

“This Ancient Love”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31 and John 12

Jeremiah is sometimes known as the Weeping Prophet because he was often moved to tears because of the hard-heartedness of the people of Israel in response to God’s word.

He stood in the midst of the exiled people, as they had all been removed from their homes and livelihood in Jerusalem and taken to Babylon. And he stands there and weeps.

And to Jeremiah is given the message to give to the people of Israel – that God is giving them a new covenant:

“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.”

You may ask what happened to the old covenant. You will be familiar with earlier covenants in the Old Testament. God made a covenant with the people to never again destroy the earth with flooding, and as a reminder, God put the rainbow in the sky. The Ten Commandments were a covenant between God and the people, and were etched into stone tablets.

And Jeremiah references God’s covenant promise to bring the people out of the land of Egypt, out of bondage, and into the promised land: “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.”

And this covenant is set apart from all previous covenants. What is so distinctive about Jeremiah’s words are that this covenant will not be written on a stone tablet, or seen in the sky as a rainbow promise, but *this* covenant will be written within – on your heart. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

The Psalm for today is Psalm 51, the words of David after ‘he went into bed with Bathsheba’, and they are offered to the prophet Samuel as his confession: Create in my a clean heart O God. Clearly, what is written on your heart is of great importance to God.

Do you think God has written the law on *your* heart? “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” And what are those words? And what is that law? Love? Forgiveness? Respect? Equality? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbour likewise?

Is that law a living law in our hearts? ‘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.’” Is that us? Does that call us together as a church?

There was a festival in Jerusalem. And some Greeks came to Philip and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’. Philip then went and told Andrew and then both Philip and Andrew went and told Jesus. The Greeks somehow leave the storyline at this point.

And this is a pivot moment in the Gospel of John. There is a change, a turn in the path that Jesus has been walking up to this point. The teaching is done. The healings are done. The miracles are done. Jesus now says that his ‘hour has come to be glorified.’

It’s as if he is saying, in answer to the Greek’s ‘We want to see Jesus’, if you want to ‘see’ me, don’t look for me in ways you’ve heard, as a healer, teacher, or one who performs miracles.

But rather, you’ll find me up on the cross.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. Again, here is this Greek word ‘hypsoo’ for lifted up, which has two meanings – the literal raised up on the cross, signifying how he will die,

but also, the enthronement of a king – which foreshadows that he will be lifted up, in resurrection and then ascension, to sit ‘at the right hand of the father’ as the ancient church creeds say.

And then there is the detail of the thunder. Jesus said, “‘Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ (vs. 28-29)

We have heard this ‘voice from above’ in Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan, when upon coming up out of the water, the dove descended upon him and the voice from heaven was heard saying, “This is my son, my Beloved, in him I am well pleased.”

And we have heard this voice at the Transfiguration – when Jesus suddenly appears above the heads of James, John and Peter, with Moses on one side and Elijah on the other, and the voice from heaven says, “This is my son. Listen to him.”

And this third event, which is only recorded in the Gospel of John, has the voice from above saying, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’

As a commentary thoughtfully suggested, “As one reads this passage, one experiences deep in one’s soul the thunder John believed to be God’s voice. The Word in flesh is radically, experientially present, here and now.

Other Gospel writers wait until after Gethsemane to show this dimension of Jesus. John gives us this glimpse of Jesus now, in Jerusalem, before his arrest.”¹

¹ FOTW, Year B, Vol 2, Pastoral Perspective, p. 232

The Greeks asked, ‘We want to see Jesus’. Clearly, they are getting more than asked for. And so are we. For we are entering into a liminal space in the Passion of Jesus.

Liminal means: relating to a transitional stage of a process, or occupying a position at a threshold.

There is in this text from John a different space created for us to step into. For just as the disciples tell him that some Greeks are asking to see him, Jesus opens up this ‘liminal’ space, in other words, this timeless moment when he transcends in his identity from that of Jesus to the Christ, knowing that his hour is here, the hour that God’s name will be glorified.

Who are the ‘Greeks’ in our time, in our community of Stouffville? Are they ‘newcomers’, are they millennials, are they people who have never heard of Jesus before?

The world is more secular out there than we think. So yes, people will come here having no idea who Jesus is and will be asking the same question the Greeks asked Philip and Andrew – we want to see Jesus.

What if they come into Stouffville United and don’t find him?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German priest and a theologian. He was imprisoned by the Nazis and was hanged in 1945, a month before the war ended. He wrote many books, and letters and papers from prison which have been collected and published. Here is an excerpt of his thoughts on what church should be like:

“The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling.

The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell people of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”²

Would the Greeks ‘see’ Jesus in Bonhoeffer’s church?

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She asks, *Vulnerability*. Wherever did that go in our lives? Because only when we are truly vulnerable does the transformative work begin within us.

Is it when we are vulnerable that we see Jesus? How do we tell that to others who want to know who Jesus is?

² *The Wisdom and Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 18.

Jesus says, 'the hour is here'. The hour has come when the seed must die, so new life can emerge.

In the dying, is the vulnerability. That as the seed dies, new life will emerge. The transformative work begins.

Jeremiah stood there, the weeping prophet. God will write the law in your hearts.

Jesus, in a moment of transcendence, stood there, telling the Greeks that to see him, they should look at the cross.

Help me to look to the cross, to see you,
in your vulnerability,
knowing your hour has come.
I want to see you.