

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 21, 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

‘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.’

Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ 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.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.’

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.
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.’

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen

So just at the beginning, the beginning of the prophet's journey, we heard the words of God spoken to him; and what's interesting to me, as we begin to explore this idea of Christian hope, is the way in which God's words might shape a picture for us of what hope looks like.

This prophet, who was to bring hope to God's people in the midst of exile, to bring hope of deliverance, hears God's words.

That God says to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I consecrated you.”

Jeremiah, it turns out, was appointed as a prophet to the nations before he ever was. That means that God had a plan, God had a plan from before time, and that God was working out God's plan over generations. And it strikes me that for the people of Israel the waiting must have been beyond difficult.

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God could have perhaps snapped God's proverbial fingers and brought about a new thing-- freedom in the land of promise, but in Jeremiah that's not how God works. It turns out that the God of hope works in a more patient way, a more methodical way, that the God that we know takes the long view of hope.

God knows that the work of the prophet also is going to take a long time--at least four decades for Jeremiah. That's why God gives images to help God's people understand the work of the divine. Just a few chapters from now in Jeremiah, there'll be a famous description of God as the potter. The people are invited to go down to the potter's house. It ought not to be lost on us that the central image of God in Jeremiah is one working clay, and it turns out that pottery is not work that can be rushed.

The potter cannot afford to be impatient. The work of the potter takes time and attention. It takes perseverance and a gentle hand to shape a lump of clay into a worthy vessel.

But if pottery doesn't resonate with God's people, later in the book of Romans the author will give another image of how hope is born into the world. In foreshadowing the future glory of God, the author of Romans describes creation groaning in labor pain as God births God's redemption into the world.

“Before I knew you, before I formed you in the womb,” God tells Jeremiah, “I appointed you to prophesy.” And if childbirth and if sitting at a potter's wheel don't resonate with you, then later on Jesus will describe it as the way--a journey.

Presbyterian Eugene Peterson titled the memoir of his faith journey, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. The title was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche. The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be long obedience in the same direction. This kind of obedience results, and has always resulted in the long run, in something which has made life worth living.

The people of God, it turns out, need different images to cultivate within their spirits a sense of hope. Jeremiah's, Jeremiah's sense of hope is grounded in the idea of the patience of God's work in the world; but Jeremiah, it turns out, is not convinced. In verse 6 Jeremiah says, “Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.” Jeremiah is wondering how it is that God is going to accomplish God's purposes through him and in him and amongst God's people. And I think if we're being honest, we've all been there before. You might be there this morning. How is it that God is going to do the thing that I believe God is going to do? How is it that God is going to heal? How is it that God is going to remake? How is it that God is going to make a way for me in the midst of wilderness?

In response to Jeremiah's hesitation the Lord says to him, “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; and (here's the key, Jeremiah) do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you.” And then we have this tender moment when the God of all creation reaches out God's hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth and

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says to Jeremiah, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. 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.”

This understanding of God's hope,
this patient long-viewed sense of hope,
this hope that is going to be anointed and brought forth despite our frailties, despite our inability,
and because of God's power,
this hope is what is foundational to the beginning of Jeremiah's journey.
And it turns out that it becomes critical for us in our time and in our circumstance.

As we navigate the world, whether in our relationships, in our marriages, in our parenting, in our singleness, in our work, in our church lives, in our faith journeys, it is critical that we have a long view of hope, that we do not as individuals or as a body get complacent or worried when the thing that we hope God is going to do doesn't happen immediately, but instead we trust and we believe that the good thing that God has begun will be brought to fruition.

In 1857 Roger Taney, then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, penned the Dred Scott decision. Mr. Scott was a slave who had sought refuge and lived in free states and territories.

He appealed to the Court that he should be a free man. Taney, writing for the Court, stated that the Constitution did not allow for Scott's freedom.

27 years later the Court again heard cases addressing the civil rights of those who had been formerly enslaved. In 1883 the Court revoked the Civil Rights Act of 1875 and asserted that no person who descended from slaves could be a citizen. And Justice John Harlan found himself in a familiar spot, opposing the rest of the Court, a lone dissenter as a voice for the civil rights of all humanity. But when it came time to write his dissent, he'd struggle to find the words. Months passed and he found himself in a quagmire of logic and precedent and law. And then one Sunday morning while he was at church, his wife retrieved an inkwell from the Supreme Court and placed it in his writing along with his writing pad at his desk; and when he returned from church, she told him that there was an inkwell in his study--the inkwell of Roger Taney that needed redemption

It needed not to write words of enslavement but to write words of freedom; and so Justice Harlan sat down that Sunday afternoon to write his dissent, using the inkwell that Justice Taney almost 30 years earlier had used to enslave Dred Scott.

But here's the thing-- Justice Harlan did not prevail that day, but he did not let the prevailing winds of his day destroy his hope. He did what he could with words, with his writing, to point to a day when we would live like all people were indeed created to live.

To live in hope like that requires a long view, a holy vision.

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There is a long way to go in the work that confronts us as a church and as a community and as a nation. We see all around us signs of division and hate. Those are real and they point us to difficult days that still lie ahead.

But if we are to listen to the God who spoke to Jeremiah, who through Romans birthed redemption into the world, the God who sat at the potter's wheel with a lump of hardened clay and with water and sponge and time and attention and care, if we are to pay attention to that God, then we will know that God is still at work, that God is still about bringing redemption to all God's people. And as the people of God that God has seen fit to call to Idlewild Presbyterian Church in 2022, we will not be deterred from the work of the gospel.

We will not be deterred from proclaiming to all who might have ears, that all are beloved in God's sight.

We will not tire of advocating, as God has called us to, for a more just society.

And we won't stop ourselves from the beginning, by looking within this body to see what change God might be trying to birth.

So I wonder what hopeful thing you brought with you this morning, what small seed of possibility you carried through the rain to this place.

Perhaps it is for love.

Perhaps it is for grief.

Perhaps it is for courage.

Perhaps it is for transformation.

I wonder what hope you might take from this day. For as Buechner reminds us, as Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ, the hope that Christ really is what for centuries we have claimed he is, the hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, Christ somehow conquered them. I hope that in him and through him, all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too, the hope that at some unforeseeable time in some unimaginable way Christ will return with healing in his wings. May we carry that type of hope with us this day, into our lives this week, and into our lives of service to Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen.