

WHAT DOES YOUR HEART SAY?

March 18, 2018

Lent 5

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)

[John 12:20-26](#)

(prayer)

[Jeremiah](#) of Anathoth, the son of Hilkiah (the priest) - according to the Old Testament book that bears his name - began offering insights to the people and leaders of Judah in the year 626BCE (the 13th year of King Josiah) and continued for 40 years or so.

The global context of the time that Jeremiah began his prophetic work was *divisive disputes within the Assyrian Empire*, the dominant world power. About 100 years earlier, the Assyrians had overrun the northern Hebrew kingdom of Israel, with its capital city falling to Assyrian control on 721BCE.

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Quick biblical history.

When the Hebrew people first settled in the land of Canaan (after Moses led an exodus from centuries of slavery in Egypt), they did not have a central governance structure, like most other nations. They were led by the teachings and precepts of the Law, the Torah, rather than having a king or governor of some kind. Wise local judges would interpret the Torah, arbitrate disputes and instruct the people in the ways of just and faithful living.

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Eventually, as the 12 tribes of Israel became more established, they did [desire a king](#), like other nations. Samuel, the son of Hannah, was guided by God to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel.

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David followed and built Jerusalem as a new national capital, and provided a permanent place for the Tent Tabernacle of the exodus (housing the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone fragments of the original Ten Commandments).

When Solomon became Israel's third king, he oversaw the building of an ornate stone temple (on Mt. Zion) to replace the tabernacle and solidified Jerusalem as the centre of worship for the entire kingdom.

That decision divided the people. To simplify a complex power struggle, generally... for many people in the north, Bethel on Mt. Garizem (where Jacob was said to have wrestled with an angel and envisioned a ladder leading up to heaven) was "the" proper place to worship God.

The kingdom [divided](#) after Solomon's death. The tribes of **Judah** (and Benjamin) succeeded from the other tribes, maintaining Jerusalem as the seat of power under King Rehoboam (Solomon's son). The northern tribes of **Israel** (under King Jeroboam) governed themselves with Shechem as first capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Eventually, Samaria became the seat of power in the north.

As I said before, in the early 8th century BCE, the north was swallowed up by the Assyrians. But, the Assyrians did not keep moving south; Judah remained independent.

Until...

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In 621 BCE (just 5 years after Jeremiah emerged as a prophetic voice in Judah), the Babylonians (under the leadership of Nabopolassar) ransacked the Assyrian capital of Nineveh beginning the era of the [Neo-Babylonian Empire](#) as the dominant power in the region.

In the early 7th century BCE, Nebuchadnezzar (who had succeeded his father, Nabopolassar) expanded the

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Babylonian Empire westward... into the land of Judah. Whatever *independence* deal the Judeans may have had with Assyria, clearly, it no longer applied.

Jeremiah was a witness to all of this and he certainly had his opinions on what was happening.

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The theme that runs through Jeremiah's teachings is centred on the covenantal relationship between God and the people. Jeremiah warned people that geo-political pressures were signs that the Covenant had been strained by the lack of faithfulness of the people.

When the Babylonians began to exile some of the Judean leaders, Jeremiah saw this as further evidence that the Covenant was crumbling.

Jeremiah warned the people that, unless there was a change in the attitudes of the nation, the Babylonians would continue to take control of the rural lands of Judah and may - in fact - take control of Jerusalem, itself.

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But Jeremiah was not purely a *prophet of doom*: he was hopeful that there was a future where the Covenant would be renewed. God was still in control, even if defeat and exile was in the cards.

Jeremiah wrote letters to those who were already living in exile: *To all the exiles... [in] Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.* (Jer29:4-7)

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For several hundred years (since the time of David and Solomon), Jerusalem and its temple were synonymous with what it meant to be Judean; so much so, that the southern hebrew kingdom willingly severed its ties with the northern tribes.

A dominant belief in Judah was that the essence (Spirit) of God physically resided in the *holy of holies* : the inner sanctuary of the Temple.

If the Babylonians were powerful enough to ransack Jerusalem and destroy the Temple, it could only mean two things: either,

1. The babylonian gods were greater than Yahweh (Judah's God), or
2. Yahweh had abandoned the people and the Covenant.

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As we can infer from passages like the one today from Jeremiah 31, the prophet offers a third possibility:

After 300+ years of judean stability and seeming certainty, Jeremiah begins to imagine that Yahweh's sovereignty is not tied to anything physical, be it the land of Judah... or Solomon's Temple... or even ancient stone tablets inscribed with foundational holy law prominently achieved in the Ark of the Covenant within the *Holy of Holies*.

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Jeremiah - in the strong tradition of Hebrew prophets - places the blame for the people's circumstances on the people, themselves.

Also, in the strong tradition of Hebrew prophets, Jeremiah preaches about the steadfast faithfulness of God,

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even in the face of the faithlessness of the people. It seems that although God might be willing to allow the Covenant to bend under the pressure of people's choices, God does ensure that the covenant relationship does not get to the breaking point.

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And so, with the walled city of Jerusalem suffering from a strangling Babylonian blockade (with defeat realistically only a matter of time), Jeremiah looks to the future.

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: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

First of all, it is significant that this promise reaches back to include not only kingdom Judah, but also the northern kingdom of Israel, which disappeared of the map a century earlier.

The covenant has been strained a lot longer than the Babylonian era. And God is still seeking renewal.

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Imagine how hopeful these words were heard a few years later when Jerusalem had been completely overrun and the Temple had been looted and was rumoured (among) the exiles to be only a pile of ruin stones.

Into the worry (that the Ark had been taken apart for its valuable raw materials and the Ten Commandment remnants were unknowingly dumped on the ground by greedy invaders), Jeremiah's words brought hope... *The Lord says: I will write the Law* (not on stone this time, but) *on your hearts*. Teachers of the Law will be out of a job because *no longer shall they teach one another, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me*.

This kind of relationship with God could endure empires

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and exile. Out of the sands of defeat would rise new life.

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The story of God (throughout the scriptures) is one of determined faithfulness - of emerging hope - of surprising legacies.

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Today is the fifth Sunday in this year's season of Lent. In just seven days, we will start our walk through **Holy Week** that will begin with Palm Sunday, travel through Good Friday, and end with Easter.

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The Holy Week narrative is also one of emotional and faith-challenging twists and turns.

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The gospel lesson we heard this morning is one of John's not-so-subtle foreshadows of the end of the Jesus story.

In the context of a teaching moment with some curious foreigners, Jesus speaks a truth that jews and greeks alike understood:

In order for a seed to be able to sprout with new life, it must be allowed to be given up as dead. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

This might remind us of other teachings of Jesus... like ones recorded in Mark, chapter 4:

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it

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withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

and

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

and

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

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For Jesus' audience, the realities of first century farming were well understood... in that, the lessons of past generations had learned the best practices for how to plant, where and when.

But the whole process was founded on mystery and trust in *the ways of creation* beyond the full understanding of those who grew the crops. As the parable of the growing seed says... *someone scatters seed on the ground; the seed sprouts and grows, but the sower does not know how.*

Growth may not be understood, but it is known.

How does a dying seed result in new life? was not a question people of Jesus' day could answer, but their experience allowed them to trust in the mystery.

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In the wake of Jesus' resurrection, the New Testament apostle Paul would ask the rhetorical question: *Where, O*

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death, is your victory? (1Cor15:55)

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From *Jeremiah* to *Jesus* to *Paul*, our bibles are documents of new life... of steadfast faithfulness... of persistent hope emanating from the heart of God.

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Earlier this week, I joined ministers and congregational members from dozens of Alberta United Churches at a workshop with [Betty Pries](#) (pree-əs), a renowned consultant to both churches and workplaces on *conflict, change* and *leadership*.

We spent time exploring how to offer helpful leadership during times of transition and change - whether that change is happening by proactive choice or forced upon us by the circumstances around us.

The reality is that often those *forced circumstances* are the sum total of choices we have made (or failed to make) over time.

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There was a lot of good information shared around the tables at the event, but a central learning I took away was that effective change will be better managed if we are able to honest and clear about our *Identity* and *Purpose*:

- Who are we?
- Why are we?

And... if we are being authentic as a church, our purpose will dictate who we are.

I don't believe that this is new information for St. David's United Church. I have learned over the years I have shared this ministry with you that, this church does try to practice what it preaches.

But, I also believe that we must (not only be aware of

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who and why we are right now, but also to) always be mindful of what lays before us.

Jesus proclaims that the *hour has come* for glorification.

Jeremiah proclaims that the *days are coming* when a new covenant will emerge.

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Both of these can be true for us today.

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We are the manifestation of God's compassion in the world right now; **and**... the holy heart continues to grow within us, leading the world into deeper and fuller relationship with its creator in the days that are still to come.

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The greek visitors told the disciples that they wanted "to see Jesus". Clearly, they had heard about him and the things had been doing and saying. They wanted more than a story; they wanted an experience.

The challenge before us is... are we doing our best to usher in the days where people experience the heart of God and not just hear about it.

As enthralling as theological discourse can be (I'm serious... sharing our faith is a valuable and enriching activity), we are to be more than storytellers, we are to be story-livers.

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Is it possible for our faith to be (not only) on our lips... but in our hearts as well so that it is simply part of who we are?

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"The time is coming when it will be obvious", the prophet said. No one will have to remind another that we are living testaments to the heart of God, because our example will shout it louder than any words.

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Each one of us can proclaim that these “days that are to come” *begin with me.*

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Let us pray:

Author of life, help us remember your word. Call our spirits to discover our meaning and potential. In Jesus, I pray.
Amen.

#79MV “Spirit, Open My Heart”

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