

Beyond gratitude – the days are surely coming

Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

In the passage in Jeremiah, we hear this phrase several times – “the days are surely coming”. What days are those you might wonder. The days of new hope, the days when we see infinite possibility instead of the barriers that keep us and hold us back. Maybe it’s the days when we release harbored anger and hurt. Days when forgiveness is given, where relationships are reconciled. The days are surely coming when we will make decisions, where leaders will make decisions, based on the common good of all, rather than personal gain and desires. The days are surely coming when we will listen deeply to all people in our sphere of reference. Even when the person might be saying things that create fear and uncertainty within us. The days are surely coming when we will place our trust in God and enter into the New Covenant that God offers us. This powerful phrase – “the days are surely coming” – according to Donald Musser, a theologian, implies something that will rise above the ordinary and the familiar. Something that will rise above the ordinary and the familiar. God’s New Covenant is truly “a promise of a future of hope and meaning, brimming with promise...it claims that there will a fertile time of building anew and planting anew.”¹ According to Jeremiah’s prophecy God has watched the destruction of humanity unfold and even with that happening God is still there for the people. God continues to care for all people.

As it says in Isaiah, another prophet, God said and God promised I will not abandon you, all my promises are true. You are gifted, called, and chosen; you are mine. What we need to hear this day is that God will always be there for us. That God will renew our faith. That God will forgive our sins and God will not hold onto our past mistakes and failures. In this season of Pentecost, which will end the liturgical year with the reign of Christ, which is the last day before Advent begins, we will move from the practice of humility to a practice of gratitude. Over the last six weeks we have been talking about what the spirit of humility is and it's that practice of considering other views and needs as important as our own. Where we learn to accept the lessons life brings knowing that mistakes are often our best teachers. Humility, the practice of humility, then leads us to thankfulness. Gratitude is about appreciating and celebrating all that life offers. This is about living in the present moment. Where we no longer define ourselves based on what we do but rather on who we are.

¹ Donald W. Musser, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 172

I want you to take a moment to reflect on your own. Think about someone you know who only defines themselves by what they do. Picture someone in your life who defines themselves by what they do. Now I want you to think about someone else you might know or have encountered who is grounded in their being, who does not define themselves based on what they do. What's the difference in those two people and how they approach life? I recently watched a documentary about Kelly Slater who is a surfing legend. He and his group of friends-built relationships through surfing together. As time went on, they moved into the professional world of surfing and by doing that something was lost. The competition, the desire to be the best at their craft, changed who they were. Changed them into what they did and what they were known for. Their relationships amongst this group of friends became strained as they competed against each other, wanting, and needing to be the best. This came with intense pressure and fear leading many of them into addictions and depression and just struggling in life. They especially struggled after one of their friends died while surfing. This brought a crisis point, where many of them started to question who am I if I am not a professional surfer? It was all they had known. Now that they have moved on from competition though they have come to recognize that what's most important is our relationships. Who they were to one another before competition was what was most important. Finding the pure joy of surfing again, being one with nature, and surfing with their friends was what brought them joy not winning.

If we think back to whom Jeremiah might have been speaking to, which were the Israelites, the Israelites too were brought out of this exile, away from slavery. As they journeyed to the promised land however, they struggled. They searched for their identity. They lost sight of what was truly important. In fact, they lost sight so much that they begin to worship false idols. They were angry with God. And they convinced themselves that slavery was actually better than wandering aimlessly to the promised land. Through the prophet Jeremiah though the Israelites were given a promise which we too are also given. God promises forgiveness. And as one theologian describes Divine Amnesia, which I thought was a great word. I have no doubt that we have all hoped for people like our parents, our teachers, sometimes our loved ones that they get amnesia as well. To forget the mistakes that we have made. So that they don't get brought up over and over again. Making us go through that same cycle of guilt. Bruce Bach writes "God sees that forgiveness is an act of compassion, prompting worth and value in another but forgetting is an act of love that reinforces the desire that the relationship will be broken."² There's a difference between the act of compassion and forgiveness and then moving to letting go of what has happened, in order to mend our relationship. In order to move towards reconciliation. Paul in his letter to Timothy today is encouraging Timothy in his leadership. Paul is writing a letter of encouragement because Timothy has been abandoned by the people that he was leading. Paul writes, I solemnly urge you Timothy to proclaim the message to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. In other words, don't give up on the people. God is calling Timothy to lead,

² Bruce Boak, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2010), p. 174.

and God does not want Timothy to simply placate the people and give them what they're looking for but to hold true to what God has called him to proclaim. Be persistent.

As a leader in this community of faith I'm hearing a lot of wonderful things words from God that claim the essence of who Robertson Wesley is. One of hospitality and openness. And I also want to proclaim the words of God that the days are surely coming when we will see a clear path forward over the next decade. This New Covenant that God wrote in our hearts is a covenant that shifts the focus from hard and fast Commandments to conversations. From rules to relationships. And I am beyond grateful to God for this shift. We've all been dealing with grief at differing levels over the past few years. One psychology professor named Robert A. Neimeyer states that "a central process in grieving is the attempt to reaffirm or reconstruct the world of meaning that has been challenged by loss."³ The Israelites were grieving as they journeyed to the promised land. The surfers were grieving the loss of their friend and the loss of their profession. We the faithful followers are also grieving the loss of friends who have been in our midst over the last decade, people who have been key fixtures. We are grieving the loss of who we once were, what we once did. And we need to hold onto the hope that we will find a way forward. That we will identify what is most important. The things that we most value. All is not lost. There is hope. God is calling us to build up our relationships with one another. God is calling us to listen deeply to one another and collectively hear what God is calling us to be in this post-pandemic world. What have we learned? How have we grown? How has our faith deepened? I truly am grateful for your dedication, for your faithful acts. For all that you have offered and done in this time. The days are surely coming when we together will find a way to leave our mark at this time in our history. The spirit will spark us to engage to pick up the mantle of the people who have come before us. So that we can spread God's love to everyone and to all living things in creation. So let us forgive. Let us let go of past mistakes and break down the barriers that stop us from working together and living out God's call in this world. What brings you hope this day and what are you most grateful for?

³ Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, (New York: Random House, 2021), p. 110