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When Jeremiah talks about a place that is a waste without human beings or animals, streets desolate and without inhabitants, I think of many places the Poverty Initiative is working.

Can you picture with me now the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with blocks and blocks in places like New Orleans and Biloxi, MS where there are still no houses or people or trees or anything living present when they used to be bustling neighborhoods this many years later.

Can you see the mobile home parks in rural Vermont after Hurricane Irene passed through this past summer and washed away all of people's belongings and livelihoods.

Can any of you witness with me the situation on Kayford Mountain in West Virginia where Mountaintop Removal has destroyed mountains and trees and ancestral burial grounds and not even created many jobs for the unemployed miners in the area.

I think of Wilkes Barre, PA where close to a quarter of the population are in foreclosure and are on the edge of eviction from their family homes and Detroit Michigan where many children are taken away from their families because they can't afford to pay their water bills. Or Philadelphia where babies are dying in fires right next to closed down firehouses because the city can't afford to keep the firehouses open.

But just like with Jeremiah where the voice of mirth and gladness breaks through the despair and desolation, there are signs of hope in these communities. There are signs of hope here in Asheville and in all the places I just mentioned.

We see neighbors helping neighbors rebuild. There are programs like Sanctuary Saturday that is building community when we need it most. We know poor families in West Virginia who are collecting money to send to other poor people in Vermont and Louisiana and Iowa. There are people standing up for their rights and insisting on being treated with dignity.

Jeremiah continues. He comforts us that there will be pasture for shepherds. For us, this may be the homeless finding housing and hope here in Asheville, or those without health care finally winning universal health care in Vermont like they did this past summer. It is domestic workers getting the rights to living wages and work protections for the first time in history in NY and CA this spring. It is farmworkers getting the first raise in 30 years and finally being able to spend more time with their kids.

These victories, this pasture is happening when times are tough. It is out of these hard times that new possibilities are arising. I like to think that Jeremiah is reminding us in Chapter 33 that ending poverty is possible even today, even now – not just when our economy is strong but even when more and more people are struggling to make ends meet.

Jeremiah also reminds us that this restoration is the fulfillment of the covenant between us and God. God will protect and be present with us if we do what God commands – we are to do justice, love our neighbors, honor and worship God, treat each other right. When we do the right thing, when we practice righteousness, God provides for us by igniting those in our communities to bring forth justice and righteousness in the land.

So it is interesting that this comfort and opportunity for a new covenant, new possibilities is happening when times are so tough. It is also important to note that it is arising from those who are suffering the most. In the Poverty Initiative, we like to call this “Good News from the Poor” – kind of switching around the concept of simply bringing good news to poor people, instead those who are without homes, without jobs, without basic necessities are demonstrating a way out of poverty and misery for all of us.

I have seen this hope in my work among the poor for the past 17 years. From people who are homeless and jobless and without health care and struggling to feed their families, I have learned the ending poverty is possible. This hope is actually a deep, deep faith. It is a faith that change is possible, faith that in even the darkest situations and most impoverished places, God is real and present. Faith that we can one day really soon have God’s kingdom here on earth.

Let me share a story of restoration in the midst of poverty and despair from my work. Perhaps this story is a modern day example of what Jeremiah was talking about. I heard cries of joy and mirth and witnessed a community in

restoration in Philadelphia at Tent City some years ago. Tent City was an encampment where over 40 homeless families lived in tents and cardboard boxes during one of Philadelphia's hottest summers. That summer the city's shelters were full and mothers with babies were being told to sleep on the street.

Tent City was set up by a multi-racial group of poor and homeless families. There homeless families of different races – poor whites, Blacks and Latinos - lived together – sharing donated toys, clothing, food and toiletries. When a family was evicted and moved to Tent City, they would present their paycheck to the community. When someone needed to go to an appointment, families would volunteer to do childcare and pool their money to pay for the bus for that person. When it was hot, people in the surrounding community would drop off water and juice and all kinds of food.

Governmental and religious institutions were skeptical.

They said (and continue to say) that there is not enough to go around. They told us the poor will be with you always. They said that our communities would be forever abandoned, our children had no future, we would be alone when we died. But in the United States, we throw away 46 million pounds of food each year when it only takes 4 million pounds of food to feed everyone. Policy makers say that we cannot end homelessness but there are more than 12 million empty luxury housing units in the country (more than the estimated 10 million homeless people in the United States). In fact in Philadelphia there are 39,000 abandoned houses when there are about 27,000 homeless people. But families moved to Tent City because homeless shelters were closed and affordable housing programs were cut – the City of Philadelphia was saying there simply was too much need.

A miracle took place at Tent City (a miracle if we are to believe that feeding and housing everybody is impossible without a miracle). Perhaps it was the sharing of what the families brought to Tent City; perhaps it was donations from those who had more than enough from the surrounding community and city, especially from local religious congregations; perhaps it was God's work of creating something out of nothing (or at least creating order out of the chaos of poverty and hunger.) While homeless families moved to Tent City with close to nothing, food and other necessities were abundant at Tent City. In fact, not only was everyone at Tent City fed (and housed for that matter) but there was food and other necessities left over.

The homeless families began distributing the extra food, clothing and toys that were brought as donations to the surrounding community. They went out each day with baby buggies bought second hand and distributed the surplus because people in the neighborhood needed it. Not only were they able to feed the families at Tent City but dozens or hundreds of families in the poorest neighborhood in Philadelphia were fed with the extra food. As the months went on, different religious congregations came to witness and pray and worship and share what they had at Tent City. More people heard the good news that there was a place where everyone was fed – more poor families came, more church people came, and they came and they came. And all were amazed at the abundance. And some of us never left.

This community of diversity and restoration reminds me of the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the last years of his life, King called for a Poor People's Campaign and proposed that we needed to unite the poor across race, geography and other lines that divide and build a Freedom Church of the Poor. King followed in the tradition of Jeremiah and the prophets. He called for the need for us to do justice and to live righteously. He called for the immediate abolition of poverty. Perhaps King was trying to ignite the righteous branch that Jeremiah said God would call out when things got so bad. Listen to these words that were printed on the front of your program this morning from Rev. Dr. King.

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

So we know what we are called to do. God, Jeremiah even Martin Luther King have made it clear. We are asked to do the right thing, we are implored to work for justice and build community, we are told the true way to worship and honor God is to do the work of righteousness. The choice is up to us. Will we heed the call? Will we find the hope to end poverty even in hard times? Will we find the restoration and new covenant promised to us? Will we be that righteous branch?

I would suggest that many people in this congregation and others I have encountered in my work with the Poverty Initiative already are.