

“Jeremiah: Week 1 - Call and Temple Sermon”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron
May 30, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – May 30, 2021

“Come Ye Disconsolate” #195 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-3

V. 1 Come ye disconsolate

Where'er ye languish
Come to the mercy seat
Fervently kneel
Here bring your wounded hearts
Here tell your anguish
Earth has no sorrow
That heav'n cannot heal

V. 2 Joy of the desolate

Light of the straying
Hope of the penitent
Fadeless and pure
Here speaks the Comforter
Tenderly saying
Earth has no sorrow
That heav'n cannot cure

V. 3 Here see the bread of life

See the waters flowing
Forth from the throne of God
Pure from above
Come to the feast of love
Come ever knowing
Earth has no sorrow
But heav'n can remove

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“We Come to ask your Forgiveness” #201 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2

Refrain:

We come to ask your forgiveness, O Lord
And we seek forgiveness from each other
Sometimes we build up walls instead of bridges to peace
And we ask your forgiveness, O Lord

V. 1 Sometimes we hurt by what we do to others
Sometimes we hurt with words that are untrue
Sometimes we cause others pain
By what we fail to do
And we ask your forgiveness, O Lord

Refrain:

V. 2 For the times when we've been rude and selfish
For the times when we have been unkind
And for the times we refused
To help our friends in need
We ask your forgiveness, O Lord

Refrain:

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"Dear Father, Lord of humankind" #451 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2, 4

V. 1 Dear Father Lord of humankind
Forgive our foolish ways
Reclothe us in our rightful mind
In purer lives Thy service find
In deeper reverence praise

V. 2 In simple trust like theirs who heard
Beside the Syrian sea
The gracious calling of the Lord
Let us like them without a word
Rise up and follow Thee

V. 4 With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down

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Closing Chorus: "Walk with the Lord"

Walk with the Lord
Go from this place
filled with his everlasting grace.
Walk with the Lord
Go where he leads
blessed by his love and his peace

Each day you live in all you do
let the light of Christ be found in you
Walk with the Lord
Trust and obey
Go now and serve him in faith
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Scripture Texts: Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:1-10

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

⁴ Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷ But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord."

⁹ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Every parent has had the experience of asking a child to do something and getting a less-than-enthusiastic response.

It's your turn to clean the bathroom.

Please empty the dishwasher.

The lawn needs a cutting.

Don't forget to put the recycling out tonight.

These are all basic things that needs doing around our house, and yet, the request or reminder is often met with a sigh, an eye roll, or a negotiating session. Those are my favourites. We live with a fantastic negotiator. I often find myself unloading the dishwasher because I've been convinced that unloading it is better than reloading and doing the hand washing. I admit, I fall for it. It's only when I'm part way through that I realize, wait a minute, I'm still the parent in this situation and somehow I am doing someone else's chores! Sigh. For whatever reason, kids can be reluctant to do what they are asked to do, and I'm never quite sure why. I was too, so it's not like my own family is unique, but it can be awfully frustrating for parents who think the request is reasonable. It's not like we're asking them to fly to the moon, although they would probably jump at that opportunity, as long as they didn't have to clean the shuttle first.

In other words, kids are reluctant to do the things they don't want to do. Sounds normal.

Jeremiah had a reason why he couldn't do what he was being told to do. God was instructing him to go be the prophet he was appointed to be. There was even a preamble before the Lord got to the actual instructions: that Jeremiah had been appointed to be a prophet before he was even born. In spite of this preamble Jeremiah had a quick response. "I can't do that, I'm too young." He uses the same excuse as Moses, "I'm not a good public speaker."

I can't blame him, really. I wouldn't want to do what God wanted him to do either. I would likely try to come up with reasons why I wasn't qualified for the job too. But God wasn't buying the objection. God knew this child better than Jeremiah knew himself, and took steps to make sure the young lad had what he needed to fulfill his purpose. He wasn't in for an easy time, but what prophet was? Still, he would be assured of God's presence and provision as he did what he was asked to do. It didn't matter what reason he gave for not doing what he was asked. Israel was in for a traumatic time in its history, several turbulent periods, a national crisis. Jeremiah was the one who would foretell what was to come for God's people. He would also bring words of relief later on. It would not be easy. But it had to be done, and Jeremiah was the one God had already chosen to do it.

The book of Jeremiah, in which we are going to spend the next six weeks, is not an easy book. It isn't put together in chronological order, like a novel, but rather in order that we might understand the situation in which Israel found itself, and the ministry to which Jeremiah was appointed. One Hebrew Bible scholar writes: "Before we come to know Jeremiah, the book shows us the historical scene through the reigns of kings but more importantly the significant national event of the... exile or the captivity (Jeremiah 1:1-3). While Jeremiah's career doesn't begin at the point of near national collapse, this

pending reality frames the book and most certainly Jeremiah's life. The tasks that he receives as a prophet are equal parts destructive and constructive (1:10)."¹

No wonder Jeremiah had a bad feeling about taking on the job. But, God reached out and touched the young prophet, giving him the words he needed to speak, and appointed him *over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (1:10)*. Like I said, Jeremiah didn't have an easy time ahead of him.

The first post-call text we read in this series about Jeremiah is a sermon preached on the steps of the Temple, and it wasn't an easy sermon to preach. There are times when every preacher is faced with a difficult text for interpretation, or a message one knows will be hard to hear, but I cannot imagine how much Jeremiah's knees were shaking as he spoke the words we now share:

Jeremiah 7:1-11

7 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. ³Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. ⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Imagine arriving at the church to discover someone standing at the doors, preaching about your church home becoming a den of robbers because of the disgraceful behaviour of those who enter for worship. *Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.*

Change your ways so that God will be present in this place.

Stop living your life of self-satisfaction.

Let go of your selfish desires.

Re-direct your self-serving attitudes.

Serve others rather than yourself.

Respond to the needs of the vulnerable, no matter how hard it is.

Stop giving more allegiance to your old ways than you do to me.

Not an easy sermon to preach. Not an easy sermon to hear.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/call-and-temple-sermon/commentary-on-jeremiah-1>. Written by Steed Davidson, Professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Ill.

Jeremiah had to tell the people, as they entered the place of worship, that they had to change if they were to be true to their faith, true to their God.

They had to give up old worldly ways, old self-serving preferences and closed-mindedness, and allow God to take the lead.

They had to live as people of the Spirit, not people of the flesh.

They had to offer genuine and sincere worship, not empty words of praise because it made them feel better, because they had fulfilled their obligation.

They had to live outside of the place of worship as they said they would inside the place of worship.

In other words, live your faith as more than a proclamation. Live it as people who truly believe it and are changed by it. Because if you truly believe it, you will be changed by it.

Not an easy sermon to preach. Not an easy sermon to hear.

Fast forward to our time, our society, our experience of the church. Still not an easy sermon to preach. Still not an easy sermon to hear. We still need to change our ways.

For the past couple of years, the Presbytery of Kingston, of which St. Columba is a part, has been discussing the reality of our needs in terms of structure, functioning, and leadership. One thing has become crystal clear: we simply cannot keep going in the way we always have. It hasn't been working for some time, and it is not feasible to keep the old ways going. By hanging onto the way we've always done it, we have spent as much energy looking for people to fill empty positions as we have serving.

We are tired.

We are overwhelmed.

This has translated to a conversation far wider than the members of the Presbytery itself. It is about all of our congregations. We are not alone in this conversation as the church across the nation, in every denomination, is experiencing decline. Since 1999, our Presbytery has gone from having fourteen full-time called ministry positions to seven, many of which are tenuous, and average worship attendance has been reduced by half.

We are in a position to open doors to new possibilities. The Presbytery has started a process of working with our congregations to facilitate the kind of change that needs to happen if we are to see the ministry of the church grow in our region. A workshop was held in which we were made aware of some startling realities. In the 1950s 70% of people attended a church. Now, it is less than 10%.

The question was asked, what happened?

The answer...the world changed, and we church did not.

It is happening to all churches, and the story is so much bigger than any one congregation or Presbytery, or denomination.

We are aging.

We are tired.

We are overwhelmed

So what do we do? How do we respond? How do we remain faithful to the Word and still work for the growth of the church in this newly recognized reality?

We do what Jeremiah told the people to do as they entered the Temple for worship.

We give up old ways that are no longer working and old habits that have become stagnant, and we allow God to take the lead.

We live as people of God, not people of the world.

We offer genuine and sincere worship, not empty words of praise because it makes us feel better, that we have fulfilled our obligation.

We live outside of the place of worship as we say we will inside the place of worship.

We open ourselves to what God is instructing and leading us to do, rather than come up with excuses and reasons why we can't do it, why we can't change.

Not an easy sermon to preach. Not an easy sermon to hear.

But over all of this, we absolutely must remember that Jesus is at the center of all of this, not us. We belong to him and to his church, not the other way around. Such good news! No matter what possibilities we consider or choose, Jesus will guide us by his Spirit. God will guide us by the Spirit. Just as Jeremiah was not given instructions and then left to handle it on his own, we are led and given what we need to take the next steps in the growth of the church.

No excuses. No negotiations.

All faith. All trust.

Easy to say, I know. As a church leader, I must admit this is daunting, even a bit scary. If the church is to live into the future God has planned for it, we have to be willing to do things differently. Change your ways so God will be present in this place. It's not that we've done something wrong, necessarily, it's that we haven't trusted God to help us grow by following the leading of the Spirit rather than the familiarity of our ways. We have not been willing to let go of what we want in order that people who need to hear the Gospel message of hope can actually hear it. We have clung to what we want things to be like instead of responding to the actual reality in which we live and serve. The people who heard Jeremiah speak that day heard a message telling them to amend their ways because they were living lives that were contradictory to God's law, God's Word. The message we hear today is one that points out our very human reluctance to change and be changed, but we must if we are going to grow with the church into the future.

The Hebrew Bible scholar I quoted earlier also writes, "Rather than a 'God on your side' message, Jeremiah's chastises those who may have paid him any attention with a 'God against you' sermon. Despite his crude strategy, Jeremiah rethinks theological traditions and settled dogmas that stand as obstacles to the community facing their challenges in beneficial ways."²

We, the church continue to face challenges today. God is not against us, the fact that Jesus sits at the Father's side and prays for us reassures us of this, but perhaps it is time we rethink theological traditions and settled dogmas that stand as obstacles to growth, to the slowing or even reversal of the decline we see.

What do we need to do to so there will still be a church in our community for our children and grandchildren?

What is God calling us to do, and how will we make that decision?

One more time: not an easy sermon to preach. Not an easy sermon to hear.

Jeremiah's protest of God's appointing him as a prophet with a tough message didn't last long. He knew it wouldn't be an easy road to travel, but he also knew he wouldn't travel it alone. God would always give him the words and provisions he needed in order to fulfill his purpose. The church does not travel an easy road in this world either, but we are also assured we do not travel it alone.

² Ibid.

God is giving us what we need.

God is pointing us in the direction we are to go.

God is surrounding us with the Holy Spirit.

And if we put our own reluctance aside, and I include myself in this, God will grow the church in this community and in the world because we will be following the One who cannot fail.

Amen.