

Faithfulness on Earth
First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, CT
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Jeremiah 31:27-34

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

It is so good to be back here at this church and with this community, back in what Steve has so well described as one of my spiritual homes. And thank you Steve, for yielding the pulpit to me and for your warm welcome. It's wonderful to finally meet you! David Good gave me my first preaching opportunity right here back in 2006. And it has become one of the great joys of my life. So it is good to come back home

That first time 13 years ago, I remarked to David that the lectionary readings were amazing and apt for my message and he said, oh, we are Congregationalists, we never follow the lectionary! Well, you can take the man out of the synagogue but not the synagogue out of the man. The prescribed reading is the reading, you don't deviate, and you trust that the cycle of texts will deliver just what you need, even when -- especially when -- you look at and say, I don't get this, or it's just wrong, or this is not the Bible I follow. That's when the doing of theology and the teaching really happen. And also for me, compared to what we have in the synagogue, which is limited to the Old Testament, your lectionary is a candy store! There is the Old Testament, and the gospels, and the epistles. And together, they tell a story. And that's the story that needs to be unpacked, meditated upon, and even struggled with as we make sense of it in our current context.

And yes, I have been kicked out of the synagogue, but it's OK, so was Jesus on that Sabbath in Nazareth on the initiation of his ministry. He was expelled, almost killed, for breaking the rules. The scroll of Isaiah was tolerated, sure – but when he talked about the true healers, the true prophets, being found in Lebanon and Syria – not Israelites! Foreigners! those Others! -- that was unacceptable. It broke the rules. And Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. The message from Isaiah laid out the ministry, to be sure, everything that followed – the Sermon on the Mount, the message of Matthew 25, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the concrete examples of his healings and miracles and encounters over the next 3 years simple expanded on this powerful call for compassion, justice and liberation. But the seemingly offhand mention of that man from Sidon and that man from Syria introduced a critical and integral part of the program he was laying out -- that this was not only for Israel, it was for *everyone*: especially, and pointedly, those considered outside the tribe. Jesus was confronting the synagogue, the church of his time if you will, for its exclusivism, xenophobia, elitism, and alliance with tyranny.

And so now to the texts:

Jeremiah 31:27-34

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. 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-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law – bad translation, I will come back to that -- within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (literally, a people for me). 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.

What is this new covenant? Remember that the context of Jeremiah was that disaster is looming. Babylonia was about to swallow Judah, and the kings are in denial, they are desperately trying to hold on to power as kings will do, foolishly and catastrophically seeking an alliance with the competing empire of Egypt. And Jeremiah is saying, you are courting disaster, you've got to change your ways. Here is where it gets interesting -- Jeremiah is describing nothing less than a change in Israel's relationship with God -- from dependence on God, from being "taken by the hand," like a wife -- of course we are in a very patriarchal world here, the word translated as "husband" is *Baal*, in Hebrew that's also the word for *master* or *Lord*. In contrast, the prophet puts forward here a very different kind of relationship -- a deeper, integral *knowing* of God. The Hebrew, translated incorrectly as "law," *I will put my law into them*, is *Torah*, and the Hebrew is *Torati b'kirbam* -- My Torah will be in their innermost, deepest most essential selves, integrated with who they are. "Law" is a very misleading translation for *Torah*. *Torah* is a civil code governing human relations, and its core is social justice. And here we need to take note of the last words in this text -- "they shall all know me, *from the least to the greatest*." This is course brings to mind Jesus' words in Mt 25, -- perhaps the central text of the gospels alongside of the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 25:40 where Jesus says that the justice and lovingkindness you do for "the least of these my brethren" you do for me. This is Torah! This is what God requires above all else! It is the question, asked and answered by Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" It is caring for those who suffer, being part of all humanity in its struggle, pain and courage, doing what must be done to allow the oppressed to rise from the ditch of humiliation and domination, this is what it means to know God, to carry God within us. It is to teach this lesson -- in Jesus' terms in John to "know the Father" -- this is the covenant, this is the relation to the divine, and it is within each of us, as individuals and, all-importantly, in the communities we build. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "Christ exists in community." Jeremiah is saying, God wants you to live, and this is the new covenant that will grant you the fullness of life. This is what salvation is all about -- it's not vertical, it's horizontal. It's about how we create the Kingdom of God here, on earth.

In contrast, the original covenant was about many things, but from the beginning it was about land, prosperity, growth, domination. And it included ethnic cleansing -- it's right

there in Genesis – you will take the land by “driving out before you” the indigenous peoples – and they are named! -- and in the later books of the Pentateuch and in the Book of Joshua you get horribly specific instructions about the genocide and ethnic cleansing that accomplishes this taking possession of the land. The prophets knew that this taking of territory and making of kings would lead to trouble, and they did a splendid job of speaking truth to the corrupting, destructive power of king and Temple.

Nothing has changed on this score from those times to today, except that the stakes are so much higher for our species and indeed for all creation and the planet itself. I was in Northern Ireland recently. I learned about the history of what led to the Troubles and guess what – it had nothing to do with religion. The cause was settler colonialism! Beginning in the 17th century a project blessed and financed by King James of England brought Scottish Presbyterians to Northern Ireland to take the land of the indigenous Gaelic Irish and turn the Irish into a subject population. The Ulster Planters, as they came to be called, brought with them not only hunger and greed for land and profit, but the Bible, using the concept of divine right and the claim that they were a “Covenant people.” This idea of covenant, straight from John Calvin, was that the Planters were predestined -- chosen by God -- to bring civilization and salvation to new lands. Think *promised land*. Sound familiar? It’s the same DNA we share here in the USA, when the English settlers arrived on these shores to carry out their Manifest Destiny to build a “shining city on hill” for the greater glory of God. I’m not from around here -- who can tell us whose land we are sitting on as we gather here this morning? The Afrikaners of South Africa – good Reformed Christians in that same mold, made the same claim for their dispossession and economic enslavement of the indigenous Africans.

And then there is Israel today. Even though original Zionists were socialists who claimed to have rejected religion, still the Bible was and continues to be claimed as a historical document. Ben Gurion famously said: God does not exist, and he promised us the land. Ben Gurion thought that traditional Judaism would wither away to be replaced by Zionism, but in fact the colonization of Palestine by the Jewish state provided fertile ground for the most poisonous kind of fundamentalist, exclusivist religion. And I am not talking only of the orthodox Jews in Israel. Christian Zionism, born in the English Reformation and enjoying a resurgence today, must be confronted, theologically and politically. It must be named as the evil that it is, as about as un-Christian as modern political Zionism is un-Jewish. Trust me on this, as a Jew I was raised on it. Not the fundamentalist kind, the liberal kind. Ultimately, it’s the same thing: we are special, we deserve this, and we are innocent of whatever crimes we commit in pursuing this project of our own redemption from suffering. I love my Judaism and treasure my heritage, but the dark side of growing up Jewish was that I was taught to see the world as unsafe, and Jewish history as the story of being saved from enemies that, “in every age,” as the liturgy goes, “seek to destroy us.” It built a wall in my heart. I was rescued, really healed, from this identity that poisons the soul and damages the spirit, when I met the Palestinians, met this supposed “enemy,” and, like Jacob reunited with Esau, looked upon them and saw the face of God.

And it goes back to the Bible and the land deal. The Hebrew prophets saw the problem of territoriality merged with peoplehood, the xenophobia and the myth of redemptive violence that brings with it with it an exclusive and God-given claim to a piece of land, but they were never able to step out of the tribal exclusivist framework. Let justice stream down like a mighty river, yes, but in the end it was about being fair to “the stranger in your midst.” In the end, the people, reconciled with God, are returned from exile to the land they must possess, and the Temple is rebuilt -- this is never in question.

Enter Jesus. Jesus, who said to the Samaritan woman, the day will come when we will worship not on this mountain or that mountain, but in the spirit. Jesus, who stood before the Temple, the embodiment and expression of tyranny, greed, the 1% over the 99%, and said, this will come down, Jesus who on Pentecost conferred the power of the spirit to his followers to speak all the languages of the world – including Arabic – and then sent them from Jerusalem, passing through Judea and Samaria into the wide world, to carry the Good News: God’s love is for everyone, no one people is special. Jesus, who asked, and answered – who is my neighbor? Jesus who is for me the best Jew, the Jew who said put the love of God into your own, innermost selves, and act accordingly, that is the covenant.

To our next text:

Luke 18:1-8

We know this parable so well – the unjust judge, yielding to the persistent widow, finally grants her justice just to get her to leave him alone. And really, what else is there to say about it? Persistence, based on deep faith, is what is absolutely required for action in the world to bring justice and compassion. As the Palestinians write in their Kairos document, it is to practice hope in the absence of hope. We are all in this together. In the presence of the most desperate, urgent issue of our time, climate change, which is driving migration – and I tell you we ain’t seen nothin yet, migration is coming at us like a speeding, out of control train, we must ask, more urgently than ever before in history, who is my neighbor? But let us return to this text, which ends, not with a pious pronouncement about God’s goodness and reliability, but with these curious questions: *“And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. **And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”***

Faith on Earth. The word in the Greek translated poorly as “faith” is *pistis* – it means making good on what you have promised, being faithful to a promise or covenant -- endurance, clarity, steadfastness. So the question asked here is, God will be there for you, but will carry out your end of the deal? It’s back to this business of covenant: what is a covenant people? It is not about taking, inheriting, entitlement, exploiting. It is rather about, as the text reads, faithfulness on earth, reads and I would say, *to the earth. To creation.* So this is the *sumud*, the persistence, the *faithfulness* to the covenant.

And there is one more clue here, and it is key: *When the son of man comes will he find faith on earth?* Why does Jesus call himself, repeatedly, in all four gospels, by this name? Because what he says, in Hebrew, is *ben adam*, which means, simply, *human being*. To understand this, we must pay a visit to the final chapter of Luke, chapter 24.

Jesus has been crucified, the tomb is mysteriously empty, and Jesus keeps turning up -- but his followers (with the exception of the women), don't recognize him. Finally, in this final chapter, he comes to them, plain as can be but they are frightened, and "think they have seen a ghost." Jesus, patiently, as concretely as possible, tries to clear up the confusion. I am no ghost, Jesus tells, them -- "Look at my hands and my feet!"

See that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

Jesus was demonstrating not his *divinity* but his *humanness*. Look at my wounds! Hear that I am hungry! Don't you understand it has always been about my *humanness*, that I suffer as our people suffer -- beaten, persecuted, starved? Are you looking for God? Do you want to know the Father? Look here, right here, at my body. Behold my wounds, feed my hunger. My ministry, this whole story you have been part of since the beginning is about that suffering and about the mind and the heart of God who feels that pain and experiences that hunger. Look at my wounds, know my pain, feed my hunger! And then go and do this for the least of these, meaning those under the wheel, suffering under the boot of oppression, that is what God wants, this is Torah.

This is what resurrection means. Jesus is not gone, and certainly not gone to somewhere else, he is here, as he said, *with you always*. *Now: go and teach this to all the nations*.

Finally, our last text:

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist." Again there is an important problem of translation here. *Evangelion* does not mean to go out and "convert" people to "save their souls," as the meaning has been perverted over the centuries. It means, simply and literally, to be the messengers of good news, and we know from the gospels, and from Pentecost what that means and it is up to us, as in every historical period, to understand what that means in our context.

It's a strong message, this letter to Timothy. And this strange image of "itching ears" -- I suppose this means that instead of listening to the cries of the oppressed, seeing, as Luke writes elsewhere, the signs of the times, what is there is plain sight -- injustice, suffering, tyranny -- demanding our attention and our action, people instead respond to their own selfish needs, their own desires, the Greek word there is better translated "lust." The connection here with Luke is the need for persistence in resisting this tendency. But see -- here it is about being persistent *with ones' self*, especially when it is not a "favorable" time, i.e. when it is not comfortable. I love the "wandering away to myths." Myths keep us comfortable. Especially myths about ourselves and our tribes. Covenant people is such a myth, used, as the text says, "to suit our own desires," for land, power, wealth, and just that really comforting feeling that we are good, even superior to those Others, whoever they may be, and that for that reason we do not have to answer for what we do to gain and preserve our power and privilege and wealth at their expense. As Americans we are awash in myths, about ourselves and about our ally Israel: "Making the World Safe for Democracy" -- a Land Without People for a People Without a Land -- "Making the Desert Bloom" -- supporting the "Only Democracy in the Middle East" -- the list goes on.

So what is the message, that is to be soberly, persistently, and uncomfortably brought forward?

How are we to live, in these times, as the forces of Empire are gaining ground everywhere we look, as our natural environment is beginning to show us, in ways we can no longer ignore, that the planet will soon no longer support our greed and blindness -- and it is the poor who will suffer first and suffer most? How are we to live when judges -- in our context those responsible for governance and human affairs only respond when you knock on their door, or more accurately when they are knocked hard and repeatedly on the head, and even then only grudgingly, when you can count on one, maybe two hands the ones who show integrity and courage and real commitment to humanity? The text instructs us to bring the good news, the urgent message: that community and solidarity are here for us, it is the only answer, it is the only way to live. "*Christ*," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "*exists in community.*"

One final word about Jeremiah and this business of a new covenant. Ultimately I must confess to being confused by this text. It's made more confusing by this question: are we reading it with Jewish eyes or Christian eyes? As a Jew this passage confuses me. If we have indeed screwed up so profoundly, then why the offer of a new covenant? Why does the old one no longer serve? You sin, you are punished, you repent and it's good again. Why is God changing the rules, giving us a chance at a whole new thing? And for me, it is in this idea of the new thing --- that is where for me the answer is found. So I say this, and do not misunderstand me: It is with Christian eyes that this text makes sense. I don't mean "Christian" in the religious sense, I am not talking about Lutheran or Presbyterian or UCC or Roman Catholic or Orthodox, any more than Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist. I am talking about the gospels, I am talking about the revolutionary, money changer banishing, my Kingdom is not of this present world order, destroy this Temple radical grassroots organizing ministry of Jesus. "Behold, I am bringing

something new,” it says in the Book of Revelation, where the Tree of Life, sprouting the leaves of healing for all the nations, sends us forth from *our* mountain, *our* country, *our* land, speaking all the languages of the world, to proclaim the Good News and to stand before the Temples – you can find them everywhere – and say, bring this down, to be replaced with love, even of, especially of, those we are told are our enemies. In the Kairos document the Palestinians set this out clearly, addressing the Jewish community in Israel: “Even though we have fought one another in the recent past and still struggle today, we are able to love and live together. The culture of love is the culture of accepting the other. Through it we perfect ourselves and the foundations of society are established.”

I close with an astonishing passage I received recently from Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar in the U.S. who sends out a daily meditation and teaching. It’s sort of my 4th text. He writes about Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), a young Dutch Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz. I love Rohr’s radical vision of Jesus, and of the meaning of the crucifixion. It speaks to our theme today of what is faithfulness to God, to creation, to one another. He quotes Hillesum, turned into a mystic and a believer through her personal suffering. She writes a prayer, a letter to God:

“If suffering, even unjust suffering (and all suffering is unjust), is part of one Great Mystery, then I am willing to carry my little portion. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.

Let us pray, then, with Francis:

*Lord, make us an instrument
of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred,
let me sow charity;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and Where there is sadness, joy.*

Amen