

Sermon - "And They Shall Be My People"

Sunday, October 16, 2016

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8 and II Timothy 3:14-4:5

Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Jeremiah and speaks into a time of devastation, in the midst of Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of Babylon. Hear these words from chapter 31, verses 27 through 34.

27 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. 28 And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. 29 In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." 30 But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. 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. Amen.

Our Gospel reading, Luke 18, verses 1 through 8, relates a parable of Jesus. Hear the word of our Lord:

1 Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4 For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming. " 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Our final reading is from the second epistle to Timothy, written in the early days of the church, and contains direct instruction to its recipient about living faithfully. Listen for God's word to you in Second Timothy, chapter 3, verse 14, through chapter 4, verse 5.

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching,

for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: **2** proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. **3** For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, **4** and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. **5** As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: And They Shall Be My People

The text: *“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... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD.”* Jeremiah 31:33-34

In early 2006, I was part of a group of Princeton Seminary students who traveled to Gautier, Mississippi for a week-long work trip following Hurricane Katrina. We stayed at a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance tent camp, worked at the homes of two families, and found our eyes opened. Coming on scene more than four whole months after the storm, we weren't sure what to expect, but we quickly found that in much of the region, it might as well have been only a few weeks for all the progress that had been made.

Giant barges sat atop flattened buildings, with mud and debris, rubble and destruction for hundreds of miles. Families were crammed inside tiny trailers sitting beside houses that were completely uninhabitable. One of the houses we worked on had borne water 9 feet high. When the family had first come back home, there were alligators inside their house, feasting on the meat from a chest freezer which had been overturned by the storm surge.

We wondered at the lack of any evident progress, but quickly learned there were several reasons. Although the Federal Emergency Management Agency was highly visible in New Orleans, it had practically no presence as one moved further away from the city. They were providing trailers, and showed up occasionally with paperwork, but that was about it. Everyone had heard news trumpeting government grants and loans, but nobody could figure out where they were going—no one knew anyone who had gotten one. Insurance companies weren't paying out, and people were left scraping by, with no money to rebuild if they didn't work, and no time to spend fixing their houses if they did.

And even if they had some savings, it was impossible to hire a contractor—the contractors were all busy rebuilding the enormous casinos down in Biloxi. So family after family was stuck like the ones we met, living in a trailer, with a deadline for having to move out and no way of getting their house inhabitable by that deadline.

The situation was bleak and discouraging enough perhaps to give the people some relatability to the chaotic and devastating days of the prophet Jeremiah, whose writings cover the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. As in those times, the city was destroyed, great numbers of people uprooted and forced into exile, and a living future for the place was hard to imagine.

Now Jeremiah was never one to pull his punches, either when predicting this devastation or when speaking in the midst of it, and he was insistent that this would be a long, rough road. And yet in today's reading Jeremiah preaches an interesting word of future hope into his moment. "The days are surely coming," he repeatedly declares. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals."¹ Days are coming, he asserts, when place and people will be restored. And more than that; a fullness of justice will arrive. No more suffering for others' sin. And a new covenant, one written within. No more having to teach of God, "for all will know the Lord." Jeremiah's prophecy speaks of a time when God will be present universally, known personally, "forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."² This goes beyond simply rebuilding the city and bringing back God's law. As commentator Bruce Boak points out, this promise is "a move from commandments to conversation, from rules to relationship"³ with God.

Like those struck by hurricane Katrina, and like those caught in the Babylonian exile, the widow in our reading from Luke is left waiting, waiting, hoping for restoration. She troubles the judge again and again and will not give up until justice is given her. Jesus wants us to learn something about God when he tells us, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." This judge ultimately gives in despite having no regard for the widow's concern, saying, "[B]ecause this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out."⁴

Now this might be taken in a somewhat confusing way. Does it mean God is like the judge, not caring and needing to be harassed continuously until we finally get justice? A more likely reading is simply this: if even that guy, the cold and indifferent judge, will bring justice in the face of persistence, then how much more can we expect the God of all goodness to do so?

But Jesus doesn't conclude the parable there; he tacks on that odd final question. "And yet," he asks, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"⁵ Jesus doesn't leave his hearers with a mere lesson of comprehension about God. He challenges them to live it, not just understand it. *They* are to persist in faith, as the widow persisted; to "pray always and not to lose heart."⁶

What does this mean to us? As those with needs of our own, whose lives are also touched by injustice and loss, persistence in prayer and faith means continuing to place our hopes and reliance on God. It means refusing to give up and set our hopes on our self-made plans, our wealth, and our possessions. And not placing our hopes in those things means relinquishing them rather than clinging to them. We

¹ Jeremiah 31:27 and 31:31 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Jeremiah 31:29-30 (*NRSV*).

³ Boak, Bruce, "Pastoral Perspective" commentary on the Jeremiah for Proper 24, from *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Vol. 4* (David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors).

⁴ Luke 18:1-8, quotes from the *NRSV*.

⁵ Luke 18:8 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Luke 18:1 (*NRSV*).

defy this teaching of Jesus whenever we fearfully hold tightly onto what is ours rather than letting it go with generosity.

Which brings us into another question of what we can hear in this parable. Jesus teaches that God hears those who cry out. What does this mean for us when we overhear *others'* cries for help, if we see ourselves as followers of that same God?

Our Second Timothy passage, full of direct instruction to the believer, takes up the matter of engagement with the needs of the world. It takes it in a different direction than we might expect, though, for its primary instruction is “proclaim the message.”⁷ In today’s world, that seems like an odd answer to the world’s cries for help... and yet that—proclaiming—was Jeremiah’s answer, and was what Jesus was doing in Luke, as well.

Like the Lukan parable, Second Timothy is filled with language of persistence. We are urged: “proclaim the message; be persistent... convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”⁸ Part of why this language might sound odd to us is that we hear words like “rebuke” and imagine standing up in front of a needy world, proud and distant, and evangelizing from a high, self-righteous place.

But consider the other words. “Convince” is about conversation. “Teaching” requires understanding of another person. “Patience” involves care for another. And to “encourage” is to love. And all this teaching is meant to leave people “equipped for good work.” When this passage tells us to proclaim the message, it doesn’t describe one who stands apart, firing dogma from a cannon at those who need to be chastised and lectured at the wrongness of their ways.

“Carry out your ministry fully,”⁹ it says. Like the prophecy in Jeremiah, this is language of something more than law. It requires walking alongside, living in relationship. And relationship is key, always, because that is what brings trust, and trust is what makes anything we say believable. “[T]he time is coming,” declares this epistle, “when people will not put up with sound doctrine,” and “will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.”¹⁰ In a sort of upside-down echo of the “days are surely coming” language heard in Jeremiah, Second Timothy reminds us that the Good News of Christ is contested in the world, by the voices offering us hope in lesser things, which can be highly appealing when we can see those things but have to wait, wait, and persist in our faith in the Lord. And so we are told in the face of this: “be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist.”¹¹ Into despairs and false hopes, our job is to tell of *real* hope.

I spoke earlier of the dismaying circumstances we saw in Mississippi back in 2006. But there was one thing that surprised us, and made us look differently at the very nature of our trip. You see, almost everywhere we went, there was only one place people were getting much of any help. It was coming from the body of Christ.

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:2 (NRSV).

⁸ 2 Timothy 4:2 (NRSV).

⁹ 2 Timothy 4:5 (NRSV).

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 4:3 (NRSV).

¹¹ 2 Timothy 4:5 (NRSV).

People there had not failed to notice this. The woman whose house I worked on, frustrated by the lack of assistance from the government, and knowing every bit of work done so far on her house had come from volunteers through the Presbyterian Church, said one day, “It just shows us how much we have to put our hope in the Kingdom of God, because the kingdom of man isn’t doing nothing for us.”

We didn’t feel like bearers of The Hope Of God. We had labored physically for only one week, and to be honest not even that well, since most of us had no relevant experience. But what we came to see was that this woman was seeing something bigger at work: God kept bringing people to her house. Before us there were others, and after us there would be more. Those who followed Christ were being brought to give whatever they could give in service to her, each offering small, but the whole put together being a true work of the body of Christ.

All of us were hoping people would be materially better off after our being there. None of us were prepared for the spiritual significance that emerged from it all. What we were amazed and humbled by was that our work, despite just being a physical task of applying drywall mud and tape, was not just service, but evangelism.

We went to a church dinner one evening. One member told us of taking a crew to visit a man he knew whose house had been demolished, spending hours cleaning and clearing out debris and getting him started on rebuilding. This was a man who wanted nothing at all to do with the church. But it’s one thing to hear pulpit pronouncements and dismiss them, or evangelistic speech and discount it. When people start showing up at your door to join together in lifting you out of an overwhelming situation, you start to wonder. This isn’t just talk. It isn’t argumentation, and it certainly isn’t moral judgment; it is pure and simple neighborly love. What are these people about, that they would spend their time improving your life instead of their own? That man, who previously had no interest in anything he had heard coming out of the church, was one of those who served us at the church dinner. “[L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,”¹² Jesus tells us in Matthew 5. What this man had never recognized in Christian words, he recognized in their deeds.

We’re talking about mission. What is mission? Mission is a particularly Christian form of service, deriving from the commission Jesus gave to go and spread the Gospel to the whole world.¹³ Patterning our own mission after the way Jesus himself did this work means that for us, his followers, mission is neither strictly word nor deed. Jesus preached the Good News of salvation by openly speaking of it and by demonstrating the nature of the Kingdom of God in his compassionate life of servanthood. He taught, healed, and served. We are called to do likewise. "Mission" means providing that the Word of God should reach the whole world, and that those we reach should not merely hear, but experience the Gospel at our hands.

How are the people of this church called to take part in mission? Only you can answer that, and I invite you to. I believe there is not a person called by Christ who is not called to mission. It is at the core of

¹² Matthew 5:16 (NRSV).

¹³ See Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:19-23, Mark 16:14-18 (but note that many scholars believe the oldest version of Mark does not actually contain these verses), and Acts 1:4-8.

what it means to be the church. Failing to share the Gospel and love of God to the whole world would be nothing less than proof we don't really believe it. But thankfully, "Gospel" means "good news", and sharing something good is exciting.

I think one of the most exhilarating things about what the church can be comes out of the fact that every one of us has things we have noticed in the world that we, personally, can speak to, or do something about. Every one of us has particular passions, skills, and a unique imagination for putting them to use in the service of God's kingdom. And yet we are not individuals but a whole body, which means we can come together, encourage, and build up one another. People notice the need to serve children at Graham School, come together, and Compass happens. People care about hunger, get organized, and the CROP Walk happens.

Our Mission and Community Service Committees have been putting in hard work seeking our joint call to mission, not just as a list of programs we offer, but as a central part of the identity of this church. That is a never-ending process, but at bottom it comprises two things: looking inward, discovering the call and purpose of the people who make up this congregation; and looking outward, coming alongside our neighbors, getting to know who they truly are, and loving and serving them in Christ's name.

Today you are all getting new booklets describing the existing mission projects of this church, including two new projects we're excited to have just committed to: backing our involvement with Compass with significant funding, and becoming one of the lead churches in a new house being built next year by Habitat for Humanity. Your invitation is to join in! Find something in there that matters to you, and put yourself into it in some way. Or dream up what is not in there and should be. We're always growing and adapting to the way in which the world needs to hear of God today.

We are told by Christ we are the "salt of the earth."¹⁴ What does that mean? It means in a world full of despair, of hopeless life, we are called to awaken something different. Salt is for seasoning; it brings flavor to the bland. It is a seasoning of taste for the tasteless; and loving service in Christ's name is a seasoning of hope for the hopeless.

Our supervisor at that Mississippi work camp told us a story. A few weeks after the hurricane, not long after the camp had first been set up, a team of volunteers went to take on their task for the day: mucking out and cleaning a house that had been flooded, terribly damaged, and filled with wreckage. It was a huge mess, in terrible shape, and they worked hard for hours at hauling out debris and cleaning. The couple who lived there just sat in the corner quietly and watched.

At the end of the day, the house was still a catastrophe needing extensive repairs, but it was visibly far different than when they started. The mud and rubbish that had littered the whole place was out, and it looked like someplace where one could start working now, rather than like an overwhelming and impossible disaster. The man spoke up finally. He thanked them for coming, and he told them, "We just wanted you to know that you are the first people we have seen here since the storm hit. We haven't seen any sign of help until now, and we were so hopeless that we had decided to commit suicide tomorrow. But now we have changed our minds. You have given us some hope again."

¹⁴ Matthew 5:13 (NRSV).

The volunteer leader was blown away, but puzzled after a second, and said, “Wait... surely someone else has been here. They must have come to fill out this assessment sheet about what needed to be done.”

The man looked at the piece of paper he was holding.

“You’re at the wrong house,” he said. “That address is two streets over.”

Well, whatever the paperwork may have said... I think they were at the right house that day. Praise be to God. Amen.