

Title: Restoration Is Not The Same As Return
Date: September 19, 2021
Texts: Jeremiah 29.1-7 Luke 23.56b
Series: Questions of Displacement.....Responses of Hope!
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Luke 23.56b – On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

The ones to whom
Luke is referring
in our brief Gospel lesson,
are the women
mentioned a few verses earlier
in chapter 23.....

The women who followed Jesus
wherever he was taken
on the last day
of his life.....

The women who stood weeping
at the base of the cross
when Jesus gave himself
over to God,
breathed his last,
and died.....

The women who watched
Joseph of Arimathea
take Jesus' body down,
and then take it to,
and place it in,
a rock-hewn tomb.....

The women who
burned the location
of that tomb
in their hearts,
because it was too late
on Friday afternoon

to properly prepare Jesus' body.

For we must recall
that the Jewish Sabbath starts
at sunset on Friday,
and does not end
until sunset on Saturday.....

And so the women
sealed that location
in their very being,
so that first thing Sunday morning
they could return
to that tomb,
and do the work
of body preparation
that was prohibited
on the Sabbath.

(LINGER.....)

This month we have been
setting stories from
the Prophet Jeremiah
alongside stories of Jesus
from Good Friday
to Easter Sunday.....

To learn something
about the nature
and the methods
of the God we worship.....

With the hope of using
this deeper understanding of God
to try and
make some sense
of the chaotic
mess of covid.....

Which has and continues
to keep our world,

our country, our church,
and our lives
on edge, on hold;
filled with anxiety and anger;
feeling like everything
we once knew
is no more;
desperately searching for
the tiniest bit of hope
to which we can cling!

(LINGER.....)

In last week's sermon
we acknowledged that even being
stuck and paralyzed
can be an important
and useful aspect
of the journey of faith.....

If we are willing
to embrace the stuckness –
like the stuckness of covid –
as a time and place
where we can
more carefully and intentionally
listen to God
than we usually do.....

A time when
we can become
more fully in tune with God,
if we are
willing to listen,
and willing to
use our imaginations,
and willing to be open
to God having
new and different possibilities
in store for us!

(SLOWLY.....)

Our lesson from Jeremiah

is really extraordinary.

It describes how the Prophet,
who is still in Jerusalem,
sends a letter to those
who have already
been carried into exile.....

Jeremiah corresponds
to all those who have
already made it to Babylon,
and are trying
to figure out
what they should do.

For they do not know
if their stay
in this foreign land
will be long or short.

They do not know
whether they will
live long enough
to have to
worry about a future.....

Or if they
will be executed
for political purposes,
or sold as slaves.

And ultimately,
they do not know
whether God cares
anything about them,
or if there is any hope
of God ever starting
to care again.

To people living in

this confusion and chaos,
Jeremiah writes an audacious letter.....

A letter which claims
to speak for God;
and so is a sign
that God has not
completely forgotten God's people –
at least not yet –
offering the tiniest
sliver of hope
that the future may contain
a restored or reconfigured
relationship with God.

But what Jeremiah says,
is had to hear.
He tells his fellow citizens
to get comfortable,
because they're all
going to be
in Babylon for a while.....

Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce;
take wives and have sons and daughters;
take wives for your sons,
and give your daughters in marriage,
that they may have sons and daughters;
multiply there, and do not decrease.
But seek the welfare of the city
where I have sent you into exile;
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare –
in the welfare of your captor-city –
you will find your welfare!

Jeremiah, who may
not yet know
that he will soon

be removed to Babylon as well.....

Jeremiah proclaims that the future
for God's people
is not Jerusalem,
but has become Babylon.....

A future which God's people
did not choose
and probably won't like.....

But still a future,
and the possibility
that this future includes God!

(LINGER.....)

The Saturday between
Good Friday and Easter Sunday,
which some call 'Holy Saturday'
offers a similar
possibility of hope.

God may yet choose
to do something
with God's people.....

But just maybe;
nothing is a certainty!

(PAUSE)

What God ultimately reveals
in each of our story lines –
the one about Jeremiah
and Babylon exile,
and the one about
Good Friday robbing
the followers of Jesus
of their leader.....

What God ultimately reveals,
is that there is
no going back

to the way things
used to be.

Each story holds out
the possibility that
a new relationship with God
can be established.....

Or that the relationship
can be restored,
patched up, and
maybe even repaired.....

But each story
also makes clear
that whatever type of fixing
God eventually decides to offer.....

That God's fixing
does not allow
for a return
to previous patterns of behavior.....

Especially behavior that is
dysfunctional and unfaithful
and not about
the building up
of God's Beloved Community of Heaven. (SLOWLY.....)

The Good news
that God wants
God's people back;
that God is always willing
to find a new way
forward with us.....

This good news
is always tempered
by the reality
that God's ways

are not our ways.....

And that there is
a high probability
that the restoration
which God provides,
and into which
the Holy Spirit
will lead us.....

There is a high probability
that God's restoration
"will be one
that many of us
did not choose,
and one that
many of us
may not like..."

And this is the rub
that God's people
have run into
time and time again.

When a break
with God has occurred,
and we want,
we need to stay
in relationship with God.....

The renewed relationship
is only available
on God's terms,
and never.....never our terms.

(SLOWLY.....)

Now, I don't
want to equate
the covid pandemic
with Jerusalem being sacked
and God's people

being carried away
into Babylonian exile.

And I do not
want to equate
the covid pandemic
to Jesus' crucifixion.....

But what I do want
to be very clear on
is the reality
that our current pandemic
has changed,
and continues to change,
everything.....without exception.....

The world, our country,
our church, our lives.....

Everything has changed,
and will forever be altered.

And while we may not
have much ability to understand
how covid has
and will continue to change
the world and our country.....

I want us to realize
that we do
have some resources
as children of God
and disciples of Jesus,
when it comes to grasping
how to deal with
our covid-changed
church and lives
as we seek
to move forward
into God's future.

Our family faith stories
about loss and restoration
that come to us
from Jeremiah and from Luke
show us that God
is never done with us.....

Which, I believe,
offers us amazing hope
some eighteen months
into our present
world-wide pandemic.

But our family faith stories
also make crystal clear
that the hope
and the restoration
which God makes present,
is always on God's terms
and never our own.....

Meaning that the church
we have known and loved,
and the way of living
we have known and loved.....

Is being transformed right now,
in this very moment,
from what has been
to what will be.....

From what is
familiar and secure
to something that is probably
unknowable and uncomfortable

For there is always
a high probability
that God's restoration

“will be one
that many of us
did not choose,
and one that
many of us
may not like...”

And, I don't know about you,
but a future
that is unknowable,
and is probably
going to be uncomfortable
always makes me
a bit anxious.

(LINGER.....)

Next Sunday we'll
explore this anxiety
and what we
might do about it
in greater detail.....

But, for now,
knowing that God
has a future for us –
even one we
can't full see.....

Knowing that God
has a future for us,
provides enough hope
for the week ahead.

And it is this hope
that I want us all
to focus on
for our spiritual homework
in the coming days.

What might God's hope
look like for our church

and for our lives
going forward, post-pandemic?

How might we
embrace this hope
rather than just
fight against it?

How do we
seek the welfare
of the place
where God is sending us?

How do we memorize
the tomb's location
so that we can return
for the work
we must do?

(LINGER.....)

Questions of hope!

Good spiritual homework!!

Amen!!!

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Resource: *Preaching Jeremiah: Announcing God's Restorative
Passion* by Walter Brueggemann