

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Imposter Syndrome

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Introduction to Jeremiah

This morning, as we continue our covenant series, we will read from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known as the Weeping Prophet. His contemporaries would have likely given him a harsher name than that—perhaps the obnoxious prophet, the prophet who just won't go away.

Jeremiah foretold almost unimaginable tragedy and suffering for the people of Judah. He told the kings, the priests, and people that they would experience desolation of their land, their people, their very identity as God's own. But within all these dire predictions, there is a three-chapter section known as the Book of Consolation. This is where we read from this morning.

Let us pray:

God of wisdom,

We pray for understanding and resonance as we listen to your Word.

Help us to know you,

That we might follow you boldly in our daily lives. Amen.

Listen for God's word to us today from Jeremiah 31:31-34:

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34, NRSVUE

31 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. 32 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. 33 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 within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 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, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Hope in Unhopeful Times

These words from Jeremiah were sent to a people in exile. They had lost everything and were now in the foreign land of their enemies. Jeremiah had already told them that they would be there for generations. God’s word to them was to settle in, build homes, plant gardens, marry their children off

and let the next generation find their way in Babylon. The people were at a dead end. What hope could they have for the future?

The University of Chicago conducted a survey in March 2023 that asked the question: Do you feel confident or not confident that life for our children's generation will be better than it has been for us? 78% answered "not confident." Could you imagine if a survey were conducted with the exiles in Babylon?

We can easily view our time as a time of desolation, with a scarcity of hope. And we ought to be clear eyed about the violence, hunger, displacement, and chaos we are witnessing and responding to in the world. We should be honest about the challenges and suffering we face in our lives. This is not a sermon about sugar coating suffering.

And yet, Jeremiah calls us out of the spiral of despair and reminds us, along with these exiled Israelites thousands of years ago, that God is God, we are still called as God's people, and so there is hope.

Imposter Syndrome

You may recognize the refrain, “I will be their God and they shall be my people.” It was the core of the covenants that would form the Israelites into a people, first as a promise to Abraham then as they learned to live in freedom out of Egypt.

In the time of Jeremiah, Israel’s identity was not on the solid ground of those covenants. They had moved away from the steadying knowledge that they were God’s people and God truly was their God. They had strayed so far for so long that they no longer resembled the vision of God as people set apart to be blessed and to be a blessing to the world. In their idolatry, they lived as if God was not God. In their injustice, they lived as if their ways were higher than God’s ways. In their sacrifices to other gods—including even children—they lived as though there was not a good God who could be trusted to care for their needs without a terrible payment. They wanted to be like the other nations, so God let them play that game of war and empire, of conquerors and exiles. They had a losing hand.

But God had not stopped being their God. They had not stopped being God’s people.

They had been living out of sync with reality. The truest thing about themselves and how they related to the world around them was that covenant relationship. Jeremiah assailed them with accusations because they were living as imposters.

They lost sight of who they were and of who God is.

Iditarod Dogs

“The last great race on earth” finished this week. That is the tagline of the Iditarod in Alaska. Dallas Seavey crossed the finish line first with his dog sled team after racing 938 miles in nine days, two hours, and sixteen minutes.

I visited the Iditarod Headquarters last summer. I was in Wasilla, Alaska with a group of high school and college students for a service and learning trip, and we had the opportunity to meet an Iditarod musher and his dog team. He told us that the question he and other mushers get asked more often than anything is, “How do you get the dogs to run?”

Many folks assume that these dogs must be convinced to get up and into their harnesses. But that's just not the case. These are Alaskan huskies and similar breeds who have it in the genetic make up to "go," and to go very long distances. They have it in their DNA to run in their pack and to bond so closely with their musher that they act as one unit. The problem, the musher told us, was getting these dogs to slow and to rest. When they're at their best, the musher and the dogs form such a bond that the innate desire to run as a pack is harnessed, directed, paced, and the whole team flourishes.

The most famous sled dog in Alaska was named Togo. There are many stories about Togo, and I encourage all of you to go on a Wikipedia bunny trail this week, but my favorite stories are about Togo as a puppy. He was obnoxious.

At six months, Togo had become such an unruly nuisance to the team, that he seemed a hopeless cause. He maybe just wasn't meant to be a sled dog. And so, he went to live with a family as a pet. That lasted a couple weeks.

Then, he managed to jump out a window and ran miles to the kennel where the sled dog team was resting. He was given another chance. Eventually, it became clear that Togo wasn't

just a sled dog, he was a lead dog prodigy. He just needed to do fully what he was created to do— harnessed and in front of the pack, he was incredible.

New Covenant

If it can be hard for an Alaskan husky to discover its identity and live it out fully, we can have some compassion for the Israelites— and ourselves.

God does. God's word comes to the Israelites anew in exile. God reminds them of who they actually are. The covenants of Abraham and Moses have not been erased. Though the people strayed, God has doubled down, tripled down, at this point God has probably at least quadruple downed on God's promises to them. Even when they acted as though they did not know God and were not God's people— God was still their God. And even in Babylon, without the Temple, without a nation or a king, God is still their God. There will be a new covenant. The people will be reestablished, reminded of who they are and of who God has always been. There is a future for them.

The worst happened. Yet, it is not the end of God's story.

“I will put my law within them, says the Lord, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 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...for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

The previous covenants are not erased. But this one is not merely the old repackaged. The exiled and dispersed Israelites are defined as God’s people in a new way. It will be written on their hearts how to be God’s people. They will understand who God is, and trust that they belong to God. The covenant will be lived from a place of deep, intimate knowledge. The covenant will be internalized as who they are, not just what they ought to do.

This is a covenant of grace, rooted in forgiveness. God gives Godself in relationship. God gives hope, a future, an identity where there was despair.

Embracing Our Identity

We, as followers of Jesus, are grafted into this covenant.

Writers in the New Testament pick up Jeremiah 31 to point to Christ as its fulfillment. We don't get to override it and claim it as only ours. But we, too, hold fast to this promise, to this grace, to this covenantal relationship with God. We have come to know through Christ this God of Jeremiah 31.

During Holy Week, we will be invited again to know who God is when the worst happens. When hope is lost, when the battle is over and God's plan has not panned out how we expected: We know the God of a love stronger than sin and death; we know the God of redemption; we know the God who makes a way out of no way; we know the God of new covenants and second, third, forth, seventy-seventh chances... we know the God of resurrection.

It is that God who writes God's ways on our hearts. Who is as close to us as our very breath. Who knows us and calls us beloved children that we might live as we have been created to live— loving God with all we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In times and places of desolation, despair, and fear it is not merely helpful but imperative that we are living out of knowing who God is and who we are as God's people, with hearts saturated in grace.

In these final days of Lent, I pray that we might be a little more like the huskies, and feel a little less like imposters. God is our God, and we have been called as God's people, gathered here at Westminster to experience that truth, and then to go out and live it.

So may you know intimately the love and grace of God, and, from that place of knowing, may you find courage to face the world with hope. Amen.



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