

Living In the Meantime....

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; II Corinthians 5:7; Mark 12:28-31

May 17, 2020

How are your feelings going these days? In an old comic strip, *Shoe*, the newspaper editor sits at his desk and says, “There are mood swings.... And then there are mood *bungee jumps!*” Some days are like that for me!

Who could have imagined where we are now? In the middle of a pandemic with no discernable end in sight. Over a million Americans infected with the virus, over 80,000 who have died. And that’s just the numbers we have decided to count. The big picture has become clouded and dark. And we are experiencing what psychologists call “anticipatory grief”, over those who may yet die, grief over all the kinds of losses around the corner, grief over the seismic changes which may lie ahead for us all. The storm has hit, and we have little idea of its duration or the extent of its destruction.

How do we live in the meantime? The prophet Jeremiah has some timely instruction: *When times are dark the way of faith is the path of everyday faithfulness and ordinary love.*

Jeremiah was raised the son of a priest among an outcast community of priests—in Anathoth, a small town a few miles from Jerusalem. These priests had been banished from participation in temple worship. For many years they had faithfully carried on their priestly duties in the shadow of the temple in Jerusalem. It seems centuries before they had backed the wrong son of David for the throne, and when Solomon won, they were out. Such things happen when politics and religion get mixed up together. This is the first clue that Jeremiah will not be a conventional thinker!

God had called Jeremiah to be a prophet when he was barely a teenager. Jeremiah protested, “I’m just a youth!” And God said, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’! I will tell you what to say. Do not be afraid of them”, God said, “for I am with you and will help you.”

“Who’s *them*?”, Jeremiah may have said, his voice cracking. How could he be God’s voice? His voice hadn’t even finished changing yet?!

Early in his prophetic career he had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem if the nation didn’t change its ways and return to God. It didn’t make him the most popular preacher on the block.

But it happened. The unimaginable happened. Jerusalem and God's inviolable temple destroyed and the Hebrew people carried off to captivity in Babylon.

Into this crisis false prophets arose, many in high places, who promised swift salvation. Their messages were variations of "Something Good Is Going to Happen to You!" Hananiah one of the false prophets appeared and said they would be back home in *two years*.

Jeremiah's prophecy was more realistic and harder to bear. "It will be more like seventy years" he said, "before God brings you back home."

To symbolize the time of captivity Jeremiah fashioned a wooden yoke, put it over his shoulders and walked through the streets of Jerusalem. Hananiah tore the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's neck and smashed it into pieces on the ground. Jeremiah went back to his workshop, made a yoke of iron and started all over again. A determined prophet.

Sometimes God helps us prepare for a longer ordeal than we would wish. We cry, "How long, O Lord?", and God says, "Longer." And we say, "Longer?! What are we to do?" And God gives us instructions for the meantime. We need prophets who tell us what is real, not what we'd prefer to hear. Then we can prepare for how to handle things.

III

How do we live in the meantime? This leads to the next chapter in Jeremiah, our text for today. The Hebrew people were suffering captivity in Babylon for far longer than they hoped. They cried, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Our choir might be asking the same about these strange times! And we all who long to sing hymns together in church again.

How do we live when times seem dark and cloudy, when everything is uncertain? Jeremiah teaches us the way of faith in such times. It is the path of *everyday faithfulness and ordinary love*. Here is the word from God Jeremiah sent to the captives in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have children. Give them to be married so that they may multiply and not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you; (We are talking Babylon here!) Pray to the Lord, on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Here is the path of everyday faithfulness and ordinary love. When the big picture grows dark, focus on the little picture. Paul says, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” So when we cannot see far we focus on what is near. In bad times pay attention to the little, but really not so little, things, the people close at hand, the

daily tasks you've been given, the people you've been given to love. There's a husband, a wife, a child, a friend, a parent to love. We work for the welfare of the city and nation in which we have been placed and pray for its welfare.

In bad times Jesus' greatest commandment still pertains: To love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

There's a job to do, a business to run, a living to make. We care for the little things and trust the big things to God. You may not be able to change the world, or your nation, or your city, but you can make your community better, your family better, your church better—and you can make yourself a better human being.

Jeremiah's call is also to enjoy the pleasures and goodness of life where you are—even in Babylon. Plant a garden, get married, have a baby, play with your grand-children, find joy in the simple things. Make the most of the meantime. This is the path of everyday faithfulness and ordinary love.

IV

Walker Percy was one of America's great writers, a novelist and a philosopher. In 1971 he wrote a novel which echoes Jeremiah's words and is eerily prescient of our times. It is entitled, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*.

It pictures America at a time in the future when it is in great trouble as a nation. Vines sprout up in Manhattan; wolves have been spotted in downtown Cleveland; shopping malls look like ghost towns. Americans have grown more and more polarized, between races and classes and politically between liberals and conservatives. Rage, paranoia, anxiety and despair are everywhere.

The main character is a physician named Thomas More. He has been a devout Catholic but has since dropped away from church, has stopped going to Mass, and in general, to use his words, “fallen into a disorderly life.” His spiritual malaise has cast him into a careless and self-destructive way of life.

Near the end of the novel Thomas More goes to see a priest for help. He makes his confession, and he and the priest talk. The priest hears him out and then offers these words to him:

Meanwhile, forgive me, but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families—unkindness toward those close to us is such a pitiful thing—doing what we can for our poor unhappy country—things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged day-dreams.¹

Sometimes such times as ours can throw us into a devil-may-care, what-difference-does-it-make state of mind. Or throw us into despair, or stoke our angers, or make us want to give up. We can slump into passivity with a feeling of helplessness. It can smother our hope.

In such times God calls us to everyday faithfulness and ordinary love, to pay attention to those close at hand, to find ways to be of help to others. And, *and*, to take care of our own dear selves, showing yourself a little loving kindness.

And to do what we can to make our community and nation better because we are bound together in such a way that our welfare and the welfare of others are part of one another. To use Paul's words, "We are members of one another", all of us.

Conclusion

Sometimes single verses carry important meaning. We carry them around with us. Here is one of mine, a few verses down in Jeremiah 29:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope.

Yes, God is at work, planning things, planning things *over*, working for good in ways you cannot possibly see now-

Yes, God is giving us, even now, *a future and a hope*.

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1. Walker Percy, *Love In The Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (N.Y: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 399.