

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
"Like A View Through Tinted Glass"
Sunday, September 5, 2021

When I was serving in the Milwaukee Presbytery many years ago, the executive presbyter of that body had a poster on the wall in his office that I just loved. In the center of the poster was a rider on a huge Harley-Davidson motorcycle. And Milwaukee is the headquarters. The main manufacturing plant of Harley-Davidson's in the state of Wisconsin are like a religious thing. But there was this huge Harley-Davidson motorcycle in the middle of the poster, and the rider and the bike were on a winding two-lane road. And you could see the road kind of meander through the poster and off to the very edge of it. On the top of the poster were the words, "It's the journey, dot, dot, dot," while across the bottom of the poster were the words, "Not the destination, exclamation point. It's the journey, not the destination."

As those who know me best will tell you, especially my wife, this advertising tagline describes me to a T. I love to journey. Give me a two-lane road and no particular schedule to keep, and I will soak up the countryside at a less than interstate speed, stopping at historical roadside markers and in the small towns that occasionally jump into the path of my journey. You can only imagine how much our children enjoyed these travel days when they were small and dad just needed to journey. But in my defense, the journey is when I experience and learn the new things that just arriving at a destination cannot provide, will never teach. And I've discovered over time that a journey doesn't just happen in a car. Sometimes, the journey is within myself. Sometimes, the journey is with another person. Sometime, an entire church is on a journey. Even sometimes, an entire country is journeying.

Jeremiah knows that the people of Israel are about to experience a journey. It's not a journey that God's people are expecting. In fact, they think that everything is going great, that everything is right with the world, and that God is unconditionally on their side and that they have nothing, absolutely nothing to fear, nothing to fear despite the personal and political behavior they exhibit, behavior that is unfaithful and unjust and mean-spirited and ignores God's expectations. So they simply pay no attention to the news reports that the Babylonian army is headed toward Jerusalem while destroying everything it encounters, everything in its path. And when the army appears outside of the walls of Jerusalem, God's people stubbornly cling to their belief that God has their back. Everyone sticks their head in the theological sand, everyone except the newly minted prophet of God, Jeremiah, whom we are introduced to in this morning's Hebrew scripture lesson. Jeremiah, who understands directly from God that everything, everything is about to change. That God has grown weary with the faithlessness of God's chosen people, and that those who survive the sacking of Jerusalem will most likely be forced to endure the long and horrible journey of exile. In fact, the biblical book which bears Jeremiah's name, is a long theological reflection, a long sermon on this crisis of exile. The crisis of displacement, displacement from God's sacred temple, displacement from God's Holy City, displacement from God's favor and presence. And it is this last displacement from being God's chosen ones, from dwelling in close proximity to God's watchful protection. All of that to nothing. It is this last displacement that pushes the people of Israel into an unanticipated and undesired journey, a journey which raises difficult yet crucial questions for God's people. Why did it happen? Is God faithful? Does God punish? Is there any future? While scripture lessons which we normally hear around Easter are not our typical September biblical fair, the death of Jesus in our gospel lesson, His death is for His followers, not unlike the crisis of Babylonian exile. Jesus' disciples and followers believed they were following the long-awaited Messiah who was going to make God's beloved community of heaven a reality on earth. Jesus spoke so directly and so eloquently about matters that concerned people who were poor, and powerless, and politically excluded, and hungry, and fearful that

they had no future. Jesus gave these His followers real hope for a future, a future in God's presence, a sense of a future that they were feeling for the very first time in their lives. Jesus made a difference in their daily existence. Jesus was their connecting point to God's love, which they had never known, had never experienced before. So when Jesus dies, murdered as a political prisoner on a cross, this sudden extinguishing of His light raises Jeremiah-like questions of Divine abandonment. Why did it happen? Is God faithful? Does God punish? Is there a future? Questions which continue to shape and direct the individual and corporate journey of disciples and the Christian church still today. Questions which continue to shape our journey, yours and mine as we seek to follow after Jesus. I don't believe it takes much imagination to see the present COVID pandemic as a moment of existential danger for humanity in general and for a church like ours in particular. Certainly, the disease and our collective response to it threatens our existence as individuals and as a community. A threat which has made more pressing by the great divides roiling our country these days. Political divides, racial divides, economic divides, intellectual divides, spiritual divides are anemic and inadequate national response to the virus at nearly every turn and in nearly every moment has largely been defined and exacerbated by these divides. As a country, we like to think of ourselves as exceptional and under God and indivisible, but the pandemic has exposed deep and perhaps fatal fractures in our national fabric. For disciples of Jesus who are also Americans, I believe are present crisis raises old and familiar theological questions. Questions that were also asked in Jeremiah's day and at Jesus' death. Questions just as challenging and just as impossible to answer today as they were then. Questions which we no longer can ignore.

Questions which we at the very least must attempt or struggle with to answer. Why is it happening? Is God faithful? Does God punish? Is there a future? I don't think that the purpose of our wrestling with big questions, such as these is to discover quick and easy answers to reach the destination quickly. For as our ancestors of faith found in the past, the arc of God's intent is long and not always readily discernible. Simply asking such impossible questions demands a lot from us. Such questions demand a journey of discovery where answers, if they come at all, where answers are formed over time and through shared experience, where answers are the result of deep and sometimes painful and sometimes frightening personal reflection and soul searching. Now, I fear that my talking about our need to wrestle with deep and difficult and painful questions makes me sound fairly pessimistic and hopeless about the future, about our future with God, about our future as people of faith about our future as individual disciples. So I want to be real clear, both with myself and with you all, I want to be clear that I see the journey before us, the journey that I believe we are already on or certainly are being called into. I see the journey before us and our need to ask and answer impossibly difficult questions as we journey. I see this as a deeply hopeful time. God's people have been there before. God's people have been where we are before. God's people, as evidenced at Jerusalem's destruction and Jesus death, have previously had their understanding of God and their relationship with God thrown into utter chaos and disarray. And because we follow after these ancestors in faith, we know something of their story and something of the ways by which they went about seeking answers.

Now, we may not know their answers to the impossible questions with which they wrestled. And even if we did know those answers, there's still 2,000 or more years old and cannot answer our present-day questions at all. But what we know is that through unanticipated and difficult journey, through anguished prayer, and through faithful imagination, through all of this, new possibilities for a way forward with God were discovered and that through these new possibilities, a new and different relationship with God was forged, a new and different relationship through which new life and a different future was discovered and also made possible. It is the potential of such newness with God that fills me with great hope today, great hope that even in the midst of our present quagmire, a future with God is still possible for us, possible because God never abandons us completely.

Yes, God may grow angry with our choices and behaviors and turn away for a moment, scripture bears that out, but like a frustrated friend or parent, I believe, I trust in the fact that God leaves the front door unlocked, God leaves the porch light on so that when we return from the journey, which our choices and behaviors requires of us, when we will return, we will know

that God is ready to begin with us again, ready to begin with us, not as it used to be, not as we've always known, not in ways that are familiar and comfortable, but God is ready to begin with us, begin building a new relationship that will serve all of us well, God and all of us, will serve us well in God's future.

My hope for the coming weeks in September or September sermons is that we can begin the journey that is before us, that is being imposed on us by the challenges of these days, or that we can begin to more fully acknowledge the journey we have already been on for some time now, a journey that we have perhaps not wanted to acknowledge. And in the days to come, as we grow honest with ourselves about the need for our present journey, my hope is that we can begin to wrestle with some of those impossible to answer questions which are before us. Why is this happening? Is God faithful? Does God punish? Is there a future?

One of the opportunities that is provided by a crisis of biblical proportion, which I think the COVID crisis is, one of the opportunities before us is that it can lead God's people, it can lead you and me to stop and look around and pause for a bit and consider our present direction for only through such discernment does the possibility of re-engagement with God's purposes and priorities lie for any crisis, particularly this crisis. They cannot be moved through too quickly. A crisis can only be and must always be simply experienced, simply endured, simply part of a journey for hope that is meaningful, hope that makes a difference. Such hope is only discovered in the midst of the journey, never at the quick and easily reached destination. I'm grateful that we have one another as traveling partners in this time, as conversation partners in this time, as imagination partners in this time, as fellow children of God, as fellow disciples of Jesus who are privileged to journey together. Amen.