

## **“TREASURE IN CLAY JARS”**

***Jeremiah 18:1-6; II Corinthians 4:7-9, 16-5:1; Revelation 21:1-6***

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It was the summer of 1947. Two Bedouin shepherd boys were playing in a barren field near their home, a village 13 miles east of Jerusalem. They had challenged each other to see who could throw a stone the farthest. One would pick up a small pebble from the dusty ground and throw it as far as he could, then the other would try to out throw his friend. After several rounds, one of the boys again threw a stone as hard as he could, but didn't hear it land. Curious, the two boys ran to the place where the stone should have landed on the ground only to discover a crack in the earth's surface, a hole in the ground. Shifting sands revealed what had been walled off for centuries — the entrance to a cave. Venturing inside, the boys discovered several huge clay jars. In the jars were rolls of parchment.

The boys were both excited and scared by their discovery. The cave was alluring, but it was also dark and potentially dangerous, certainly no place for two young teenagers to continue their game. That afternoon, when they returned to the village, they reported to their parents what they had seen. Their parents took them seriously and went to the cave, then quickly called the authorities to report their discovery. Upon examination, it was found that in the clay jars were ancient scrolls of the book of Isaiah, and other prophets, centuries older than any that had previously been discovered. The finding of these two boys had led to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating to 150 B.C., the oldest known copies of several books of the Bible in existence in the entire world.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls both confirmed theories of biblical scholarship and aided in research leading to a fuller understanding of the Bible. Books have been written about the Dead Sea Scrolls, but on this All Saints Day, I want to focus, not on the scrolls themselves, but on the clay jars that preserved these documents through the centuries.

You see, when the ancients wanted to preserve something, make sure it lasted for a long time, they put it in a clay jar. Pottery stands the test of time. If it doesn't get broken, pottery will last longer than any of us. Amazingly, these clay jars protected the scrolls on which the words of our Bible were written for literally hundreds and hundreds of years.

Where do we keep things that are precious to us? Many women have jewelry box on their dresser in which they keep their earrings, necklaces, bracelets and other valuable jewelry. When I was a boy, my family went out West for a vacation, and I bought a treasure chest, where I kept my Boy Scout neckerchief slides and medals and things like that. We often keep things that are precious to us in a dresser drawer, tucked away in a closet, maybe even in a bank vault or a safe deposit box.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that the memory of our loved ones is like treasure in clay

jars. We want to hold on to and preserve the memory of those who have been such a significant part of our lives. Most of us have some heirlooms around our homes: a chair that once belonged to our grandparents, a painting that hung in the home of one of our relatives, a vase that grandma kept on her table, a watch that grandpa once wore, a diamond that was aunt Susie's, and so on. These things are precious to us, not necessarily because of their intrinsic value, but because they remind us of those that we love.

Of course, the memories that we have in our hearts are the most precious remembrances of all. I counted recently, and I am aware of 39 people who have died this year that were intimately related to members of this congregation. 39 families lost a mother, a father, a husband, a wife, a sister, a brother, a child. All of us at Church of the Saviour have lost some dear friends.

What memories we have in our hearts! What treasure we could put in the clay jars of the Near Eastern desert! I can close my eyes and still hear the piano music of Betty Mull, filling the room and filling our hearts. I remember the theological discussions I used to have with Gordon Rowe, the steadfast perseverance of Al Gochnauer, the gentle spirit of Bob Backhaus. I recall the thoughtful insights of Flossie Thomas, the great sense of humor and love of life of Jack Wiegman, the courage of Ed Janis to continue against all odds. I have treasure to place in one of those jars for Norma Schieb — her playful spirit, her deep faith, her ability to love and embrace people of all ages. I think of Bob Heuman — much decorated soldier, double amputee — with a smile on his face and an upbeat, positive spirit. And what will be the legacy of David Webster, who not only made his mark in the legal world, but whose concern for the environment is becoming instrumental in forming national and international policy? The full extent of his treasure, only God knows.

Yes, our memorial roll contains quite a collection of treasure. There aren't enough jewelry boxes, and treasure chests and safe deposit boxes and bank vaults and clay jars to contain all the precious and wonderful memories of these, our dear saints. The list in our bulletin today is just the beginning! You have your own list, and so do I. Yet, in spite of all the enduring qualities that these people possessed, in spite of all our efforts to preserve and remember — the Bible tell us that these qualities and these memories will eventually fade away. Even clay jars do not last forever. But God does! Even when our memory fails, God does not. The God who took care of our loved ones during their earthly life will continue to protect and preserve them forever. *“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”* Even when the clay jars are broken and destroyed, our lives will not be destroyed, nor will the lives of those we love come to an end. For God is not only the giver of life, the creator of life, but also the giver of eternal life.

Once, when asked about what happens when we die, C.S. Lewis said he was confident, on the basis of his experience of God in this life, that the same God who had sought him, hounded him, and found him in life would do the same in death. To put it in his own words, “Death occasions not that moment when God says, ‘It has been nice to know you, so long,’ but rather God comes to us once again and says, ‘Gotcha!’”(1)

Bishop William Willimon put it this way: One day I shall leave home and shall not return that evening. I shall then be buried, forgotten, returned to the dust from whence I was made, remembered for a while only by those few who knew me well. I shall fade into the

oblivion of the forgotten. Whatever I accomplished shall tarnish and diminish. And yet, on the basis of what I have known of God, I believe that what seemed a conclusion will in reality be a commencement. I fully expect to hear the God who so sought me in life to say to me even in my death, “Yes, your face is familiar. I remember you. I’ve got a whole new world to show you. Wait until you see this. I have yet to give up on you. Can we talk? You haven’t seen anything yet! We’ve got all the time in the world.”(2) Death is not the end of us. Our faith teaches that God has another chapter planned for us when our earthly life comes to an end. I repeat, “*If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*” As Christian believers, this is our comfort; this is our hope; this is our joy.

As a pastor, I conduct a lot of funerals, and funerals are sad times. It is always difficult to say goodbye to those whom we love. No matter how strong our faith, on the human level there is the reality of loss and the emptiness and loneliness of separation from those we love that cannot be avoided or denied or ignored. Yet as a Christian pastor, I want to assure you that there is more to a funeral or memorial service than just a process of providing a formal channel for our feelings of grief and loss. There is also the promise of new life. A belief in life after death is part of the foundation of our faith. We believe that when we die, our lives will continue forever with God. But there is also a further dimension to our belief in life after death. That is the idea that devastating though the loss may be, God has plans — not only for those who die in the Lord — but also for those of us who are left behind.

Jeremiah lived in a time of war, a time when many were being killed, when devastation and destruction were everywhere. One afternoon, Jeremiah heard God say to him, “Take a walk with me. Let’s go down to the potter’s house.” Jeremiah did as God suggested, and soon found himself watching a potter working at his wheel. The potter was making a clay jar. As Jeremiah watched, the potter realized that he had made a mistake, messed up the design of the clay jar that he was trying to create. But instead of taking the clay and throwing it in the trash can, the potter remolded the clay into another vessel that had a pleasing shape and texture.

“Now,” said God, “If a potter can do that with clay, what do you think I can do with you, if you will give me a chance?” The life that you knew and were familiar with ended when your husband died. Your family life changed dramatically when mom died. Things haven’t been the same since your daddy died. There’s a big hole in your heart since your son died, and it isn’t getting any smaller as time goes by. But your existence did not end when your loved one died. God has more planned for them, and God has more planned for you. Of that I am very sure.

Revelation tells us that God continues to “*make all things new.*” In life and in death, God continues to create. The message for us in John’s vision is not so much that all will turn out well as it is that we are called to repent and change and allow the potter to make us the people he wants us to be.

Yes, we have this treasure in clay jars. Even when the clay get messed up or broken, even when things don’t turn out like we hoped they would, God is still there to remold, remake and re-form us in his love. What is God calling us to do this day? What is God wanting to create in us and through us? Jeremiah tells us that we are clay in God’s hands. What will you let God do with the rest of your life? What treasure will be in a clay jar someday because of you?

*Prayer:* Dear God, thank you for the lives of those near and dear to us who shared their lives with us and who now live forever in your presence. Thank you for their memory that we hold in our hearts. Now, we pray that you will take our lives and form them into what you would have them to be, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes:

1. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 4., p. 22.
2. Willimon, William H. *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 4., p. 23.