

“The Days Are Surely Coming”

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St. Paul's UCC Church

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Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34

36:1 In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. 3 It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. 4 Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. 5 And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, "I am prevented from entering the house of the Lord; 6 so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in the Lord's house you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the people of Judah who come up from their towns. 7 It may be that their plea will come before the Lord, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people." 8 And Baruch son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house.

21 Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. 22 Now the king was sitting in his winter apartment (it was the ninth month), and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. 23 As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier.

27 Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 28 Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which King Jehoiakim of Judah has burned.

31:31 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. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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.

There is so much political unrest these days. This has been true for years, but seems especially true these days.

We all know how divided, and divisive, we have become as a country. Facebook has become the ultimate symbol of all this unrest and division. *If you vote differently from me, you'd better watch out! I think you are evil in every way. And I'm going to tell you so, and then unfriend you.* We are so extreme in our judgements – and this is on both, on all, sides. It can be quite painful.

And I always find myself thinking: as the church, how should we respond to this? What is our calling, for a time such as this?

Today we turn to our third prophet in the last three weeks: the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah resides in Judah, in Israel's Southern Kingdom. And Jeremiah – kind of like us – is living during a really fraught time. Babylon has become the most powerful empire in the known world, and the Babylonians are right at Israel's door, ready to conquer them.

Jeremiah would have made a terrible politician, because, instead of inspiring the people, instead of telling them that they are “stronger together,” or that he will make Israel “great again,” Jeremiah proclaims a message of judgement. He calls Israel out on its hypocrisy. He reminds Israel of all the times it has failed, and sinned, and fallen flat on its face. And because of Israel's sin, Jeremiah rails, God will not protect them from the encroaching Babylonians.

Now, as you can imagine, this hopeless, defeatist message doesn't go over very well with Israel, or with Israel's king, Jehoiakim. The king is so mad, in fact, that he even bans Jeremiah from entering the Temple.

That's why today, when God speaks to Jeremiah once again, Jeremiah can't actually deliver this message himself. Since he's been banned from the Temple, he has to go through someone named Baruch. So Jeremiah tells Baruch to deliver the message to the people in the Temple, which Baruch does, and the people become so upset by it (I mean, who wants to hear about how much they've messed up?), they tell the king's people, and then the king's people tell the king. It's kind of like the game of telephone, but played by really powerful grown-ups.

So here are the Israelites, angry and fearful and not knowing whom to believe or what to do. Here are the Babylonians, panting at their doors. And here is the king, sitting in his winter apartment, surrounded by his riches and his walls. So it's really no surprise to me that when the king hears these prophetic and judgmental words, he cuts them up, word by word, and burns them in his fancy fire.

Here's the conclusion I've drawn to from the first part of this story: it doesn't work. These words – these written words, these words divorced from flesh and blood, these

words made of parchment that you can simply cut up and throw into a fire – they just don't work. They are ineffective. They don't make the people change their ways, or turn from their sin. These words, these flimsy words, just don't work.

And God seems to understand this.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, which ends our reading for this morning, is one of the most important passages in all of the prophets. What is God's ultimate response to the pervasiveness of human rejection and sin? It's to reiterate the old promise... but in a new way. God realizes that for anything to change, that for the promise to be finally heard, that God needs to inscribe it not on paper, not on parchment, not even on stone, but on human hearts. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel," God says. "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." *That* is what God has been trying to say, all along.

"The Days Are Surely Coming"

The days are surely coming, the days are surely coming
When I will make a new covenant, make a new covenant,
Make a new covenant, not like way back when.

It will not, will not be, it will not, will not be
Like the one that I made before, the one I made before
The one that I made before, before we were friends.

*And hear, hear, hear! Here it is:
I am writing love upon your heart.*

And I will be your God, and I will be your God
And all of you belong to me, all of you belong to me
All of you belong to me: I'll catch you if I can.

No longer will you say, no longer will you say
"Now you better know the Lord, now you better know the Lord,
Now you better know the Lord," 'cause here I am:

*Yes, here, here, here, here I am.
And I am writing love upon your heart.*

*Yes, here, here, here I am.
And together we'll create this work of art*

*You always were forgiven, from the start
And the days are surely coming, take your part
And I am writing love, right upon your heart.*

The Israelites were living during a period of fear, of unrest. They were scared and anxious and uncertain. And then here comes God, telling them that *they* are going to be the promise, that *they* are going to be the covenant, that *they* are going to be the word – the living word – that will show the world what God is all about, especially in a time such as this.

I wonder if we are called to the same.

St. Paul's Church, I am so grateful for you. Our work together has never been more important. Because here, today, we are the people on whom God is inscribing the word.

I know that we are all over the place – politically, theologically, philosophically – here at church. And that's what I love about us. I know that we have some pretty deep disagreements with each other. But I also know that we keep showing up for each other. I love that about us.

And church, we still have work to do. God is inscribing the word onto our hearts, and that means we need to lean in even more into our commitment to being the church for a time such as this. We need to show the world that we can disagree with each other, on some pretty deep levels, and still leave laughing tighter. You know how I often pray about being a light to the nations? That's the image I have: disagreeing, even vehemently, but leaving laughing together.

Advent is coming up (it begins next week!), a time when we listen deeply to the words of Mary when she is told she will have the Christ child: "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53). God is inscribing *this* word on our hearts. Which means that we have a whole lot to do together. Our homeless neighbors still need to be housed and fed. Grieving people still need the listening ear and prayers of a deacon or member of this church. Families like mine still need a village like this to help us raise our children.

Most of all, our neighbors need to know that they are not alone. Our black and brown neighbors. Our undocumented neighbors and their terrified children. Our Muslim neighbors. Our neighbors need to know that somebody loves them fiercely; that somebody sees them as human; that somebody has their backs.

God's love is being inscribed on our hearts. God's work will be done with our hands.

Thanks be to God.