convince Abraham to send Lazarus to Hades with some water. Perhaps he knew that if he asked directly, Lazarus wouldn't do anything for him, since he didn't do anything for Lazarus.

He tries to convince Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, so they won't end up in the same place. I wonder why he didn't ask to go himself; why would his brothers listen to some strange ghost? Is this the equivalent of not wanting to cause discomfort at family dinner?

As Abraham points out, they have Moses and the prophets. If the rich man hadn't taken the teachings their teachings to heart and his brothers weren't doing as the Torah commanded, why would they accept what Lazarus has to say? What difference would it make whether or not he came to them from the dead?

If we learned anything in these last years, it's that our framework for processing information is just as, if not more important, than the information presented to us.

The Gospel of Luke is the gospel that talks the most about money and wealth, particularly our relationship to money and wealth. At the same time, wealth isn't the only factor that gives us the privilege of not having to pay attention to the modern-day equivalent of Lazarus at our "gate," of not having to commit to getting on the arc and staying on it because *those* injustices aren't affecting us directly. And you and I have had the benefit of hearing from someone who has been raised from the dead!

If Jesus were telling this parable today, he could use as his example the privilege of being white or light skinned, the privilege of being able to identify with the gender assigned to us at birth, the privilege of only being attracted to someone of the opposite gender, the privilege of being neurotypical, the privilege of being able to hear without any devices or accommodations, and other privileges I can't even think of because I take them for granted.

There is so much happening in the world right now. There is so much pain and suffering.

We don't need to solve all the problems of the world AND we are called to get on the arc in some way, shape or form. We are called to put who we are on the arc, as individuals and as the St. Alban's community.

How shall we get on the arc right here, right now?

Who is the Lazarus you see, that others in this congregation might not see?

Just a reminder, the questions I ask at the end of my sermons are NOT rhetorical.

Please take them with you, and share your answers with me, with all of us. Sometimes it's hard to measure the impact of our actions. Sometimes it's hard to see the difference we make.

I believe that the moral arc of the universe will start bending toward justice when we focus on what we do without calculating the rate of return, when we live as if the kingdom of heaven is not just near, but already here.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Clip: <https://www.heavenlyrest.org/get-on-the-arc-learn> Full video: <https://vimeo.com/431946695>