

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

Jeremiah 32:1-15

“What should we do in the face of Covid 19?”

I was thinking a lot about useless information this week, given what is happening south of the border when I stumbled on this story. A newbie balloonist is blown off course, and is forced to land. He is in a field close to a road, but has no idea where he is. He sees a car coming along the road and hails it. The driver gets out and the balloonist says, “Howdy! Can you tell me where I am?” “Yes, of course,” says the driver. “You have just landed in your balloon, and with this wind you have obviously been blown off course.

You are in the top field on John Dawson’s farm, 10 miles from Charlotte. John will be plowing the field next week and sowing wheat. There is a bull in the field. It is behind you and about to attack you.” At that moment, the bull reaches the balloonist and tosses him over the fence. Luckily, the balloonist is unhurt. He gets up, dusts himself off and says to the motorist, “I see you’re an appraiser.”

“Good grief,” says the other man, “you’re right! How did you know that?” “I employ appraisers,” says the balloonist. “The information you gave me was detailed, precise, and accurate. Most of it was useless, and it arrived far too late to be of any help.” This little story really resonated with me, in light of the ongoing Corona pandemic. I was reading in the Toronto Star on Aug. 4th, about all the conspiracy theories floating around about the pandemic.

Too many people are retrieving their information and advice about the pandemic from social media, from sources that are not vetted and have no scientific bases. Such is the case with the outrage some are displaying at having to wear a mask in a public place, or the President of the US assuring everyone that a malaria medication cures the Corona virus. The conclusion of the article was powerful.

The article described that how you respond to the requests by health officials about: wearing masks, washing your hands, social distancing comes down to a fundamental choice. Do I see society as a collection of individuals, seeking their own fulfillment, no matter the consequences to others? Or do I see society as a mass of humanity, all interconnected, and all being affected by everyone else. These affects could be positive or negative depending on the action.

Today’s story from Jeremiah is enormously important for me. Yet I am well aware that in just reading the passage without some context, it is pretty baffling to see why it might be important, given our current circumstance. So that’s my job, right? Why is it that a man buying a piece of property 2600 years ago, has any significance whatsoever for our life and faith, much less a story that I would call enormously important for me? I hope to help you see the importance.

Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet in Jerusalem around 600 years before the birth of Jesus. I confess right off the top that he is my favourite prophet, for many reasons. He ministered during what was a tumultuous period of history for Judah, the southern kingdom and for the Jewish faith. You know how people get labeled, and everyone reacts to them based upon that perception? Well, Jeremiah was seen a prophet of gloom and doom, a constant critic of his king Zedekiah and his nation and his neighbors.

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

How bad was it? It was 52 chapters worth. It was so bad, that if you look in Webster's dictionary under "Jeremiah," it not only defines him as a Hebrew prophet, but also as any person "who is pessimistic about the present and foresees a calamitous future." He is also called the "weeping prophet". Do you know any Jeremiahs? Hold on, it gets worse. His very name has been co-opted into a word. A 'jeremiad' is defined as "a prolonged lamentation or complaint" or "a cautionary or angry harangue."

Prolonged lamentation. Angry harangue. These are what we associate with Jeremiah the prophet. Doom and gloom and criticism. This was what God called Jeremiah to do. He didn't like it. He didn't want to spend his life doing it. But he did it. He stood in Jerusalem, and loudly denounced just about everything that anybody there was doing, and proclaimed that God was getting ready to bring doom on the whole place.

Perhaps a bit of historical context is in order. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the nation of Assyria in 721 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah, where Jeremiah lived, was made up of only two tribes (Benjamin and Judah) and was increasingly isolated and vulnerable to the surrounding powers. Judah had paid Assyria not to invade them as they had Israel, and had formed an alliance with Egypt which they hoped would protect them.

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet about 100 years after the fall of the northern kingdom. The newly developing threat was the nation of Babylon. Jeremiah prophesied in the capital city of Jerusalem up until its defeat by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and the beginning of the period of exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah told the people that God couldn't understand how they could have learned nothing from the experiences of the northern kingdom of Israel. They continued to do the same old things and trust in the same false gods, oblivious to the fact that without God, their destruction was imminent, too. Jeremiah told the Judeans that God wanted them to trust him alone, rather than weapons, or alliances with other countries, or idols of wood or silver.

The temple actually created a special problem for getting the message through to the people of Jerusalem. They viewed the temple as God's home, God's dwelling place, and were firmly convinced that God would never let anything bad happen there. One day, Jeremiah went to the temple and told everyone who came, that if they thought just coming there one day a week would make up for all the terrible things, they were doing the other six days, they were crazy.

He criticized the king, and especially the other prophets who were saying everything was okay. Jeremiah took on the priests, and the people. One day he was so angry about some people participating in a human sacrifice, that he took a clay pot and said, "This is what God is going to do to you!" and smashed that pot into smithereens. Jeremiah was a very visual preacher, and he used props all the time to make a point.

In 597 B.C. the Babylonians came, and carried off exiles to Babylon, but they spared the city of Jerusalem and left many residents.

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

This reinforced the belief that Jerusalem would never fall, but Jeremiah said that the complete destruction was still coming. Another prophet said the exiles would be back and all would be restored in two years. Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles, and told them to build homes and plant vineyards, and have children, and work for the good of Babylon for the time being, because it would be their home for a long time.

Jeremiah had a faithful scribe named Baruch, but it is not recorded that he had friends. He had enemies aplenty, death threats, imprisonments. None of them shut him up. There were days, as with anyone, when he felt like he was wasting his time, his energy, his life, and he wanted to quit. But he continued to warn his nation of God's displeasure, and impending judgment, if they did not return to him.

Finally, the armies of Babylon returned ten years later, and surrounded Jerusalem to cut off supplies. An army from Egypt approached from the south to assist in the defense of Jerusalem, as they had before. Jeremiah counseled the king to surrender to the king of Babylon and submit to exile. The king had Jeremiah imprisoned for the treasonous advice and for the negative effect he had on people. The Babylonians began their siege upon Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was imprisoned in the palace.

It was while he was imprisoned, and the Babylonians surrounded the city, that Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel came to him with the business of today's passage. He came to ask Jeremiah to buy his land in Anathoth. Anathoth was where Jeremiah "was from." What he is asking Jeremiah to do is prescribed in Leviticus 25. It provided that if a family was in danger of losing their land because of financial difficulties, it was up to the eldest male member of the family to purchase it so that it would not be lost from the family. It is called, interestingly, the "right of redemption," redeeming family land so that it will not be lost forever.

What makes this an absurd request is that Hanamel's land lay beyond the northeast wall of the city of Jerusalem, and was certainly occupied by the armies of Babylon. Jeremiah is in prison, the land is occupied, and people are finally realizing the truth of Jeremiah's prophecy that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians. The chances of Jeremiah ever being able to use that land are slim and none. The nature of his bombastic prophecies makes us cringe as we await his response to Hanamel about how the land is forfeited and will become thorns and brambles.

But to our utter astonishment, Jeremiah agrees to the purchase, saying that the Lord has told him to do this. And he doesn't do it quietly; he makes a big production out of it, because he wants everyone to know about it. I'm sure this did nothing to make people change their minds about him being a nut.

Jeremiah measures out 17 shekels of silver – at the time this was silver by weight, rather than by coins. Was this buying low or buying high? We don't have any way of knowing. We don't know the size of the piece of land, nor the relative value of the money at that time. What we know is that it was a purchase that made no sense from a practical standpoint. Then he makes a big deal out of the preparation and preservation of the deed, which had to look absurd to people who were wondering if they would survive the night.

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

But he has the deed prepared, along with a copy, gets witnesses to sign it, and generally does everything decently and in order. One copy is sealed and one is open, for public record. Perhaps the sealed one would have greater validity, I don't know. Then Jeremiah entrusts the deed to his scribe Baruch, with instructions to put it in a clay pot, where it can be preserved for a long time just as the Dead Sea Scrolls were. Why did he do this?

Here is the punch line: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." The city is about to fall, but judgment will not be the last word.

Everything has been turned upside down here. For years Jeremiah has prophesied doom and gloom, trying to break through the numbness of his community, and the Pollyanna belief that everything would be all right. Sound familiar? Finally, the reality has sunk in, and the people are sinking into despair and hopelessness that all is lost, and now it is Jeremiah who says, "Wait a minute. This is not the end of the story. God is still our God, and we still have a future. Because God ensures the future, I am redeeming this piece of property."

This is, indeed, trust for the long haul. This is not an investment in the stock market when it is down, trusting that it will come back up in a couple of years and will pay a profit. This is an investment which Jeremiah never expects to use personally, but which he expects his people to use at some point in the future. It is a future which no one can see at the moment. He has prophesied 70 years in exile. He has told those already exiled to put down roots and acclimate themselves to their new homes. But now he says that one day there will come a time to go home and be restored and we must not lose hope or faith in that.

Jeremiah has not suddenly changed his tune and decided things are going to get better after all. Defeat, destruction, exile, separation, those are all going to happen as he said. There will be a long wilderness experience, a time of reorientation and of new learnings and insights. And in time there would come a new beginning, a new creation. Ezekiel would see a vision during the exile in which God would bring together the dry, dusty bones of Israel, connect them and put flesh on them, and breathe the breath of life into them and give them a new future.

Perhaps you have begun to imagine why I said this story is enormously important for me. Perhaps you have found something important for yourself. Lately it seems we all are facing the armies of Babylon, who have figuratively hemmed us in, and are ready to move in for the kill. Maybe we have been denying it was going to happen, like refusing to wear a mask or social distance, and maybe we are struggling against it happening, but we have finally come up against the stark realization that it is indeed happening.

This virus means some are going to lose their job. Some significant relationships are breaking down. The virus is everywhere and we seem powerless to stop it. The end of something is at hand and in place of denials or struggles or excuses or false hopes: there is the beginning of grief and temptation to despair.

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

The temptation is so great to want to hold out some sort of false hope for people sitting in that difficult place; to want to fix it; to want to assure them that everything will be okay. But there is no integrity in that – it encourages wishful thinking rather than hope.

The truth is that endings happen, and they are enormously painful. Things are not the same afterward. You have to trust for the long haul. You have to build a home and plant a garden in a place you do not want to be. You have to let other people or forces control your life for a period of time while you learn difficult lessons. But you have to have a hope that God is still with you, still loves you, still cares for you, and will still be at work in your life and has a future for you.

If I didn't have faith in such a God, I'm sure I would have changed jobs many years ago, rather than continuing to sit down with people moving into situations of exile time after time after time. Stories from the Bible like Jeremiah's, helped prepared me. Stories like Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, but later telling them that God meant it for good so that many would be saved in the famine.

Stories like Naomi being blessed by her Moabite daughter in law Ruth after the death of her husband and two sons. Stories like Hanna and Samuel and Eli, and David and Jonathan, and Jesus and John the Baptist, and Mary Magdalene as well as Mary the mother of Jesus. Those stories help me understand how hope does not disappoint us. But watching the people I sit with move over time from despair to hope, from exile to home, from bitterness to joy – that is what keeps me going and helps me know it is possible.

An intriguing part of today's story that I have not told you yet, is that Jeremiah told this story to King Zedekiah. As the Babylonian army moved closer, Zedekiah went to visit his old tormentor in his prison cell. I guess, as the Babylonian king would years later, he finally saw the writing on the wall. He just wanted to know why. Why was your message always against me and so negative? My guess is that, as with many crisis questions, the true question was, "Where is God in all of this?"

Jeremiah does not answer his question; he tells him this story. It reveals a different side of Jeremiah than the king is used to seeing. He is not unpatriotic; he doesn't get pleasure out of being negative or opposing the king. He is being obedient to his call, and in the case of this story he is called to do something outlandishly hopeful for God. He redeems the field of his cousin Hanamel in anticipation of God redeeming his people in the future and restoring them to their home so that they will not be lost forever.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

Sunday August 23rd, 2020

STEWARDSHIP: “For what will it profit them, to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”
Mark 8:36

PASTORAL PRAYER: Here we are again, O God. Gathered as your people, seeking to connect to the great mystery which is your presence. Our words seem so inadequate, our hearts seem so unworthy, but still we come. Not because we think we have the right, but because we have been granted access, by your abiding grace. How marvelous it is to be enveloped by your love, to experience even the smallest crumbs of your life-giving peace. We know we could have so much more, than the mere crumbs but we hesitate, we question, we doubt and most of all we live in fear.

We fear: disease, economic loss, political turmoil, relationships and so much more. In fearing death and events that feel like a death, we have ended up fearing living. In fearing living, we have lost so much. We fear a stranger and therefore miss out on a new life enriching friendship. We fear the past so we can no longer embrace the present or look forward to the future. We are so self-conscious that we fear speaking out, or participating lest we embarrass ourselves, and therefore our experiences and opportunities for growth are stunted. We even fear for others so much that we become stumbling blocks keeping them from achieving personal growth.

How we long to be more like Jesus? To be able to set our face towards our destinies despite uncertainty, struggle, and even death. To be able to see that even in the face of the severest of challenges and threats, there is always life on the other side. Jesus told us that was why he came; to give life and life in abundance.

We would be remiss, O God, not to acknowledge that this week is a prime time of preparation for many people, especially children and young people. And it is easy to be overcome by fear. Walking into a new classroom, with a new teacher, and new classmates; sometimes, even in a new city, as older ones go off to university and college. These are great enough challenges without the pandemic effecting so many things. We pray for our children, teens, and young adults who begin a new chapter of their life’s journey. Keep them safe, healthy, and as they learn, help their spirits also to grow as they gain more relational experience with you. For parents, grandparents, and friends of these students, help us to be ready to encourage, support, and walk alongside them. Make us a regular reminder that no one need go alone on life’s road.

BENEDICTION: Take up your cross, quickened by the vision of the empty tomb and inspired by the fires of the Holy Spirit. Do not gladly bear a burden that diminishes your life, but seek the aid of God and neighbour to cast it from you. Keep gladly only the charge that God has given you; fulfill that calling, and you will find your life. Amen.