

American Lutheran Church of Sun City
Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 16 – March 17, 2024
Pastor Scott Klimke

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

“The days are surely coming” begins our reading from Jeremiah; a reading so significant that it shows up five times in our three-year reading calendar. The prophet’s talk of days that are sure, but still coming reveals the waiting that a life of faith can involve. We trust that God’s promises are sure, as we also often wait for them to be fulfilled. For example, Christ has died, and Christ has risen, but Christ has not yet come again. At least for now, in a life of faith, there’s that which is already and that which is not yet. Why so far and yet so far still to go?

If we’re to continue in the trust that God is real and every divine promise sure and true, it may be all of God’s unfinished business is reflective of how God desires one thing from us most of all and that’s a real and genuine relationship. And relationships are complicated and convoluted; traveling what’s been called “the long and winding road.” The details of our reading from Jeremiah reveal just how messy and time-consuming relationships can be.

By the time Jeremiah speaks, God and Israel have dancing toward a relationship for some time and they’re still out of step and sync. The continuing dissonance in the relationship explains God’s need to start over and to speak through the prophet of the surely coming days when the Lord shall make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah. Stunningly, this do-over is promised after the Assyrians have already wiped the northern house of Israel off the map and not

long before the Babylonians shall raze the house of Judah to the ground and force its residents into an exile of their own. By all appearances, it sure does look like the relationship God begins with Abraham and his descendants has gone down in flames; with the twelve tribes of Israel seemingly like chaff blown here and there by the wind. But with defiant hope and faith, Jeremiah still announces that in the descendants of Abraham, today's chaff will become tomorrow's wheat before God is done. This is how committed to relationship God is.

As Jeremiah tells it, God is surely and absolutely committed to renewing and improving the relationship God has begun with Abraham and his descendants. And this isn't a commitment to one people and family. As our reading, John affirms when it speaks of how Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, shall draw all people to himself, God's untiring, immovable, irrevocable commitment to relationship with Israel is also an untiring, immovable, irrevocable commitment to relationship with every people and nation since the Bible tells us it was to be through Abraham and his descendants that all of the families of the earth were to be blessed by God. And yet, as sure as we can be that God will not quit on relationship with the entirety of the world God loves, the days envisioned by our reading from Jeremiah are still sure days, but also still coming days too. Before the sure days God promises through Jeremiah can come, the house of Israel will have to be found rather than remaining Israel's ten lost tribes. As I've already asked once today, why is so much in the way of surety and still so much to come?

Again, if we want to trust that God and God's promises are sure, the waiting and the unfinished business may reflect how complicated and convoluted it can be to get to what God desires most, and that's relationship with all of us. I've been told that every relationship cycles back and forth between forming, storming, and norming; with storms from within and storms from without interrupting every period of normalcy for a time. Our reading from Jeremiah gives

voice to one example of this kind of history. It reports that God had initially taken Israel by the hand like a parent takes a small child by the hand. Seizing their hand, and holding fast to it, God had carried Abraham's descendants out of Egypt and through the Red Sea; led them through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; fed Abraham's descendants with just the right amount of manna every day like a mother monitoring her baby's diet. And yet, if you hold someone by the hand too long or too hard, even if you do drag them into green pastures and beside still waters quite often, what's going to happen? Your charge is eventually going to want to break free and blaze a trail of its own.

In preparation for this kind of "Independence Day," maybe you've taken your charge by the hand from kindergarten through the twelfth grade; insisting they get up each day and do their homework at night so that they might learn the laws that make for a good citizen. Maybe you've also held your apprentice by the hand until they ended up in a church pew each week so they might learn the laws which are to govern faith and its practice. Our reading from Jeremiah reminds us this is what God did. At Mount Sinai, God gave the descendants of Abraham the law which revealed the way forward to a land overflowing with milk and honey and with faith-filled people ready to love God and neighbor. But what's a road sign emblazoned with a word of law? It's a sign to be ignored when it's convenient or in the heat of the moment. Sowing our wild oats in the process, most of us for a time turn a deaf ear to the authority figures in our lives. The authority received is just about certain to become authority tested. If laws are all there is to sustain a relationship, the relationship will fail and falter. The same goes for handholding. There's a time for laws and a time for handholding, but it doesn't last forever. Relationships are ultimately a matter of love, a matter of the heart. It's why today's repentant psalmist speaks for all of us when he prays for a clean heart, for a new and improved heart.

The importance of love and hearts aflame in the realm of lasting relationships is not to be forgotten. Doing what we do out of love and appreciation for others, the relationships that make everything else go can't be legislated into existence and they won't attain the mutuality that speaks for their maturity if handholding is all there ever is. If you want a relationship built to last, you've got to win somebody's heart the old-fashioned way. Whether God or one of us, over time, you've got to demonstrate again and again that you see and value your partner in a relationship; not wanting them to be somebody else and ready to forgive them when they fail to be who they can be. It's grace that wins hearts and thereby becomes the stuff that makes relationships go the longest and the farthest. The grace of someone else's presence and support, of someone else's patience and kindness, of someone else's steadfast love and forgiveness wins hearts and energizes relationships like nothing else. God reaches this conclusion as our reading from Jeremiah concludes; thinking aloud through the prophet, "All shall 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." And yet, grace lacks power and pizzazz when it emerges apart from some of the other phases and cycles in a relationship we've talked about today.

Consider the wayward, younger son in one of Jesus' most beloved parables. It's only in the rearview mirror that this son came to know that the green, green pastures of home weren't so bad after all. But as he returns to the green, green pastures of the home, our repentant son isn't expecting much in the way of grace. Having shamed and embarrassed his father so much, having ignored and turned a deaf ear to his father's laws and principles for a life of faith so much, the younger, wayward son cannot fathom his father's hug and tears, his new wardrobe, or how the fatted calf shall be prepared to celebrate his homecoming, which shows us two things.

Relationships stall and stagnate without grace, but grace is not the be-all and the end of

relationship. Requiring handholding, shared values, and grace, all supplied at just the right time, relationships are complicated and convoluted; traveling a road which is indeed long and winding. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, let's stick with our relationships through all their phases and cycles; not growing disheartened or disillusioned when it's one step forward and two steps back. It's the only way we will ever be able to unleash the full power and pizzazz of grace at just the right time. Amen!