

“Three Things Needed for the Months Ahead”
August 13, 2023

Jeremiah 31:27-34
I Timothy 2:1-7

It might seem a little like I’ve been taking a busman’s holiday this past week, showing up on Sunday and preaching. I will say that one of the “gifts” I received in not being able to find a guest preacher for this morning is that my time off also gave me some time to reflect on our national life. And I want to share some of that with you this morning.

Along with many others, I’m concerned about the growing sense of division in our nation. In our Sunday morning adult education sessions we have spent a good deal of time thinking about and discussing the polarization that is increasingly sharper. My sense is that we will experience this even more in the coming months as the presidential campaign heats up and the indictments of the former president move toward trials.

In First Timothy we hear the advice given to early Christians living in difficult times: “Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

We may long for peace and quiet. We may want to live in godliness and dignity. We may pray for kings and the president and members of Congress and judges.

But the Congregational understanding of Christianity does not allow us simply to sit quietly and pray while the world hurts and rages around us. We’ve been listening to the Gospel of Matthew on recent Sundays and we are learning that following in the way of Jesus Christ calls us to live out our faith in the world of politics and economics rather than take on a passive, other-worldly spirituality.

Rightly understood, both politics and faith are public acts. The political process is the way that our communities and our state and our nation organize our common life, allocate our resources, and deal with shared problems. For people of faith, concern with politics is never simply about the triumph of one party or another. Far more is at stake: the values we honor, the money we allocate, the process we follow so that we can live together with some measure of justice, order, and peace.

The indictments of the former president have been called a kind of Rorschach test—we see in them what we want to see—justice or injustice, good or evil. Hoping to find some clearer sight, this morning I’m turning away from Matthew’s Gospel which we have listened to in recent weeks and turning to Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of the Hebrew scriptures.

I turn to Jeremiah because he helps our nation as we live through these challenging times that call for our best when our best seems so elusive.

Jeremiah offers three things essential for the months ahead:

A call to responsible living in the present.
The hope of a new covenant.
The announcement of the forgiveness of sin.

Jeremiah calls us to live responsibly in the present.

After the destruction of Jerusalem, the people of ancient Israel sought to discover who was to blame.

It couldn't be them.

It must be someone else.

Probably it was the older generation. The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge. This was a popular proverb among the residents of Jerusalem who were taken off into exile in Babylon. God, it seemed, was punishing the people for the sins of their ancestors.

And that sounds reasonable.

In our nation we have seen how the sour grapes of slavery continue to set the teeth of generations on edge long after its abolition.

We currently continue to have an insatiable appetite for the sour grapes of fossil fuels and are close to the point when our children of countless generations will have their teeth set on edge by climate change.

We recognize the truth of this proverb.

But Jeremiah announces that God will take a different approach. The people hear the good news that, as one person put it, "they are not shackled by the failures of their forebears.... Their fate hangs on their own righteousness or unrighteousness—as does ours."

The words of the prophet set us free from a past that we cannot change and bring us into a present in which we ourselves can be changed by God's grace and so become those who shape the world for our time.

Yes, it is important to look at how we got to where we are today—to recall the grapes of wrath and greed, the grapes of fear and despair, the grapes of racism and sexism on which we as a nation have been feeding. But we need to recognize that our own appetites have set our own teeth on edge.

We look at all of this, not to assign blame but to find the ability that we have to respond to any situation.

We are called beyond blame to responsible living in the present time.

We also hear the promise of a new covenant—that is, our eyes and our hearts are pointed toward the future.

Jeremiah was not one to create false hope. He lamented that other prophets cried “Peace. Peace.” when there was no peace.

But listen again—the day is coming, he tells us. We don’t know when, but the day is coming. New opportunities will present themselves, so act accordingly. This is not the time for despair or resignation. We don’t need to act like scolds, shrilly calling people to wake up and see how terrible things are—to “know the Lord” is how Jeremiah put it.

Instead we are called to act out of an awareness that God will make a new covenant, that, as we pray, the kingdom will come.

Our nation constantly needs attention. Our common life requires participation.

Physicists tell us that “Nature seems to be less interested in *creating structures* than in *tearing structures apart* and mixing things up into a kind of average.” The political landscape of our nation has become about disruption, blowing up the system—or as Jeremiah puts it, “breaking down and plucking up.”

Left to themselves, there is a general tendency for things to decay, to fall apart. Religious words like sin help us to get a handle on some of this. Left to themselves, things decay. People get tired. People give up.

But we are not left to ourselves.

In the physical world, physicists tell us, atoms and molecules are never entirely left to themselves. They are almost always exposed to a certain amount of energy and material flowing in from the outside. And if that flow of energy and material is enough, then the steady decay and degradation can be partially reversed.

The same is true for our life together. When outside energy and material enters a life, an organization, a people, a new quality of being alive develops.

Covenant means that we are not left to ourselves. The promise of a new covenant means that what was regarded as the certain end is not seen that way by God. We are not left to ourselves and our own devices.

In the midst of a despairing and hopeless situation, Jeremiah announces that there is a power at work doing something unexpected, something undeserved. Jeremiah, who can be even gloomier than I often am, Jeremiah announces a power at work in the world that brings new life where we might expect no life.

In the midst of change and uncertainty, God is continuing to do new and amazing things with this congregation;

In the midst of change and uncertainty, God is continuing to do new and amazing things in our individual lives;

In the midst of change and uncertainty, God is continuing to do new and amazing things in our nation and world.

We hear the call to responsibility.

We hear the hope of a new covenant.

And we hear of the forgiveness of sin, which is the ability to begin anew after responsibility has been shirked, after covenants have been broken.

Sin is that separation that we know so well—the separation from our neighbors, the separation from God, the separation even from the best within ourselves. In saying that God will no longer remember the sin of the people, Jeremiah is pointing toward a new possibility and a new power coming into this world.

Perhaps you have known that forgiving another person, forgiving yourself releases a tremendous amount of energy. I hope you have experienced this. Everything that was being used for resentment, for anger, hatred, or self-loathing is now available for something more positive.

In the same way, accepting the forgiveness of others, the forgiveness of God creates new possibilities in your life. I hope you have known this as well.

God says: I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Human forgiveness is a discovery most often unearthed while we are living in the pain of being ourselves.

Responsibility. Hope. Forgiveness.

In the months, the years ahead, we need to continue to do the work that we are already doing, recognizing that our work is still unfinished. Maybe there will be more resistance, but we will continue to: work for interfaith understanding, cooperation, and acceptance, include people of all sexual orientations in the life of our nation as we do in the life of our congregation, strive to overcome the racism that clings so closely, speak the truth about the reality of climate change before it's too late—and time is running out, pursue paths of economic justice, live toward peace, and—I'll keep saying this until it happens: in all things seeking the good.

This is to say, we need to be true to our calling as a congregation.

We in the liberal church are called to important work. While we used to be able to assume that many outside the church held our values and expectations, we are now called to define and clarify what those values are and learn to speak about them in ways that can persuade others. This is not about moral superiority. It is about creating a society that honors each of its members, a society that speaks the truth, a society that seeks the peace that grows from justice.

Live in the present.

Live in the hope of the covenant.

Live in the energy of forgiveness.

The days are coming, says the Lord. Let us continue to look for them and work for them.