

“Written Within”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Jeremiah 31:27-34 and 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:27-34

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we gather as your people to worship, to praise, to listen, to learn, to grow as individuals and as a community. Be with us now as we reflect upon your word together. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

It seems that periodically there are new words or expressions that suddenly become “in.” In this particular election cycle, there is one where the word keeps occurring over and over again, and that word is “pivot”. I guess it means to move from a topic that one doesn't want to respond to, and answer with a completely different topic. But I'll be frank with you: if I hear the word “pivot” one more time, I'm going to scream and “pivot” right out the door.

Sometimes, though, there is an expression we hear over and over again and it begins to feel more than coincidental, it feels providential. Last week when I was in Springfield, I went to the Lincoln Presidential Library. On the wall was a quote from his first inaugural address. Lincoln is quite aware of the possibility of civil war and he expresses his deep hope in keeping the nation one. He says, “We must not be enemies, though passion may be strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” And that was the expression: “The better angels of our nature.” I heard that the next day at the Danforth Center Panel on Religion and Politics, not once, but twice. Then I heard it on television after the debate. I felt drawn to get a deeper sense of what that expression means.

I learned that that phrase can be found in the works of Charles Dickens and Shakespeare's *Othello*. They are words that speak to the awareness of human frailties, while hoping for something better. “The better angels of our nature” is what happens, I think, when we allow the Spirit to call away from the desire to get even with those who have angered or hurt us. The better angels of our nature win out when we are willing to move from exacting revenge to looking at the larger picture. It means we seek the way of God.

I think the words of Lincoln are far more than poetry for an important occasion. I think his words are a plea that war would be averted and with it the horrors of war. But we know that did not happen. Brother fought against brother and the nation was broken and hundreds of thousands died. People lost their homes and their way of life and their hope. No doubt, for many, it felt like they were wandering in a time of exile and yearned to have the sense and presence of the love of God.

If we reflect on what happened during the Civil War and all its destruction, perhaps we can sense the desolation of the people that Jeremiah is writing to. Jeremiah yearned, like Lincoln, to find the right words. He was ostracized and criticized like Lincoln was, yet by his words we witness Jeremiah on a journey of learning that faith called him to speak even when it was difficult. As 2 Timothy writes, 'whether the times are favorable or unfavorable,' he both challenges them and yearns that they would find their hope in the promise of God.

Now the book of Jeremiah falls into three sections: The opening chapters focus on the unfaithfulness of people and their being sent into exile. But the readings from last week when Dr. Holyan preached, and from today, give us a different mood in Jeremiah. Last week's reading leads into a small section called, “The Little Book of Consolation”. In that section, Jeremiah calls the people into the reality of the present and offers hope for the future. Jeremiah's words, last week, were about creating a new life in a foreign land, reminding them that they are not only to pray for the welfare of their own people, but also the welfare of those in the community in which they now live.

It's important, though, to understand why being in exile was so unsettling. Being taken from Israel to another country was more than leaving home. In those days gods were often seen as local

and being away from the temple made them feel that as the people of Israel, they could not longer know God's presence—that God was no longer with them.

But the words from Jeremiah are a reminder to them that God will be with them now in a new way. He states, “The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant, not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, a covenant that they broke. This is the covenant that I will make. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” In this new relationship, faith will no longer be rooted in a particular place, but in the heart of each person. While they are far from home, God is still with them. Jeremiah is saying know this and trust it. In this place create a new life. Essentially, work on the better angels of your nature. Do the things you can and pray and serve the welfare of all. I was really struck by the power of his words of hope. They seem very meaningful today, too. For while exile literally means being sent away from one's home country, being in exile can be both emotional as well as literal.

I think first, though, upon the words of Benjamin Weir. Benjamin Weir died this week and as I read an article about him, I was reminded of his story. Rev. Weir was a mission worker in the Middle East and later served as the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. Years ago he was kidnapped when he was in the Middle East and he shared this story.

“My capture happened so fast, I didn't have time to think. I remember trying to say to myself over and over again that I was still in the presence of God. But then finally I arrived in a room and when they left I tried to get my bearings. It was a barren room cut off from the rest of the outside world and I missed the presence of God in there and I knew I had to hold onto my identity. So I looked up and saw a round metal weight suspended from a light fixture. It looked like an eye and I said to myself, 'here is God's eye watching over me.' I counted the parts of which the radiator in the room was made and told myself they could represent people I know and love. I felt the links on the chain that tied me to a pipe in the wall and it was essentially something that became a Protestant rosary.” Sixteen months later, Benjamin Weir was released. And yet, rather than dwelling only on anger for what happened, he tried to help people understand the desperation of the people who had captured him.¹

Exile, though, can also happen closer to home. Consider someone faced with a request for a divorce and now needs to sell the house the family has shared for decades. Or parents who have to make a painful decision to put a teen in rehab because of the addiction their daughter is experiencing and they know there is no other choice, that it is a matter of life and death. For some of us it is the animosity of election rhetoric that has made us feel anxious, as if we are in a strange land, an exile of sorts, and we just want it to end. But the reality is we can only move through the days and wait until the results are in and then seek out the better angels of our nature to heal the brokenness amongst us.

In the unsettling seasons of our lives, we are reminded that no matter where we go, familiar or unfamiliar, that God is there and we are not alone. Jeremiah reminds us we are loved and the love of God is written on our hearts. Into the exile moments of our lives, Jeremiah says all is not lost. This is not the end of the story. He reminds us that we can find hope in new and sometimes unexpected ways, and that sometimes easing our sense of exile can come through acts of generosity and kindness offered and received—things that remind us that we can find meaning and purpose and hope again.

On Tuesday mornings, we are discussing a book called, To Heal a Fractured World by Rabbi Sacks. In it he shared a letter that he received following the events of 9/11, a time that I think felt like an exile for us all. She wrote this: “Dear Dr. Sacks, I am an American who lives in California and the events of 9/11 upset me as it did many others. When I reflected on it, I found myself realizing that in all the busyness of life, I had forgotten others who were suffering or hungry, lonely or ill, all around the world. And I am so sorry I did that. In the sleepless nights that followed, I reflected on my life's purpose and how I could recapture and live it, and I knew I could do that if I was willing to be more devoted to living the life God has called me to live. I read your book, Faith in the Future, and I found strength and understanding in what I read, especially that God has faith in us. That was a very new idea for me and it makes me take more responsibility for my faith. It filled me with joy to think of faith with God as a reciprocal relationship. I looked back at my life and I remembered why I had made certain decisions and came to realize that my skills and my time are needed in the world. I also was reminded of the importance of welcoming the stranger. It helped me to reach out not only to strangers, but to others that I love. I started with my husband, then my family and colleagues, and now those I do not know. So why am I writing you? I want you to know your words mattered.” I would say they are now written on her heart. She said, “Forgive me for sounding melodramatic, but if I had died that night, I would have died acknowledging the importance of God in my life once again. And that is a great gift. You reached out to a stranger and that stranger was me.”²

I think her words and the words of Lincoln and Jeremiah weave together challenge, encouragement and hope—a reminder that even in the midst of exile, God speaks words of hope and assurance, that in the midst of the exiles of our lives we can find meaning and purpose in new ways by serving others even, and maybe especially, when it's a stranger. And the end of the day, too, I was reminded of the words of Isaiah, one of my favorite passages. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine. When you go through the waters, they will not overwhelm you and when you go through the fires, you will not be burned, for you are honored and precious in my sight and I love you.” Let us live as if we believe that. Amen.

- 1) From an interview with Benjamin Weir, as listed on Philly.com called 'God Was There' Benjamin Weir's Tale Of Faith, Fear In Captivity By Hans Knight, Special to The Inquirer, April 2, 1987
- 2) From To Heal A Fractured World by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, pp. 126-7