

Message for September 4, 2022

Jeremiah 32:6-15

“The word *jeremiad* means a doleful and thunderous denunciation, and its derivation is no mystery. There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn’t denounce. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor and he denounced the poor for deserving no better. He denounced the way every new god came sniffing around, and right at the very gates of the Temple he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on in there, they ought to have their heads examined.

He even denounced God himself for saddling him with the job of trying to reform such a pack of hyenas, degenerates, ninnies. ‘You have deceived me’ he said, shaking his fist.”

This was written by one of my favourite authors, Frederick Buchener, in his book “Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who”. Reading the book in the Bible that bears his name, it is no wonder that Jeremiah has been nicknamed “Mr. Doom and Gloom”. Indeed Jeremiah was a man who seemed to be always angry about someone or something and when he wasn’t busy telling someone off, he spoke about how the Babylonians were going to destroy their country. And sure enough, the huge Babylonian war machine eventually set its eyes on Judah. The result quite naturally was panic.

In amidst the chaos, one of Jeremiah’s cousins came to him with a business proposal; he offered to sell Jeremiah a field just outside of Jerusalem. Now this proposed sale was of course pure foolishness. The Babylonian army was quite literally camped on that field and besides, this most certainly was not the time to be investing in real estate! This was a time for liquid assets such as gold, silver and other things that could be easily carried or hidden. Any good financial advisor would have said to Jeremiah, “don’t do it!”. Even so, Jeremiah did buy the field. In fact Jeremiah didn’t just buy it, he also went out of his way to make sure that all of the legalities were taken care of and that he had a clear and undisputed title to the land. Of course Jeremiah must have known that his land deed wasn’t worth the parchment it was written on, and so the big question is why; why did he do something so seemingly foolish?

He did so to make a point. For years he had told the people about all the bad things that were going to happen. Now that his predictions were coming true, he wanted the people to remember that no matter whatever happened, they were still God's people and in his hands. Jeremiah bought the land to remind the people that despite what was going to happen when the Babylonians took over, they still had a future. To be sure, their future would not be the same as their past but nevertheless they still had a future simply because God would be there.

Harvey Cox is a well-known writer and a former professor at the University of Harvard. In his book, "The Future of Faith", he divides the history of Christianity into three time periods. He calls the first one, which lasted for 300 years, "The Age of Faith". This was the early days of the church and during that time, with congregations scattered throughout the Roman Empire, Christianity was very loosely organized with most congregations doing their own thing. Belief was important but the main emphasis was on behaviour and following the example and teaching of Jesus. That is why the Christians were known as the "People of the Way"; they were best known for their dedication to following the teaching and example of Jesus. There were priests, bishops, and popes at that time but by no means did they run the church. Christians also made up a small minority of the population and far from being a part of the establishment, many of them were persecuted because of their beliefs. This however changed.

About three hundred years after Jesus, the Roman emperor Constantine the Great had a conversion experience, and his response was to make Christianity the official religion of the empire. Almost overnight the Christians went from being a persecuted minority to a favoured majority as many people jumped on the bandwagon to become a part of this newly favoured religion. The church also became far more organized too as the clergy, and especially the popes, grew in power and importance. While following the example and teaching of Jesus was still important, the emphasis was ever increasingly placed on belief; not believing **in** Jesus but rather believing **about** Jesus. This is when the great creeds such as the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed were written. The yardstick of being a 'real' Christian was now believing what these creeds said; how a person behaved was secondary. What Cox calls "The Age of Belief" had begun and it lasted for a long time. How long?

For 1700 years. Now however says Cox, it is over. Regular church goers are no longer a majority of the population, and Christianity itself is no longer the official faith, or even the favoured faith in Western society. Rather, Christianity in our society today is just one religion amongst all the others. An indication of how much things have changed is that when I began ministry forty years ago I, along with the other ministers in the village of Colborne, went into the public school every week and taught religion, that is Christianity. Can you imagine that happening today? Even amongst regular church attenders today, many no longer feel the same loyalty to their denomination that they used to. Generally speaking, most people today aren't all that concerned with holding the 'right' beliefs either, rather the emphasis today is on how we behave. Like the early Christians, we are far more concerned with how to best follow Jesus' teaching and example. Whether we like it or not, we are living through an era of almost unprecedented change and this has led Cox to conclude that we have now entered a new era, one that he calls, "The Age of the Spirit".

So concludes one of the most challenging and thought-provoking authors in Christianity today. Since about 1960 we have been living through a time of almost unprecedented change, and a new age has dawned. Is there is any truth to this? I think that there is but how do we feel about this?

Some of us deny that anything has changed while others hope and pray that it is all nothing more than a passing trend and that things will get back to normal. Some people are excited about all the changes and others are almost terrified. Will things ever go back to what they were? I doubt it, and in fact it is quite possible that Christianity's future will resemble its early days with smaller congregations, less unified denominations, and an emphasis on action rather than holding the 'right' beliefs. And with all of this change, we may well feel like the people of Jeremiah's time and that we are, so-to-speak, under siege. In fact we may even feel like exiles and that like God's people of 2500 years ago, we are now embarked on an uncertain journey into an unknown future. It is challenging and sometimes even frightening to be living in a time of such upheaval and yet, like the people of Jeremiah's day, we too have God's promise that whatever the future may have in store, he will be there. The future belongs to God.

That is why Jeremiah defied all common sense and bought that field. He did it to remind the people of his day, and by implication us too, that God, the

one who loves us, forgives us, and redeems us will be with us. And it is this that allows us to face the future, without fear or dread. In the words of the 27th psalm:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation:
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life,
of whom shall I be afraid?”

If we prefer, there are these words of an ancient Celtic prayer, prayed by people who knew full well how uncertain and even frightening the future may sometimes seem to be:

“The light of God surrounds me.
The love of God enfolds me.
The power of God protects me.
The presence of God watches over me.
Wherever I am ... God is!”

And so he is.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this, what is for many people, the middle day of a long holiday weekend. We thank you for what this weekend means for so many, a welcome break as the summer holiday season comes to its end and things return to a more normal routine. We thank you for what this weekend commemorates, the gift of labour. We thank you for the labour of the many people that provide us with both life's necessities and

other good things. Too often perhaps, we forget about our dependence upon the work and expertise of others who make it all possible.

As we give you thanks for this long weekend, we pray for the safety and well-being of all. We pray too for the safety and well-being of all the children and young people as they return to school in the coming week. To this end, we pray for the teachers, other staff, and volunteers, that they may do their best to fulfill the responsibilities that have been entrusted to them.

We give you thanks for this summer season coming to its end, and we give you thanks as well for the season of beauty and bounty that will soon be upon us. We pray this day for all for whom your creation has not been so beautiful or bountiful. We remember the people of Mississippi and your children in Pakistan after the incredible flooding of the past few weeks. As our climate continues to change and evolve, grant that we too may change and evolve, taking better care of the world around us.

We offer to you our prayer of loving concern this morning for all who are hurting. As you well know through the person of your Son, while life is good, it can sometimes be full of hurt and pain, both physical and mental.

As we so often have in the past six months, we once again offer up our prayer for the sake of the people of Ukraine who now, amongst so many other things, have to be concerned about the safety of a nuclear plant. May an end to the fighting and a true peace come, sooner rather than later. As we look at the world around us, help us to put our faith, hope, and trust in you, remembering that no matter what does or does not happen, you are and always will be there, with us and for us.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen