

There Will Be A Day

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What is a prophet?

They are these ancient authors who wrote with ferocity and vision, who were able to speak of God's judgement, wrath, grace, and love in a single breath.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Malachi.

They wrote in different moments, in different styles, most had a flair for the dramatic...

They could perceive their world keenly and measure it with authority against the world God imagined.

They knew if it was time to reap, or time to sow. Time to knock people off their pedestals, or pick them up and dust them off.

The Prophet Jeremiah knew the history of his people. He knew that it had always been one of ups and downs.

Right now, they were down. The Israelites were in exile from their homes, strangers in a strange land. They had been marched out of their holy city as captives, their temple destroyed, their fields plowed under...

And Jeremiah does not shy away from describing that anguish. He knows what time it is. He knows that it is a time of lament, of grieving, of fear.

But he he knew the history of his people, and takes this moment in today's reading to recall it. Reaching all the way back to the formative story of his community, the Exodus from Egypt.

"The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."

Jeremiah reminds his people that once, long ago, when the people were down, God lifted them up. When they were enslaved, God set them free. When they felt like the world was just a crowd of sorrows, God gave them a reason to dance on the shores of the sea. And when they were wanderers for a generation, God led them to home where they planted, and together streamed to the temple atop Mt. Zion.

And then, the prophet reminds the people what time it is. What happens next when they are down and out.

Again! He says.

Again I will build you up!

Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria
And there will be a day when sentinels will call out: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God."

And there will be a day...

Those words are about 2,600 years old. Its a deep history.

This church is 342 years old. Not as long. But this church is still 100 years older than the country it stands in. We still have a deep history to draw from.

And we are blessed to have Jamie Roth as our church historian, who has organized the many boxes of documents that we have upstairs from across our history.

In the early days of this pandemic, when we had just made the decision to shift all of our programs to these remote platforms, I was feeling a bit adrift. Unsure. Off balance.

It seemed like there was so much to do, and yet I didn't know what to do.

I think in moments like that history can help us get our footing so I went back to our archives and took out some of the church's records from 1918, the last time that we experienced an epidemic on this scale.

And sure enough, in beautiful old script, hand inscribed into a big ledger book of church meeting notes,

September 1918: "Owing to the epidemic of the so-called Spanish Influenza, it became necessary to postpone the Home Gathering scheduled for the evening of October 4, 1918."

Best I can tell from the church records, this Home Gathering was the heart of their life together each year, a combination dinner-party, worship service, and business meeting. It was the only time each year they welcomed new members, a time when they remembered the dead, heard reports on the activities of the past year, and planned for the future. I am certain that postponing it was a big blow, a grieved loss, and a controversial choice.

And their worship services were also suspended for a time, without the benefit of the technology that allows me to be speaking with you today.

And what gave me hope that day, what picked me up and got me back to my work and my life, was seeing just how many volumes, and photo albums, and building plans, and artifacts the church had from the years *after* those words were inscribed on that page.

Again

Again I will build you up!

Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

And there will be a day...

We have a deep history to draw from, within this church sure, but also reaching back across the generations of our faith back to these prophets, back to the Exodus, seeing how again, and again, and again, with God the people are lifted back up, and the world is made new.

Have you ever noticed that when families tell stories of their ancestors, the stories are almost always about some hardship they endured, some challenge they overcame, some close brush with death, or near disaster?

What makes us want to tell those stories?

I think it is the same thing that has made the stories in scripture endure for millennia.

And the same thing that sends me back into that historical room when the going gets tough.

We want to remember that, while what is happening right now may be unlike anything any of us have ever experienced before. It is something that our people have experienced before.

We want to know that as a community across generations, we have already been through most of what the world could throw at us.

And I believe that even if these events are outside the living memory of the people here today, we still hold within us the resilience of those who have come before.

There is a little bit of wordplay in this text that we miss out on in English.

“When Israel sought for rest” Jeremiah writes. “The Lord appeared to him from far away.”

Those last words, “from far away,” in Hebrew could just as easily be translated as “from long ago.”

The Lord appeared to him from long ago.

So how is God appearing to us from long ago?

Perhaps it is in the testimony of this community of faith, which has grown and transformed over generations through all manor of crisis, including at least one pandemic.

Perhaps it is in light of the good news of Easter. That the worst thing is not the last thing. That not even death can separate us from the love of God.

Perhaps it is in the reminder of Jeremiah.

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