



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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5th Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2015

The Rev. Brent J. Eelman

"The Days are Surely Coming"

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

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.

Have you ever felt that things were hopeless? Have you ever experienced a sense of dread about the future? We hear the groans of hopelessness in all quarters. It is the regular fodder on the news shows and journals. We hear it from all generations. Hopelessness is believing that you have no future.

My message today is about the future, because when Christian faith speaks of the future, it does so with hope. Even when life deals a bad hand... when it is most challenging, hope is always present.

The psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote:

Over the years, I have learned that every life circumstance, even a crisis, can nourish your soul. Recently, the farm and home that I have loved so much for so many years burned down in a horrible fire. Everything that I owned, without exception, was lost. There was even speculation that foul play was involved.

At moments like this, we stand at a fork in the road. If we take the fork most commonly traveled, we collapse, we give up, feeling hopeless and defeated. We focus on the negatives, losing ourselves in the problem. We point to our unhappy circumstances to rationalize our negative feelings. This is the easy way out. It takes, after all, very little effort to feel victimized.

We can, however, take the other fork. We can view the unhappy experience as an opportunity for a new beginning. We can keep our perspective, look for the growth opportunities, and find an inner reservoir of strength.

--Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Handbook for the Soul (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 49.

The message of the Bible is that "even a crisis can nourish your soul." The darkest night of the soul, contains the promise of the dawn. The future is characterized by hope.

If there ever was a hopeless time in biblical history, it was when the Babylonians conquered the Hebrew people in the seventh century before Christ. Not only did the Babylonians plunder the riches of the land, they also took the most talented and educated of the people and hauled them off to Babylon where they were held for 2 generations. They knew if they were going to hold onto Judah, they would have to remove those most able to lead a revolt. So they took the best and the brightest to Babylon or what we know as Syria today. This was the Babylonian Captivity.

Jerusalem, home of the prophets, home of the Temple soon would lay in ruin, and her people in captivity in a strange land. The people no longer felt they had a future. They were in crisis.

Have you ever felt that things were hopeless? Perhaps you feel cynical about your future, or worse. You are in despair. When we experience sudden major change, we tend to see the worst scenario. And yet there is a lesson to be learned from Jeremiah the prophet during times like this. Today I want to look at Jeremiah's message to the people held captive in Babylon. Then I want to look at his message in terms of the challenges that we face today, as individuals and as a church.

Jeremiah was truly "a prophet of doom". The message he brought to his people was the judgment of God. No one wants to hear that. Even Jeremiah despaired his calling. He complained to God and said: "Why do you give me this message to speak to your people?" His family and friends abandoned him, probably after reproving him, saying: "Can't you be more positive." He even developed heartburn, the only case of dyspepsia mentioned in the Bible.

It is ironic that one of the most hopeful messages in the Bible comes from Jeremiah, the dyspeptic prophet of doom. The words of Jeremiah's prophecy underscored the assertion that "even a crisis can nurture your soul." It nurtured the soul of people in captivity. It can nurture a congregation in the midst of change and transition.

What can we learn from Jeremiah?

First, he was realistic about the situation. He did not try to candy coat it. He stated: "the parents have eaten bitter grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge." In other words people often pay for mistakes that they did not make.

Second, when he looked at history, he remembered the faithfulness of God.

- He remembered how God saved the Hebrew people, from slavery in Egypt.
- He remembered how God journeyed with the people for forty years in the wilderness.
- He remembered how God brought them to the land of milk and honey.

His memories were not nostalgia for happy times... no.. His memories became the foundation of hope. God who was with His people in the past, was still with them, even in captivity.

Third, he looked to the future, not in light of the current situation, but in the light of history and God's faithfulness in history. He then made the most amazing statement: *The days are surely coming, says the LORD.... Behold... God creates all things new!*

Jeremiah knew the future was in the hands of God. Knowing this, he could share God's vision with the people that:

- *The days were surely coming*, once again when people would plant their crops in this land that was taken from them.
- *The days were surely coming*, when people would love God and keep God's commands, not because they knew the law, but because God touched their hearts.
- *The days were surely coming* when ... *(When God) will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*"

Jeremiah was not a dreamer... he was a hardcore realist. When we read the rest of the story of history we know his words were true. The captives returned. The Temple was rebuilt. Most importantly, 600 years later, a new covenant was sealed by blood of the cross.

Jeremiah can be our teacher.

First, when we are in crisis, we should be realistic about our situation and the challenges that we face.

Hope is not wishful thinking.... It is listening to God, calling his people out of slavery to a land flowing with milk and honey.... But first, they must leave the comfortable routines of enslavement and journey in the wilderness.

Hope is listening to the call of God to people in captivity in Babylon; calling them to a future that is good... a return to the land of their ancestors in Judah. But first, they must endure the introspection, and self-examination of captivity.

Hope, for someone who is ill, is the promise of healing and wholeness. But first it might be a regimen of therapy, perhaps surgery, and a time of recovery. It might mean changes in how one lives, changes in self-understanding, but the crisis of illness or accident can nourish the soul.. and ultimately healing begins with the soul.

Hope for Poland Presbyterian Church is hearing the call of God to a future that is in God's hands.

- It is a future of effective ministry to all the generations that are part of this community.
- It is a future that ministers to those in need in this valley: a region that has suffered economically for a generation.
- It is a future that is joyous....

But first we need to spend time in prayer, study and meditation. We need to spend time living in a world that is "not yet". We need to prepare this institution that has served God faithfully for 214 years "for the hopeful days that are surely coming."

Let us not candy coat recent history.... This congregation has been in the midst of a crisis... But hope believes "a crisis can nurture the soul" of a church.

Second, we need to look back and remember God's faithfulness in the history of this congregation. Can we be as faithful as previous generations? 213 years ago, when the first settlers came to this area, they wanted to worship and give thanks to their God. They didn't have much, but they had the faith to build a small log church. They had the faith to pour the foundation for a future that leads to this very moment.

We need to study our congregation's history. It is our story, who we are. We need to teach it to our children. Because it is a story that tells how God was faithful to the people of this congregation in good times and in challenging times.

Finally let us look to the future with hopeful anticipation!

- *The days are surely coming*, when the work we do now in this interim time... when the ministry of Poland Presbyterian Church will flower and bloom.
- *The days are surely coming*, when children and youth, elderly and mature, women and men, rich and poor will continue to worship together, but more, work together, and in relationship with each other, discover what it means "to love God, to love people, and to serve the world -- in Jesus' name"
- *The days are surely coming*, when young will be baptized and learn about God in the Sunday School, when couples will covenant to a life partnership in marriage here in this room, when in the face of death we will celebrate life and the goodness of God. When the joy of Easter, (which we celebrate in 2 weeks), permeates all that we do.
- *The days are surely coming*, when our God will renew this congregation. This is not my vision.. it is God's! Can we be faithful to it?

I know that there have been disappointments, hurt and pain in the recent past. In the words of Kubler-Ross, we are at a fork in the road. We can travel down the way of despair and hopelessness, be the victim..... "or take the other fork. We can view the unhappy experience of the past as an opportunity for a new beginning. We can keep our perspective, look for the growth opportunities, and find an inner reservoir of strength."

This is the Good News. Amen.