

Sermon 'Toxic positivity': Jeremiah and the Covenant of New Hope. Lent 5, March 21.21

Pray

May we receive the word you give, Lord Jesus. Amen.

There is a phenomenon that the pandemic has highlighted. It's called Toxic positivity. Toxic positivity is the belief that no matter how dire or difficult a situation is, people should maintain a positive mindset. It's a "good vibes only" approach to life. And while there are benefits to being an optimist and engaging in positive thinking, toxic positivity instead rejects difficult emotions in favour of a cheerful facade. There are those who push the positive and ignore the reality of the pandemic, who snub Covid protocols and host parties like one recently at a Peterborough residence among students, one of whom, a 30 yr old man, died this week due to Covid19. One vaccine doesn't guarantee immunity. We must stay vigilant.

While we join with those who seek to unmask toxic positivity, it's instructive how the prophets from the bible, like Jeremiah, in the midst of truth-telling, always get around to a word of hope. Telling the truth can be redemptive, leading to repentance and renewal.

The word I am hearing as we conclude the Lenten series on the Covenants of God, is this, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, says the Lord." Jeremiah 31:33

Why does God make covenants? Well, it's clear we can never get to God by ourselves. God has to come to us; even though there's a big gap between a holy God and humanity's sinful ways, God has come to us and made himself known in the ancient practice of covenants, treaties, legally binding agreements in which one or both parties pledged themselves to death to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant. This is the vow some kids make, 'cross my heart hope to die,' and the part I don't remember saying as a kid, 'stick a needle in my eye' – don't try this at home. A pledge to death in order to fulfill the stipulations of the treaty included a bond in blood, sovereignly administered; the suzerain or superior party pledging to protect the lesser party or vassal who swore loyalty.

God enters into covenant with Noah and his family, with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses and the nation of Israel, pledging their obedience and worship to the one true God, and now we read about God with Jeremiah, a pledge made nearly 1,000 years after the covenant with Moses in the desert. There will come a time for a new covenant but why? What went wrong with the covenant in the blood of the lamb at the Passover or at Mt Sinai? There must have been a problem with the old covenant as the people are about to experience the curses laid out in the agreement, they are about to be exiled, out of the promised land.

For the prophets, human history is not an end in itself but a transition time, a parenthesis between the Garden of Eden and the new heaven and new earth still to be formed by God. Even if everything seems out of control, God remains firmly in control.

According to biblical scholar Stanley Hauerwas, the life of faith consists, not simply of 'having a positive outlook' but living with patience and hope. When something comes along to test our relationship with

God, let's say a once-in-a-life time pandemic, we rely on those two virtues: patience formed by a long memory, and hope that our faithfulness will prove worth the risk.

When the prophet Jeremiah hears God's heart and despite the opposition he faced from his fellow prophets and priests, who exhibit toxic positivity, he writes this word.

"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. ³²It 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."

Do you see the imagery Jeremiah records? God is pictured taking Israel by the hand like a husband holds his wife's hand, yet his own people, time after time, fail to keep the agreement, and drop God's hand. Covenants that God makes, reveal his character, patience, restraint, and hope that his people will find their way in him. It's the lesser party, humanity, who fail to keep the covenant. God remains faithful, and seeks to make a new covenant, to create capacity for his people to find their way in him.

Jeremiah imagines a time when there is no need of priest or teacher, since everyone will know God directly. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, says the Lord." Jeremiah 31:33 It is a measure of Jeremiah's spiritual stature and maturity that he could even contemplate such a situation. Because, just a few chapters earlier he wrote,

"The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?" Jeremiah 17:9

Jesus picks this up when he says in Matthew 5: ¹⁹"For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander."

So how can a new covenant Jeremiah foresees accomplish what God intends if a new covenant is given to a heart that is deceitful?

The message of the Messiah is that in Christ, a new covenant has been made by God, a covenant in his blood; that's why for so many not being able to participate in the eucharist is painful. There is a kind of spiritual vacuum when we are not permitted to receive communion, yet 'spiritual communion' is possible when the word received is like a sacramental act of feeding, the word stirring hope in us. As the Prayer Book prays when referring to the scriptures,

"Grant that we may hear them read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life, which thou hast given us in Jesus Christ." (Collect for Advent 2, pg 97 BCP, 1962)

For a year, we have lived with the low-grade, persistent fear of breathing in Covid19 virus, air infected droplets. To flip fear around, if we could see the air infected with Goodness, the aerosol of blessing flying around a room, a city, a planet, that we are carriers of Christ, transmitters of virtue, that have rippled for centuries, patience and hope like Jeremiah proclaimed. In the words of author Tim Keller a heart changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ does three things: it humbles you so you appreciate what

others do whether Christian or not, it emboldens you to provoke change and work for justice, thirdly, it changes the way you think and work, inside your profession, such as the woman whose boss took the blame for her error at work, and when she found out, she pressed him and pressed him, he finally said, "I am a Christian. Someone took the blame for me, so I can for someone else." With that, the woman began to think maybe there's something more to Christianity than she had thought.

This week's Gospel reading in John 12 affirms the universality of Jesus' mission: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). And one last time, Jesus offers a re-definition of glory: Jesus is glorified when God's saving love is in action, even in the context of a shameful death, on our behalf.

Jesus says that when a seed dies, it bears much fruit. Those who save their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Servants will be honoured. Glory comes through Christ's crucifixion. This is not the way of the world. The world says that glory comes by way of victory over others. So, win at all costs. I'll get the credit for your work. You get the blame. Might makes right. Don't worry about losers. They are of no account.

In this season of pandemic and vaccine, repentance moving toward the cross, I am hearing this word of Jeremiah, as a word of hope for today. Not a false hope that papers over painful truth; hope not just because there's a few more minutes of sunlight in the northern hemisphere, although that is lovely; hope not just because loved ones qualify for a vaccine and soon it will be my turn.

I see hope, both in repentance and in the cross. Repentance means you recognize the heart is deceitful, turning in awareness of the truth you see in you, which sometimes means facing dark things we'd rather not see and turning TO the light we'd sometimes rather hide from. For some it might mean that drinking you do every day, that you say you could quit any time but you don't, means finally getting help for your drinking problem. I have heard stories about someone who woke up to their drinking problem, finally went to AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, and is actually enjoying a life of sobriety, engaging in the 12 steps.

Jeremiah did not hide the truth and it cost him. It was not popular to tell the truth, of what he saw in his country or the truth as he understood it from the heart of God who is truth.

Jeremiah cracked the code; he saw into the human heart and said God would give a new covenant, a new heart. Paul saw that when he wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has gone. Behold, the new has come!" So, for those who are baptized, we lean into our baptism promises, embrace even our liturgical confession of faith in the Creed and General Confession, trusting the covenant-God who has bridged the gap for us.

What is the law written on our heart? What does the new covenant mean? Written on their hearts means, it effectively governs their lives, in contrast to the ineffectiveness of merely presenting it in writing, though inscribed on durable stone. The new covenant fulfills the old, and achieves its purpose. True knowledge of the Lord will be shared by all, young and older, the peasant and the powerful, in an experiential, not academic, sense. "I will forgive their sins," says the Lord, the glorious basis of the new covenant. Not automatons but humanity choosing to live, as the divine Designer intended.

God sees our heart, our pain, our need for renewal. God sees there is often no room for him in our hearts. Other pursuits, other things, even good things, take God's place, become like idols, human-made and lifeless. God sees we need a new heart, a renewed life that gives us the capacity to follow a new covenant, to work its leaven in us, deeper than sin, deeper than our pain. A new heart can receive a new covenant. God initiated covenant, in his blood, for our benefit. Like a new operating system for your laptop but without the hassle.

I hear in my heart God say, "You are not alone in your pain. You are not alone in the guilt or shame you feel. I have been down there too. The whole reason for the cross, for my weakness, my pain, was so there would be no pain I am shielded from when you experience it." Jesus, is in the pit with you and shows you the ladder to get out.

For those not baptized or whose doubts or guilt or feelings of shame rear up, know this. You are loved. You are valued. Christ the crucified victor, our champion and our only king, destroys the power of sin and death and raises up all of us to new life. If you have questions, give me a call or send me an email through our website christchurchoshawa.ca Consider taking the online Alpha course to learn more.

As we ready for Palm Sunday next week and Holy Week, the archaic simile of the grain of wheat depicts God's way of bringing life from what seems like death. With the Greeks, we too wish to see Jesus. Lent provides time for us to prepare for and remember baptism. In baptism, we are wed to God and renewed in God's covenant of love, written our hearts. We take God's hand held out to us.

Practical tips: Beware of Toxic Statements such as: Just stay positive! Good vibes only! It could be worse. Failure isn't an option.

Consider Non-Toxic Alternatives: I'm listening.

- I'm here no matter what.
- That must be really hard.
- Sometimes bad things happen. How can I help?
- Failure is sometimes part of life.
- Your feelings are valid.

A memorized scripture verse can get you through tough times, a poem, a song, to refine the fire in us. Patience for today. Hope for tomorrow. Thanks be to God.

End Notes:

Jeremiah meets opposition from two camps. In supporting the reform agenda of King Josiah (see Jer 11:1-17), but then prophesying calamity for Judah and Israel when those reforms are dropped under King Jehoiachin, Jeremiah runs afoul of the 'happy days are here again' prophets. Another group challenging Jeremiah are the rural priests, such as those from his home town of Anathoth (see 11:21-23). With the suppression of sacrifices outside the restored Temple in the city of Jerusalem, the rural clergy were deprived of both income and status. In the end, the reforms failed and the southern kingdom was defeated by the Babylonians. Jeremiah's prophecies, sadly, come true. It's hard to hear a word of hope when you're in exile. That's what faith is for: looking back to God's past faithfulness and trusting God for what's ahead. Another reason a developing and maintaining daily scripture reading, prayer, repentance, thanksgiving and surrender is so important. We continue in exile from the gathered church, yet remain hopeful.

What is especially significant about this passage in Jeremiah 31 is the way it assumes and transposes the older covenant traditions.

Jeremiah had seen for himself that religious renewal was not a matter subject to official mandate, but rather something that had to come from within. He dreams of a time when the divine Torah, the Law, will be inscribed on the hearts of people, rather than remaining an external influence.