

Here
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Jeremiah 31:7-9
10/28/2018

In September, our youth group spent some time at Fort Caswell. For those of you who haven't been there, Caswell sits on the site of an abandoned Civil War Fort, where the Cape Fear River adjoins the Atlantic Ocean. The fort, built in 1836, consists of massive stone walls and bunkers. It was indestructible – as a matter of fact, not one person died from enemy fire during its constant shelling in the years 1861-1865. And it was actually one of the last defenses in the Confederacy to fall, and not for lack of trying – The Union army had six unsuccessful attempts at repossessing the fort, before finally succeeding in 1865.

Even though the fort was indestructible, its capture was inevitable.

Now, we were there in September. And it was ninety degrees. And let me tell you, it was plenty hot. Today, since the fort is in ruins, it's no longer closed in. But can you imagine being an occupant of that fort in 1864 or 1865? Brutal cold or sweltering heat. A scratchy wool uniform. And a view of the frying pan shoals, filled with a never-ending array of battleships, firing a never-ending stream of artillery. A consistent cadence of explosions. The stench of gun powder and sweat and death and disease. No sleep. No food. No rest. No strength. No hope.

And let's take it one step further. Imagine you are the chaplain on duty. And somehow, some way, God has called you to prophesy, and to love, and be yourself in this place, among these people. Your understanding of God's law and God's covenant cannot be reconciled with the practice of slavery, nor with the pursuit of cotton profits over human welfare. And each morning, you look out on the horizon, and see an enemy coming closer, an enemy whose arrival will bring sure and certain demise to your nation. And you look around at the faces next to you, and they are void, utterly void of covenant spirit, a people who have forgotten God.

And God says to you, "Speak, Jeremiah!"

Okay, I've just moved Jeremiah about 25 centuries forward to help us grasp some concept of his surroundings. Jeremiah had the misfortune to live in Judah's last days, and to witness firsthand, its destruction and systematic exile by the Babylonians. Unlike other prophets, he didn't get to tell people there was "still time" to save Israel or Judah. He had to tell them it was gonna get worse, before it got better. And so much of the book of Jeremiah consists of prophecies of destruction just before the siege of Jerusalem, and of events during the actual siege.

Our nation is not under military siege or attack. At least not today. So our Civil War example may still be a hard one to imagine. So let's think about siege in a different way. And maybe we can better understand Jeremiah's predicament.

What are the systems that have shaped us, and shaped our understanding of covenant? Are they under attack, not just from enemies on the horizon, but from those of us who no longer subscribe to their most basic principles? And do we see their inevitable demise?

On this Reformation Sunday, where stands the Church Universal? Our leaders, in all denominations, have abused the vulnerable in private AND in public, sacrificing our relevancy AND our voice AND our much-needed dissent in exchange for riches, or for power, or to protect our precious infrastructure. And as we long for the packed, WASPy pews of the 1950s, we lament our second-place status to Sunday brunch, and youth soccer, and staying home to read the *Times*. “Where have they gone?” we wonder, and all the while, there are people who are hurting, or scared, or sick, or lonely, or wandering, all in this city, and maybe they don’t look like us, or talk like us, or walk like us, but they are longing for community. As a matter of fact, I think we call them the faces of Jesus. We have the unprecedented opportunity to serve the people Jesus calls us to serve; to live, to actually live, the vision of the Acts Church. And yet we spend SO MUCH time lamenting what we’ve lost: our seat of privilege.

As Election Day nears, where stands our country? Our leaders, in all parties, have abandoned the principles of truth, and cooperation, and decency, and dialogue, and reasonable dissent. And what seemed unthinkable behavior just two years ago, has become normalized. And our elections are not about change, but rather about winning, about dominating, about silencing all who would disagree. Generations before us united to meet the challenges brought on by world wars and natural disasters and antiquated isms. No such malady or catastrophe threatens our nation’s potential. Instead, we are hamstrung by apathy, and greed, and self-entitlement. And we worry that our own opportunities will somehow be snatched away, because the world is not big enough, nor is it generous enough to be shared, especially by people who don’t look like us, or act like us, or think like us.

Our sanctuaries are no longer sanctuaries. Churches, synagogues, mosques, faith centers, and schools – the places where we are supposed to feel safe – are now vulnerable, because of assault weapons, instruments of death too easily obtained, and too easily administered. And our reaction to this trend is not to work hard to remove the hate and fear that makes gun violence prevalent, nor to create policies that would limit its harm. Our reaction is to lament that someone might try to take our guns away. We value our so-called right to hoard weapons more so than the lives of our neighbors.

Our icecaps are melting, our sea levels are rising, and our climate is changing. And not for the better. And it’s not that we don’t love and appreciate the beauty of creation. It’s just that we appreciate our inexhaustible manmade conveniences: driving, paper plates, plastic water bottles, a tiny bit more than our exhaustible natural resources.

Our communications skills are evaporating. We can link to any person in the world through thousands of media, at the touch of a button. And yet we bristle at handshakes, or hugs, or even phone calls – who does that anymore? Yes, the human touch connects us in unparalleled ways, but it can leave us vulnerable. And besides, we can stay safe and secure, impenetrable behind our devices.

You and me, we’re not under a military siege. But like Jeremiah, the things we hold dear are. Jeremiah longed for a Judah as it once was: a nation in symmetry and accordance with God and neighbor. But he lived in a time, where the Judah that was could no longer be. And that was a hard reality to bear. And his was a calling that seemed unfair.

I don’t think our situation is as dire as Jeremiah’s. But it can be overwhelming. We seek to do church and to be church, in a time where the Church is shrinking. We seek to be citizens in a country where it doesn’t feel like our voices are always heard, and in too many instances, not counted. We seek to be peacemakers in a world determined to trade in hate, ignorance, and violence. We seek to recycle and

renew our earth, and yet we must be relentless, if we are to make even the slightest difference. We seek to offer prose, poignant prose to a world that's always wearing earbuds!

We seek to build God's world among a people that often feel reluctant, or indifferent to such a vision. And it can make us feel like that world we cling to, or perhaps grasp for, seems destined to fail. Not all the time, but some of the time. The Kingdom of God is always but coming, but today, God, we'd like to feel some of that always.

I've done it again. And I'm sorry. I rambled. But I do have a point. Jeremiah lived in a hopeless situation. And yet, in today's passage, he offers us a sign of what will be: a broken present will not lead to a broken future. God will restore Israel, and not just Israel, but it's neighbors, too.

I was struck by verse 8. Jeremiah describes all the people that will come together: people from all regions near and far; mammas and daddies, expecting mammas and daddies, old, young, blind, lame, people who like tomato-based BBQ, and people who like vinegar-based BBQ, left Twix and right Twix, you name it...everybody.

And Jeremiah calls this grouping a great company. And Jeremiah says, "They shall return here."

Now it's fine if you want to think *here* means Jerusalem, or Sardis, or whatever home base on the map you want to imagine. And this New Jerusalem is some kind of cosmic hospitality tent, or grand city with golden streets.

But I don't think it's spatial or geographical. I think *here* means God. I think *here* means an awareness, a recognition, an embracing of God by all of humanity. And an embracing of us, by God.

For Jeremiah, *here* is not a city/nation restored or refined to its past state. *Here* is an evolution away from a God structured in place and toward a God centered in individuals – those left behind, those scattered in exile, those seeking to find home, will find it again in God. And I think for us, *here* cannot simply be a church, or a nation, or a world refined or returned to some idealized notion of our past. I think *here* is the moment where each of us become agents of change, empowered to be people of God, not bound to systems or ideas, but simply bound to God and one another.

And when I read today's passage, I hear Jeremiah say to me, "If you cling so much to what was, or you grieve so much about what that was has become, there will be never be room for what will be."

Even weeping, even defeated, even ignored, Jeremiah put his trust in the future God would create. He even bought a piece of land, and staked his claim for generations to come.

If I may be so bold, I think that future Jeremiah is talking about, the one he put his trust in, I think it's here. Now. I think it's you and me, in communion with God.

And I think *here* is a place and a people and a God that will create a more nimble, loving Church; a more just nation; a world no longer in need of gun violence; and a planet renewed rather than abused.

Sardis Baptist Church, *here* is right now. Let's till the plot that Jeremiah's left for us.

Amen.