

Sermon – “When Relief Comes”
Sunday, February 17, 2019
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26
Trajan McGill
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading gives us words of the prophet Jeremiah, who lived at the time of the fall and exile of the people of ancient Jerusalem. Listen for the word of God in Jeremiah 17, verses 5 through 10.

⁵Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. ⁶They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? ¹⁰I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel according to Luke. Listen for God’s word to you in Jesus’s teaching, found in Luke chapter 6, verses 17 through 26:

¹⁷[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Humanity has a thing for bubbles. I don't mean the kind you make from soap which float through the air giving endless delight to little children. I mean the kind where people see something going a certain way and feel it is important to jump on board, taking direction not from rational analysis, but from one another's actions, like a school of minnows, all following one another up until the instant they all are following one another the opposite direction.

Bubbles in real estate, bubbles in technology stocks, bubbles in commodity prices. Radio and television commercials hype people up on the need to buy gold, or silver. Beanie Babies, and before them, Cabbage Patch Kids. The California Gold Rush of the late 1840's, which brought something like 300,000 "49ers" to California expecting to strike it rich. Multiple bubbles have already come and gone in cryptocurrencies—

"Wait," you might say; "What's a cryptocurrency?"

Well, let me tell you about this great investment opportunity you better get into while there's still time!

I am only kidding, of course. I would not venture to use this pulpit for giving investment advice...with one substantial exception, which we will get to later.

But the point is that we like bubbles. We just pile aboard, and then the bubble pops, everything collapses beneath us, and we crash to the earth...only to climb aboard the next one. The object of investment, always, is to buy low and then sell high, but we don't do that. A significant number of individual investors, maybe even most, actually do the opposite, getting in once they've heard a stock is skyrocketing, which means it is already high, and then getting out in a panic while it is near rock bottom. We just can't seem to help the degree to which our read on where to go is informed by the herd, rather than by the terrain the herd is running on. Piling onto bubbles always has been nearly irresistible, it seems.

The story goes that in 1636 and early 1637, a growing market in tulip bulbs in the Netherlands, combined with interest in unusual varieties, prompted speculators to enter the tulip bulb market, driving prices madly up and inducing people to buy bulbs, or rather, purchase bulb futures contracts, while the bulbs were still in the ground and not even available yet, buying them only with the intention of turning around and selling them at a higher price before ever taking delivery. Tales include some ownership of bulbs changing hands ten times in a day, a sailor being imprisoned after grabbing what he thought was an onion and taking a bite out of what was actually a tulip bulb valued at enough to feed his whole ship for a year, and finally the economy collapsing when the bubble burst about six months in.

Of course, it turns out that we also can't resist historical narratives that grow like bubbles until they burst, and so it also turns out that the Dutch Tulip Mania story that has been circulating for at least the last 150 years is in large part myth, based on real events but exaggerated—possibly by our Reformed Dutch Calvinist forebears warning against the dangers of gambling—to the point of becoming an apocryphal apocalypse.

The point is not thereby diminished: there are things that look sound and compelling only because we wear blinders and take influence from what we hear and see everyone else saying and doing. And because we do, we put our faith and hope in things which do not, unfortunately, bear up in the end.

Both of our scripture passages for today warn us about that. “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength,” the Lord warns as reported by Jeremiah. “They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.”¹

Jesus gives similar counsel in Luke 6: “[W]oe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”²

What is the strength of human beings in the end, ultimately? Nothing, we are reminded. The strongest army, the mightiest person, the most steadfast ally among persons, all of these will wither away and fail, fall, and die. Riches are fleeting. The things we have, the moments we seek if we are striving for mirth and comfort, they will all pass away. If we live our lives for them, or relying on them, we will be dropped on the ground with nothing when the bubble bursts.

We do not even have to be capable of understanding great mysteries to know that this is true. It is obvious with a moment’s thought. We all know we are mortal and will perish, and that all we build, all we get, all the world has for us is “dust in the wind,” as a rock band named Kansas advised us in a 1977 song by that name. We even know it won’t be very long.

And if we apply just a tiny bit of logic, one of the most enduring related tropes in lifestyle philosophy crumbles. We’ll be gone tomorrow, so let us make sure to squeeze all that we can out of life for ourselves today, or so the thinking goes. We are told to stuff ourselves in this life, like someone who won some kind of shopping spree contest attempting to grab and pile as much in the cart as possible before the timer runs out.

Where logic explodes that thinking is in the difference between that image and our lives. The person who won the shopping spree benefits by filling the cart as full as possible because he or she can keep all of it after the spree is over. We, however, cannot. We die, and it all goes away.

As do we. There is an odd habit of thinking we often engage in, which we treat as wisdom because it deals in long-term perspective, but which we don’t think through to the end. We know our lives are short; there is a brief period here on this earth when we can actively choose things, do things, and experience things. We don’t want to waste it. But underlying every philosophy of living richly and sucking the marrow out of life is the premise that there will come a day, when we are in the grave and no longer able to have more experiences, when we will be very glad if we have taken the opportunity now to fill our memories with exciting, rich things while we had the chance.

Surely you see the problem there! A person lying in the grave does not, in fact, care one bit whether he or she checked off all the experiences that seemed attractive in life or not. We *will* be gone tomorrow, and the truer logical implication is not that what we get out of life today therefore matters more, but that it matters less; or even, in a very significant way, not at all. A happy life or a miserable one, to a dead person they are the same.

¹ Excerpted from Jeremiah 17:5-6 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Luke 6:25-26 (*NRSV*).

Or so it would be if death were the end of the story. Jesus in fact came and gave us something even more surprising. He did not just knock down human illogical choices of where to place our trust and on what foundations to live our lives, he flipped them upside-down.

It is of one piece with Jesus's refrain that "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first."³ "Blessed are you who are poor," he said, "for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."⁴ Not only do the kingdom we live in now and our place in it not matter, because everything as it is in this life is soon to be dead and gone, but there also lies new life on the other side—not a continuation of this life, but new life, flipped upside-down, as part of a totally different kingdom.

The Old Testament foreshadows this as well. "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."⁵

Do not have faith in what you see before you, these words are reminding us; the world, your money, your strength, the strength of those around you, because it is all a bubble, and the wisdom of the world around you is only the wisdom of the herd that inflates the bubble, gives it the appearance of trustworthiness, and gives us the fear of missing out on it.

We must be not afraid of missing out on what life has to offer us if we are to follow Christ seriously. The fact is that he never taught people to spend any of their time really concerning themselves with getting a lot out of this life. Quite the opposite. From the fishermen abandoning their livelihood⁶ to the rich young man asked to go sell everything and give the money away,⁷ Jesus asked people to drop things, leave things behind, let go. He was kind of ruthless about it, in fact.

Why? Because he did not care about people's happiness? Far from it. Jesus had great compassion for people and cared enough to consistently stop and help people in painful circumstances, even when it was highly inconvenient to him.⁸ It is not about Jesus failing to want good for us. It is about Jesus reminding us over and over again, sometimes very pointedly, that the bases we choose to live our lives on, the things on which we build our lives are not, in fact, good for us. They are bubbles that pop, and in chasing after them we are investing nothing in the truer things which *would* really hold us up.

³ See the two consecutive teachings in Matthew 19:16-30 and Matthew 20:1-16, along with Luke 13:22-30, and Mark 10:17-31, where Jesus is also found continuing on with that theme further in verses 32-45.

⁴ Luke 6:20b-21 (NRSV).

⁵ Jeremiah 17:7-8 (NRSV).

⁶ See Matthew 4:18-22 and Luke 5:1-11.

⁷ See Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-29.

⁸ See for instance Matthew 14:13-14, where Jesus was trying to take time by himself after hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist. Numerous other requests for healing seem to have been interruptions to him as well, and crowds repeatedly form, seeking him out, and refusing to leave him alone when they hear he is nearby as they pursue their hopes of miraculous assistance.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them,” Jesus says in Matthew 7, “will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall.”⁹

Ah, but Jesus! You don’t understand! The beachfront properties are going quickly! All I see is houses going up. Only a few lots remain! If I don’t buy a lot on the beach today, I might miss out on ever getting one!

It’s a funny thing that fear of losing out on something is what drives us to put our bets on bubbles, and it is precisely the betting on bubbles that causes us to lose it all. But we don’t have to.

Here is where I get to the investment advice. This world offers endless things which it says you have to make sure not to do without. We are told that life is too short not to do what pleases us, and we are even given concepts, like so-called “bucket lists”, reinforcing the notion that it is very important for us to give priority to things we desire to have for ourselves, lest we miss out forever.

Our faith tells us something else. Life is too short to allow ourselves to be caught up in the fever of caring too much about what we “want out of life.” We may fear what we don’t get to have or get to do, but God remembers us. Scripture does not pretend that faith is all sunny days. The house on the sand and the house on the rock both get hit by rain and floods and winds. The tree planted by water we hear of from the prophet Jeremiah still has to endure heat and drought. The difference is that something enduring lies underneath, which sustains and gives life.

In our resurrection hope, placed in a faithful God, we can have relief from the anxiety that drives us to inhabit bubble after bubble. And only then we can, in calm assurance, carry on, knowing of our blessedness even in the midst of whatever may befall us, fearing none of it. May God grant that our hearts may be so full of faith. Amen.

⁹ Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV).