

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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A New Day Dawning

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Those biblical images of joy and celebration
Are such a contrast to the rest of Jeremiah's book.
People have argued for years over authorship.
Could Jeremiah write such hopeful words?

Here's the Jeremiah most people know.
"Is there no Balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my people. (Jer. 8:22-9:1)"

That's quite a contrast to today's reading:
"They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion ...
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again."

When the world we have built around us tumbles in,
when everything we've grown up with,
everything we've taken for granted
comes undone
and life no longer seems worth living,
There is no joy.
Only Sorrow.
It could be a financial disaster.
It could be a political disaster.
It could be a medical diagnosis
There are so many possibilities.
But when life is turned upside down
As Israel's was
Well you know what I'm talking about.
There is no gladness, only sorrow and little hope.
Even God seems to turn a deaf ear to our prayers.

For the Hebrews of Jeremiah's day
Jerusalem lay in ruins
The Temple was destroyed.
Everybody who was anybody
Was forcibly moved to Babylon
Or killed, outright.

Priests, bankers, CEO's,
Educators, lawyers, doctors, nurses
Small business owners, governors, mayors,
Everybody with organizing skills
Everybody who knew anything about
keeping the economy running
Dead or gone.

Into that hopeless void,
Jeremiah hurled a remarkable command.
Sing! The Lord says, Sing!
“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
‘Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel.’”
Sing! Jeremiah wrote.

The Lord says sing!

And sing they did.
They sang of God's faithfulness.
They sang of their sorrow.
They sang out their anger
They sang out their pain
They sang themselves to sleep
And greeted the morning with a song.
Sing, Israel, Jeremiah said.
The Lord says sing!
And sing they did.

But not easily, and not without complaint.
They asked God how,
How shall we sing?
“How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?”
How?

Yet sing they did!
As faithful people do.
You've heard the words of their songs.
Heard them
Memorized them
Treasured them
Questioned them
Sung them.
“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

“If I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?”

“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;”

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.”
Hope-filled words.

We’ve memorized them
Treasured them
Sung them.

And when we sing,
Whether it’s the psalms or other songs
We open ourselves to God’s Spirit.
We open ourselves to the power of hope.
Faith is renewed.
Just as a new day dawned for those ancient Hebrews,
A new day dawns for us.

Oh, the transformation’s not automatic, mind you
And not always sudden.
Nevertheless, people of faith sing.
It matters not if you can carry a tune.
Sing, and if nothing else,
Laugh at your feeble attempts to do so.
Why? Because God is at work among us
And around us,
And within us
accomplishing God’s will.

Catching sight of God in action
Knowing that God is present even in the bad times
Is cause for rejoicing
Cause for singing.
Signs of a new day dawning.

Listen to Jeremiah’s words again:
“Hear the word of the LORD, . . .
and declare it . . . far away;
say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.”
The One who scattered Israel. Jeremiah says. . .
The One who sent them into exile in the first place
The One who was mysteriously present
Even in the fall of Jerusalem
Present even as the doctor speaks the word, Cancer
Present even as news of tragedy breaks.
The One who’s will mysteriously undergirds us
even in the worst of times
That One will gather the people.
That One will keep us
as a shepherd keeps the flock
In the best of times.
In the worst of times.
The Lord is my shepherd
Your shepherd.

We are reminded in not too subtle terms
That the God in whom we hope
The God who promises life
The God who sent his only Son into the world
That whoever believes in him
might not perish but have eternal life
That Same God is also the God who judges
Who disciplines his children.
Who demands that we be holy, as God is holy
And who empowers our faithful living
By the gift of Holy Spirit.

Listen!

God takes our lives seriously
God has given us life,
that we may live it obediently
God does not permit us
To live without regard for God
And neighbor.

Jeremiah speaks words of hope
Yet in their midst are words that remind
The one who gathers is the one who scattered.
The one who heals is also the one who strikes down.

This is serious business, our living, our faith.
And we ought not willy-nilly to go our own way.
For when we do, there are serious consequences
Not only personal consequences,
but also societal consequences.

We are not independent of each other,
as the bank failures made perfectly clear last year.
God holds the people accountable
God will not allow us to violate his way.

Yet God's judgment is filled with mercy.
That is the good news we preach.
Gods anger is not eternal

In words that echo Hosea
Jeremiah calls up the image of God as loving father.
Ephraim, my firstborn, says Jeremiah.

Hosea adds:
"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? . . .
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger; . . .
for I am God and no mortal;
the holy one in your midst,
I will not come to destroy. (Hos 11:8-9)"

That same God
The God who judges

The God who recoils from harsh judgment
That same God
 Sent his son into the world
Not, not that we might go about business as usual
 Not that we might just sing a happy tune when we're afraid.
But that we might be changed
 And being changed, ourselves
 Change the world around us.
That there might be no more suffering
 No more pain.
That we might reach out to others
 And invite them to join us in song,
 That we might sing with them to the glory of God
 who has come among us in Christ,
 and by his Holy Spirit works through us,
 to bring hope of a new day.

Dangerous poetic images that hint at social action
 Hopeful poetic images that invite our involvement
 Such a contrast to the sorrow people feel
 When their world tumbles in.
Yet those images bring such anticipation, such hope
 For Christ has come among us as promised
 And a new day has dawned!