**Preaching Notes**

**Lent 5.B.2015**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

The prophet Jeremiah lived and preached in some very dark days for the Jews – around the years 627–587 B.C. That means Jeremiah lived and prophesied about 600 years before Jesus Christ walked this earth.

Jeremiah’s prophetic activity extended from the years immediately before Israel and Judah were conquered by their foes from the north, the Babylonians. Nebuchnezzer’s armies took Israel, the northern kingdom of the Jews, in 597 and Judah, the southern kingdom, which included Jerusalem, about ten years later. But Jeremiah continued to prophesy through the period of the fall and into the time of exile.

Jeremiah didn’t really want to be the one picked to be a spokesperson for the Lord God. When God called him, he pleaded with God to not make him be a prophet, saying that he was too young and too inexperienced. He begged God to choose someone else to deliver God’s message. But God picked Jeremiah anyway. I guess when God picks you to be a prophet, you kind of have to do it.

So Jeremiah’s first job as a prophet of God was to deliver a message to God’s chosen people that they’d better shape up their act and start living the way God had instructed them or they were going to be destroyed by a foe from the north.

Nobody wanted to hear this from Jeremiah. He was quickly branded as an outcast, an irritant to the people and especially to the King of Judah, because he kept advising the King to surrender to Babylon rather than be destroyed. He said the impending destruction was God’s judgment on the king and his people for their unfaithfulness.

Even in the midst of having to be the constant bearer of bad news, Jeremiah still had a heart of compassion for the people and a trust that God had plans for them beyond the dark days of destruction, capture and exile. He believed God’s promise that there would eventually come a day of restoration, when their suffering would come to an end, and God would prosper them and give them a future with hope (see Jeremiah 29:11).

Jeremiah had so much confidence in God’s plans for a future with hope that even as Judah was falling to the armies of Nebuchadnezzer he purchased a plot of land in Anathoth as a sign of his trust that one day the land would one day be restored to the chosen people and he would be able to return home.

For much of his book, Jeremiah’s prophecies that “the days are surely coming” referred to the imminent fall of Israel and Judah to Babylon. But by the time we get to this week’s reading in the story, that fall has already occurred. So the words, “The days are surely coming,” take on a new meaning in this context.

The chosen people have been conquered. They have been literally taken captive by their enemies and hauled off to live in a foreign land for seventy years. Through a letter from Jeremiah to the people in captivity the Lord God has instructed the Israelites to build houses and live in them in this land of exile. He tells them to plant gardens and eat, marry and have children, and seek the welfare of their captors with whom they are now being forced to live. And the children of Israel are trying their best to do just what God has asked of them. But it is hard. It is hard to live through a time of loss and grief. It is hard to prosper when your life has fallen completely apart. Sometimes it feels like we are just going through the motions. It takes all our energy just to get through the days and weeks and months.

I would imagine that the words of the Lord God to the chosen people during this period must have gone in one ear and out the other, as they say. That is, maybe they heard the words that Jeremiah spoke, but they did not find much comfort in them.

It makes me think about all the times in my ministry when I’ve tried to speak words of condolence to people who have suffered a terrible tragedy. Someone has died, and I say, “I’m so sorry for your loss.”  I tell them I will pray for them. I visit and I try to listen. Maybe a few months later I will offer up some word of hope by saying, “It will get better one day. Time heals all wounds.” But to someone who is in shock, or someone who is hurting deeply, or someone who is facing the end of his or her life, mere words just don’t help sometimes.

Every Sunday in the worship service I attend our pastor shares the prayer concerns of the community. As I sit and listen to the problems people are facing I know that what is being shared aloud in the Sunday morning worship service is only the tip of the iceberg. Our pastor even acknowledges this truth sometimes. He says that there is so much more that he is not saying, and he knows there are things that people are not sharing with him. He tells us he knows some of us are struggling in silence and he reminds us that we are not alone in our struggle.

Does it help? Maybe a little. It helps to know that others care and are praying for us. It helps to know that people want to share in our burdens. But it doesn’t usually make them go away.

I know how many times I’ve sat in some church somewhere in my own life where I could hardly hold back the tears. It is painful to be in the hard times, the periods when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, as the Psalmist puts it. The dark nights of the soul that come upon all of us at one time or another.

And of course it isn’t just our personal troubles. There are terrible things going on in the world around us beyond the immediate needs of the people in our congregations. So much pain. So much violence. So much anger. So much brokenness. Where do we find strength for today? Where do we find bright hope for tomorrow? This week we find it in this promise from the Lord God sent through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah some 2,600 years ago. And the amazing thing about this scripture lesson is that the power of Jeremiah’s words speak to us just as clearly and profoundly today as they did to the children of Israel held in captivity in Babylon all those generations ago.

The Lord is saying to them, and to us, “No matter what you are going through, no matter how much it hurts or how difficult it is to imagine a future with hope, I promise you, it will get better one day. And you are not alone. I am with you to the end of the age.”

* One day, the Lord says, the house of Israel and the house of Judah will be restored.
* One day you will be able to return to the land that the Lord gave to you.
* One day your homes and businesses will be rebuilt.
* One day you will have work again.
* One day your divorce will be a thing of the past.
* One day shame will no longer control your life.
* One day your grief will become manageable and you will smile and laugh again.
* One day you will no longer be a slave to your addiction.
* One day there will be a new covenant.
* One day the sins of the past will all be forgotten and you will be given a fresh start. The slate will be wiped completely clean.
* One day Christ will come in final victory and we will feast at his heavenly banquet.

One day. Some day. The days are surely coming, says the Lord.

Do you think the people being held captive in Babylon found comfort in Jeremiah’s words? Probably not at that point. Sometimes we just aren’t in a place where we can hear *any* word of hope, not even from a prophet sent by the Lord God. But perhaps the one thing that we *can* do is put our faith in this new covenant, this promise of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and even prosperity that is, because of Christ, offered to all of us.

This covenant will not be made with words. It will be inscribed on our very hearts. It will come as an assurance in which we know, we *know for certain*, that God is with us and that God loves us whether we can feel it right now or not.

This is what we Methodists call grace, and grace bypasses our heads, our intellects, the limitations of communication through our words. The grace of God shown in Jesus Christ speaks straight to our hearts.

If only during those times when we as pastors find ourselves searching for something to say, something to do, something that will bring a momentary comfort to someone who is in pain, we could find a way to communicate God’s amazing grace straight to someone’s heart. If only we were able to bypass the limitations of human methods of communication—our mouths, ears and minds—and find a way touch the place that most needs touching in a moment such as that.

We can’t do that, but through the Holy Spirit, God can. God can touch people

with grace inscribed straight on their hearts. Just as God touched the people of Israel and Judah straight to the heart just when they needed it the most, so God can touch us just when we need it most.

And that’s why this message from God is so powerful for us today. I hope you can help your people hear it for themselves and whatever they may be going through. I hope we will remember it when we find ourselves in despair.

For 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 that 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 that 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

**Hebrews 5:5-10**

As in the passage from the Gospel lesson, the focus from the Epistle reading on this fifth Sunday in Lent is on sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews notes at the beginning of the chapter that “every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1). A priest is able to do this, according to the author, because as a human that person must not only offer sacrifices for others, but for him or herself. Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest” who makes an atoning sacrifice of his life for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17).

Jesus’ role as high priest is described as “the source of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9) that came as a direct consequence of his suffering on the cross. Suffering here is about a choice: Jesus chose to accept avoidable hardship in order to accomplish a good that could not be obtained if had chosen to avoid sacrifice.

Why is it sometimes necessary to choose suffering, to make a sacrificial offering, in order to bring about a higher good? And is this only the work of priests? I don’t think so. After all, we United Methodists proclaim the “priesthood of all believers.” Each one of us is called to act on behalf of others in relation to God, and to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. As the body of Christ we are chosen to make our life a “holy and living sacrifice in union with Christ’s offering for us,” as it says in our liturgy for Holy Communion (*The United Methodist Book of Worship,* “A Service of Word and Table I”).

Sacrificial living is at the heart of the Lenten discipline. At the beginning of the season, on Ash Wednesday, we were invited to “observe a holy Lent, by self–examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self–denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.”

Many people interpret these words to mean they are called to make a sacrifice of some sort during the Lent. Some offer a sacrifice through self-denial of a luxury item, refraining from eating certain foods, or perhaps giving up something they enjoy that is not healthy. Others offer a sacrifice of their time for intentional devotional practices, fasting in some way, or offering special prayers.

By this time in Lent, as my colleague Amy succinctly pointed out to me, people may be growing weary of the Lenten discipline. As she put it, “Maybe by this week they are sick of their sacrifices. . . .they’d like to pick up that glass of wine or coffee or piece of cake.  They don’t feel like reading their Lenten devotional.”

And yet, if we are to give up at this point, if we are to choose to not make the full sacrifice, is there something to be lost? If we give in to our desires and avoid the hardship for the remainder of the season, might we miss some aspect of the good that could have come from it?

We are called to be the body of Christ! Can we stay with him to the end? Can we continue to offer our own sacrifices as a way of joining him as he moves ever closer to the cross in the coming weeks? Can we draw near to him, and to one another, by our sacrificial offerings as we walk into this darkest of hours with our Lord?

**John 12:20-33**

A few years ago my mom fell and broke her hip. I would imagine that every person who is reading these words has had a parishioner or maybe even a family member who broke a hip at some time or another, so we all know that the recovery process after this type of injury is slow and difficult. I was fortunate to be able to go and spend some time with my mom and dad after the injury. I remember that when I was there, my dad kept joking about all his life he had heard that phrase, “A woman’s work is never done,” but he never really understood the truth of that statement until mom broke her hip. For several months my dad took care of my mom mom 24 hours, 7 days a week. He did many things he was not accustomed to doing: cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, bill-paying, taking care of the fish, the bird, the dog, the greenhouse, the yard, and everything else that my mom usually did, plus he helped her bathe and dress, took her to rehab and the gym, and encouraged her to do her exercises.

My mom has mostly recovered from her injury but like with so many older people, the effects of that crisis has led to ongoing problems so that my dad continues to be the primary caregiver for his beloved wife of over fifty years. He does a great job. But I know how hard it is for him. At first I thought that the accident was hardest on my mom, but I have now realized that it was just as hard—maybe even harder—on my dad, because he is the one who has really had to make some sacrifices. But he does what needs to be done willingly and lovingly. In fact, he’d probably be surprised to hear me describe what he does as a sacrifice.

The truth is my parents have made a lot of sacrifices, not just for each other, but for me and my two brothers. They raised us all up right. They both worked hard but they never had a lot of money. Even so, somehow they managed to purchase some land and build a little cabin, buy an old house and fix it up, and put us all through college.

I don’t know how they did it. But they did, as many others from my parent’s generation did. My parents are part of what is known as the “Silent Generation.” Born between 1925 and 1942, their generation was too young to participate in World War II and too old to really be part of the radical social changes of the 1960’s and 1970’s. They tend to be do-the-right-thing sort of people. They worked hard, mostly conformed to societal expectations, and believed that following the rules was the way to achieve success. They were willing to sacrifice their own goals and desires for their children.

I come from a very different generation—one that doesn’t necessarily like to make sacrifices. Not that we *don’t*. It’s just that we’d rather *not* if we don’t have to. Many from my generation have grown up with enough privilege that we have come to not just take much of what we have been given for granted, but to expect to enjoy a certain lifestyle. We are the consumer generation and we expect to have access to everything we want whenever we want it. If we want strawberries in winter we know our local grocery store will deliver them. If we want a certain book we know Amazon can have it on our doorstep in twenty-four hours.

Our consumer-driven lifestyles have had direct consequences for the church. We are the generation that goes “church shopping” until we find the perfect church for US: the one that has the service we like and the programs that fit our desires and meet the needs of our children. The one that leads us in singing the music we prefer, and employs a preacher who consistently delivers sermons that make us feel affirmed or challenged or comforted or whatever it is that we want to feel on any given day. And if we don’t get it, then we go somewhere else, because we believe a church should, first and foremost, meet our needs. Church for many of us isn’t as much about giving as it is about receiving.

Okay, so maybe I am being harsh and exaggerating a bit here, but we all know there is some truth in what I am saying. It is likewise true that many of us have an awful lot of people in our pews that are focused more on getting what they want then they are on sacrificing for the sake of others. You know it. I know it. It is part of the reason churches are struggling right now and why many of our pews continue to be filled with members of the “Silent Generation” who are still sitting there quietly, still giving faithfully, still making sacrifices to keep the church alive.

In this story John starts out by saying that among those in the crowd gathered for Passover were “some Greeks.” We don’t know if these people were Greek-speaking Jews, or pagan Greeks who had shown up to simply observe the Jewish rituals and enjoy the festivities of the day.

So a few of these “Greeks” apparently caught wind that there was a healer and miracle worker in town named Jesus. Maybe they heard about his recent healing of a leper, or how he enabled a blind man to see. Maybe they heard how he miraculously raised Lazarus from the dead! And maybe they started thinking about how this might be a great opportunity for them to see him perform a miracle or to receive healing for some sort of ailment from which they suffered. So they went looking for him.

Someone must have identified Philip as being one of Jesus’ disciples because they approached him and said, “We want to see Jesus.” Philip and Andrew then went and told Jesus. The gospel-writer isn’t clear about whether the Greeks were with Philip and Andrew when they located Jesus. But if they were, they must have been really disappointed by the encounter. Jesus didn’t offer them healing. He didn’t perform any miracles. In fact, he did quite the opposite. He said, “The time is coming for the Son of Man to be glorified. You need to let go of your life. Instead of thinking about how to save yourselves you need to be giving yourselves away for the sake of other. Learn to sacrifice, because this is the way to eternal life.”

So I’ve been thinking that maybe the younger generations—the baby boomers and the busters and the Gen X-ers and the millennials—and maybe even some of the folks who are my parent’s age—maybe we are a lot like those Greeks in the crowd. That is, maybe we went looking for Jesus because we wanted something from him. Maybe we were looking for a miracle, or some kind of healing. Maybe we wanted him to say something that would make us feel affirmed, or happy, or righteous about the way we are living. Maybe we were looking for Jesus because we were afraid of death and we thought he might show us the way to save ourselves for eternity.

The selfishly driven, self-preserving, self-serving and individualistic part of us looks for Jesus because we want something from him. But the irony of the cross is that what really feeds our souls, what really heals us and satisfies us, is when we start to give more than we take. True satisfaction comes when we begin to grasp that it comes to us through hard work and sacrifice, and not from simply taking care of ourselves and filling up our lives with more and more stuff.

In my Sunday School class we have been studying Rob Fuquay’s book, *The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus.* This week we read about Jesus’ words, “I am the bread of life (See John 6: 22-59). Fuquay writes, “When Jesus is my bread of life, I can let go of that need to get all I can for myself and have my life my way. I am free to give and share and enjoy. I can say to God, ‘Lord, you’ve already given me what I need for satisfaction, so I’m just going to enjoy it and look for ways to share it’” (Fuquay, 36). At the end his chapter entitled, “I am the Bread of Life,” he asks readers to reflect on the meaning of fullness and satisfaction. I would invite you to reflect also as you consider the lectionary reading at hand:

* List all the types of fullness you can identify in our world. Now write down your personal definition of *satisfaction.* How many items in the previous list can provide satisfaction for you?
* Thinking about the people in John 6 who followed Jesus looking for another miracle, what similarities do you see today in the way people follow Jesus?
* If the people in this story represent all of humanity, what does it say about us that we can receive a miracle one day and on the next day say to God, “What will you do for us now?”
* What does it mean to go from expecting to accepting?
* Have you ever experienced a sense of being fed when you focused on feeding others? (Fuquay, 37).

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised when the “Greeks” and even his own disciples have trouble hearing Jesus when he says, “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”

Maybe we have trouble hearing it too, because we didn’t join a church primarily to serve others. Rather, we looked for Jesus because we needed something from him. We looked for him to serve us.

But Jesus says very clearly that the way to eternal life is by making a sacrifice. He says it is by giving ourselves to others, by serving him and serving one another that we are saved for eternal life.

During this final week of preparation before Holy Week we would do well to remember that following Jesus is not always easy or pleasant. Sometimes the way to eternal life is difficult and requires hard work and sacrifice. But unless we are willing to make a sacrifice, unless we are willing to let some things in our lives go in order that others might live, we may have a hard time knowing the deep and eternal satisfaction of everlasting life with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.