

## Lent 5 – March 21, 2021

### Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, John 12:20-33

The days are surely coming, says the Lord. So the prophet Jeremiah tells us in our first reading.

The days are surely coming, says Dr. Bonnie Henry. So the newscasters and reporters tell us regularly.

I can't help but look for the parallels between these two predictions – or prophecies, if you will - of better times ahead.

According to one of my biblical reference books, Jeremiah is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to understand. It is rife with different voices and competing theological claims; it is described as tumultuous and full of pandemonium created by a jumble of poetry and prose. But perhaps it is that very tumult that can make Jeremiah resonate with today's readers and listeners.

The first half of Jeremiah tells of the utter dismantling of the Israelites' society when Jerusalem was besieged, the Temple destroyed, and great numbers of Jewish people deported to exile in Babylon under the conquering King Nebuchadnezzar. All their most cherished structures and rituals were laid waste and they were in new territory, literally and figuratively.

Many of us feel like we have been in exile this past year, separated from the traditions, routines, and people we love. And we can likely relate to the pandemonium of competing voices in Jeremiah. Every morning when we pick up the newspaper there seems to be another "expert" announcing the best path out of these hard times; how the vaccines should be rolled out, when restrictions should be tightened or eased, how we got here in the first place and how to avoid being back here again. You will, I'm sure, have noticed how often all these expert opinions contradict each other.

Both Dr. Henry and Jeremiah are speaking to us from the in-between times; the time between what is and what will be. In Jeremiah, God promises a time of new covenant and new life; in the Vancouver Sun – for example, in [this article of March 3](#) – Dr. Henry speaks of a post-pandemic world that is on the horizon, but not with us yet.

Living in this place of “not yet” is an underlying theme of the Christian story. The promise of a time when God’s kingdom has indeed come and all is made right with the world is part and parcel of New Testament teachings. Jesus’s resurrection is seen to herald what is in store for all of us when the last days are here and the lion lies down with the lamb.

What this means, we don’t know. Some astronomers tell us that we live in an expanding universe that may have gone through cycles of expansion, contraction, and expansion before. We don’t know what it might be to merge our energy with God’s to the extent that God’s kingdom comes, God’s will is done. But until then, we live in the land of Not Yet.

When I look at my reference book’s description of the second part of Jeremiah, I am again reminded of these pandemic times. In this half of the scripture, Jeremiah turns away from what has been lost to the future that is coming. My book describes it as an ode to “restoration and hope amidst the wreckage: a survivor’s guide.” The prophet makes reference to God’s coming reign on earth bringing hope to the Judean refugees and a community of renewed moral commitment. This isn’t a return of the old covenant with God, says Jeremiah in the lesson today, but a new covenant altogether.

Similarly, society talks about creating a “new normal,” a new-and-improved version of who we are and how our society is structured. Many voices – some, of course, competing voices – are calling for a “just recovery” from this pandemic; one in which people can escape the grinding cycle of poverty, one in which Creation is respected, not exploited, one that does not favour a few at the expense of the many. In any time and place, it takes prophetic voices to awaken our imagination to envision and work toward the best of what can be.

While we are living in the in-between times, our challenge is to grapple with the hard realities all around us while keeping our hearts and minds committed to the vision of what is to come. Jesus tells us not to wait for the end times to usher in God’s kingdom;

he tells us in Luke 17 that the kingdom of God is already in our midst. So what does that mean for us today?

Self-help gurus often advise us to escape the in-between times by living as if we have already achieved our goal and are living the life we dream of. It's called manifesting our own destiny, or the law of attraction. And sometimes that is good advice. Just one run-of-the-mill practical example is the advice to dress for the job we want, not the job we have, if we want to move up the ladder at work.

We are advised to operate out of a place of abundance if we want to attract abundance. And there can be some wisdom there; we are unable to live our best lives if we continually see the glass as half empty. So that's one way of living in the in-between times while you look toward a better future.

But that sounds to me like the means to securing one's individual success, and while there may be benefits to that, it doesn't sound anything like the kingdom of God we are promised. There will still be winners and losers, the one per cent and the 99.

So we look to Jesus's words in this morning's Gospel passage. Those who love their life lose it, he says, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternity. You may recall from another of my talks that the word "hate" is sometimes used in the Bible to refer not to something that is despised, but to something that should be given a lesser priority. So we don't, of course, hate this earthly life with which we have been gifted. But when we prioritize doing the work of God – wherever that may lead us – it is then that we are building the kingdom.

Bonnie Henry has, perhaps, similar advice in this article. She knows we are in this hard, in-between place. And it's a place we need to endure with patience and continued fortitude, for trying to escape its restrictions and privations too soon will mean more sickness and death – if not for us, for someone else in our community. So in this time of anxiety and impatience, this is what she wants us to hear:

Our goals and our promise is to ensure that no one who wants to receive the vaccine is left behind. And so we say to each British Columbian: Please be patient, we will not forget you.

Now – just in case the Bishop is listening in – don't worry, I'm not suggesting that Bonnie Henry is God. But to my mind, those are Kingdom-building words she is speaking. *No one will be left behind*, she says. And don't worry, *we will not forget you*.

This is a future we can help to build. A future in which no one is left behind – not just when it comes to vaccines, but to so many things in life. And it can start now, right here in the in-between time, because the Kingdom of God is already amongst us. So I urge us all to think of ways to reach out this week and do something to help one of the lonely, the lost or the least; to help them experience the embrace of God through an act of kindness or compassion. Or you might write a letter, send some money, or otherwise support a cause that is working on behalf of those whom society has forgotten or left behind.

You may have to lay down your own life – even if just for a few minutes – in order to do it. But I don't have to tell you what you will gain. I'm afraid I don't have a catchy line like “Be kind, be calm, be safe” to close with. But we don't need one. The scriptures and your own life experience will already have told you that it is in giving that we receive – and in dying to ourselves that we're born to the life for which we were made.

*The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*

*Offered to the glory of God, and in loving memory of Jill Hanney, one of our own*