

Gates Presbyterian Church      *The Days Are Surely Coming*      March 21, 2021

The days are surely coming says the Lord...

Even as we start our passage from Jeremiah today, I can feel my heart lift. I have heard these words before.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and plant, says the Lord.”

When Jeremiah utters these words, the people of God are living in exile far from home. Jerusalem has been taken, the dwelling place of God, the Temple, has been destroyed and the Israelites are wondering, where is our God now that God’s home is gone? Have we been abandoned? How will we recognize and hear Yhwh in these strange new circumstances where everything we knew and everything that was familiar is gone?

Into this space comes Jeremiah, speaking God’s word to the people, the days are surely coming, he begins...

Listen to the hope contained in these words. Hope that despite the loss of all they know – the loss of Jerusalem, the loss of the Temple, and the loss of their homes combined with the circumstances of their exile – God remains present and determined to begin anew with God’s people.

Today especially, I can relate to this feeling. One year into our pandemic so much of what has been familiar seems long ago and far away. In our exile, we have learned new languages we never imagined mastering – languages about zooming and masking and shutting down. We have explored new ways to understand and define ourselves in the absence of the old ways from before times. We have become

accustomed to new rituals and new ways to work and play. We have perhaps felt like strangers in a foreign land.

We too can imagine the feelings of loss and desolation that might have enveloped the Israelites in Babylon as they tried to build new lives in a place where nothing felt like home.

But exile and isolation are not the end of the story.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.*”

I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Yhwh is inviting the people to come home – home to a new place where neither Temple nor city is required, where familiarity of place or understanding of language and ritual are irrelevant – home to God who will dwell within them, written right onto their hearts.

Now that is a home I want to inhabit. A home, like the shell on a hermit crab’s back, that I can carry with me wherever I go. A home that cannot be dislodged because it is anchored at the center of my being, written, as Jeremiah says upon my heart.

Now one’s heart in those days was not just the organ that kept the blood moving around your body, it was not just the site of your emotions. No, the heart was the seat of a person’s will. Whatever resided in your heart would manifest in your actions and your words, your beliefs and your decisions. To have the law written on your heart was also to have the ability to follow that law in daily life.

“No longer shall they teach one another,” continues the Lord, “or say to each other, “know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

These days that are coming are miraculous life-changing days. No longer will the people need Moses or another intermediary to move between God and them, carrying messages and admonitions, promises and curses. Now, the people will know God in a new way, an intimate way that bypasses all other need for communication. God’s law will bubble up in their hearts as God’s will; it will guide and lead them into a new time of prosperity and joy and new creation.

I hear such hope in that, don’t you? And I believe as we approach Holy Week and the joy of Easter that God is speaking to us this way too. The days are surely coming. Can you feel it?

Hope and anticipation of a new day are springing forth, a new day when the old wounds are healed and new life has been revealed to us. As we continue to ponder this Lent of listening, Jeremiah invites us this morning into a listening space that places God’s voice right at the center of our beings. We don’t need someone else to interpret for us. We don’t need a teacher to assign a lesson or someone to scold when we make mistakes. We must simply listen deeply for God’s voice at the center of what drives us. We must trust that that voice will lead us out of the wilderness in which we now wander and into that new day when God is planting and building up.

This word of God, springing out of us – us, created in God’s image and made good – this word can lead us home – home to God and home also to one another, home to communities that thrive and prosper, home to places where abundance is shared and differences are celebrated, home to lives that fully explore our gifts and provide opportunities for all. Home.

Listening from the center of our beings is one of the ways we honor this covenant that God has given us – this relationship where God is our God and we are God’s people.

As Christ's body in the world, we listen not only to God but also to one another. We must listen across communities, crossing lines of race and class, education and geography, age and ability, power and marginalization.

God promises that when we listen deeply to God's word in our hearts, we will not need to be taught what is good. We will not need to hold each other accountable. We will implicitly know how to live in community together. How to value all who dwell there, how to lift up those whose voices have been lost, how to make space for the silenced and put down, how to access resources for the marginalized and cast aside.

As we move ever outward in our listening journey – from listening to God to listening to one another individually to listening to one another in community, the work becomes more challenging, the opportunities to mess up become more plentiful, the temptations to put ourselves first increase.

It is precisely at these moments that we must cling to God's presence written into our hearts of stone. "No longer shall we teach one another, or say to each other, "know the Lord," for we shall know God, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord, for God will forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more."

Think about that connection – we shall not need to teach each other because we will know God and we will know God because God will forgive our iniquity.

We will know God because we are forgiven. We are forgiven without strings attached, forgiven from the cross for all time. But this forgiveness comes only when we ask for it, when we repent, when we seek forgiveness and offer it to others. Until we are forgiven, our sin stands in the way of knowing God. It blurs the word of God written in our hearts. It prevents us from fully realizing and living into our identities as God's people.

This is the space we inhabit today. A space where we have not yet fully lived into the word of God inscribed on our hearts. When we still admonish and teach one another, often learning little ourselves but being quick to point out the mistakes of

others. A space where we demand forgiveness for ourselves but are slow to offer that same forgiveness to others. A space where we cling to our power and influence but are slow to see that others do not enjoy the same opportunities as we do ourselves.

This is where we must listen, listen deeply with our whole selves to what our neighbors are saying, and to what the people who don't look like us, who don't share our life experiences, who don't espouse the same values or political affiliation, who don't speak the same language or wear the same color skin, are experiencing. If we really seek healing in our communities, we must first learn to hear – hear one another and hear God speaking deeply into our hearts and causing us to align our words and our actions with the values that God would have us live into.

This is not an easy task. It requires courage and daring. It requires a willingness to be humble, a willingness to follow instead of lead, a willingness to value new kinds of wisdom and purpose that do not flow from the same places that our wisdom and purpose come. It requires us to let God's word sink deeply into our hearts so that it transforms our perspective on the world and compels us to follow the law of a new creation and not of the material world we inhabit today.

Last week, I had the opportunity to practice my listening skills when I attended a prayer and protest event downtown in Little Italy. About a dozen of us gathered next to the soccer stadium, huddled up against a snow squall and shivering in the wind.

I was there with my son, Dylan, whom I'd dragged along because he was scheduled to play his first concert in a year and had just discovered that his only pair of black pants were now better described as shorts. That child has been growing like a weed! Anyway, he had to join me because it was the only time I could get to the store with him to find new pants.

You can picture us there in a tight circle. Dylan with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and shivering while trying to stay engaged and present. Me, worrying about

what I was going to say because I learned upon arrival that I was supposed to join all the other clergy and offer a prayer.

One lone camera man showed up from the local TV station and we began. One by one people spoke. White folk talked of confession and sin, black folk talked of liberation and healing. When it was my turn, I prayed about listening and being a good ally to our neighbors.

I was the last one to pray and then we had a short conversation around our circle. One of the black men was the first to speak. Looking right at me he began to explain quite forcefully why we should never use the word ally. “I insist,” he said, “that anyone around me just ball that word up like a discarded piece of paper and throw it away. Just throw it away. An ally is passive. We must use the word anti-racist because that is active.”

It was clear to me that he was calling me out on my language. Even though I had listened and shown up and tried to find the best way to be in solidarity with my neighbors, I had still said something that bothered him. It was uncomfortable standing there as he gestured and spoke. There was real energy in his response. My words had touched something in him that mattered.

As the circle broke up, I approached him. Thank you for the correction, I said. He looked a little surprised as he shook my hand. I don’t know if he thought I would argue with him about it or take offense, but I was glad that he was honest about what mattered to him. As I moved away from him, another black man approached. “I don’t know what he was talking about,” he told me. “I loved what you said about listening. I think we need to do more of that.”

This experience was such a great reminder that listening to each other does not guarantee that we will always get it right. It doesn’t mean that we will always understand each other or that our interactions will be without discomfort or conflict or hurt.

Listening is just the first step in living out the call God gave us to build a new creation based on God's values and not our own. It is the first step in learning about another's experience. It is about showing up and witnessing someone else's truth, not judging or taking offense but stepping into a new place where we are willing to feel discomfort and uneasiness in order to better understand what it is like to walk in another person's shoes.

Sometimes, in listening, we will hear the deep pain that someone has experienced in the world. Sometimes it is a pain that our ancestors have helped to create and cause. Sometimes it is a pain that flows from a system that benefits us. Sometimes the person speaking will direct the energy of that deep wounding toward us. Our job is to stand steadfast and hear their words – to let them too be inscribed on our hearts so that from them we can learn about the sin of our world, the things that separate us from the God who will not let us go.

It is this very deep pain, holding all the brokenness of our world, that Jesus bore on the cross – the one that felt at times too heavy for even him to bear. As we read our gospel this morning, we encounter Jesus feeling deeply troubled by what he is facing. The Greek word used to describe this, *tarasso*, means to cause severe sorrow or pain. It is the same word Jesus uses when witnessing the weeping of others when Lazarus dies.

As he contemplates the glorification, the raising up on the cross, that is to come – a glorification the world sees as humiliation, but God sees as the triumph of an endless love – Jesus feels troubled and yet he still faces what is ahead – saying, “it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

If we are to truly accept the word of God in our hearts, if we are to truly gather and act as Christ's body in the world, if we are to truly live into the new covenant Jesus invites us to enter, we too will encounter this *tarasso*, this deep pain and suffering;

we too will have to face it. We too will have to accept the world's negative judgment of us in order to carry out God's purposes of healing and restoration.

I believe that to accept God's words into our hearts is to listen to our neighbors' pain, to let the burden of that hurt inspire us to work for transformation and a new world that creates room for all of God's children to flourish. The path will contain potholes and detours and plenty of speeding travelers moving too fast to notice what is around them. Often, we will harden our hearts or misunderstand what we are hearing and seeing. But we must try anyway. We must listen anyway. We must be faithful anyway.

As we enter this last week of Lent, already anticipating Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, let us prepare also for the pain of the days to follow in order that we may then focus on the joy and wholeness embodied in the resurrection to come.

The only way out is through, goes the old adage. Let us continue to walk through the last part of this Lent of Listening together, prepared to hear one another's cries, to listen for one another's truths, and to work for one another's wholeness and restoration, anticipating already the glorious resurrection that is sure to follow.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord. Can you feel the hope?