

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 31:27-34
SECOND LESSON: Luke 18:1-8
October 16, 2022

“Don’t Give Up”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The stock market is sliding down. The cost of living is spiking up. The pandemic has settled into a chronic condition where we are neither well nor sick, but always on edge. And church attendance and commitment everywhere are wavering. Giving is down, not just here at Penn Wynne but across the nation. Many people have stopped going to church. We urgently need to turn things around or we will not survive. But all we really want to do is find a rock to crawl under. We’re tired of the emotional rollercoaster and pressure. Constantly adjusting to new circumstances is exhausting. But if we really stop and think about it, it’s all relative, isn’t it? We don’t live in Ukraine or Florida.

The message found in Jeremiah this morning was written during the time of the Babylonian Exile, a 70-year period in which a large portion of the Jewish population were forcibly removed and relocated to a place outside of the holy land. But this exile actually took place in waves. Things could have been less catastrophic. The first exile did not destroy everything. The second one following a rebellion did. Jeremiah was writing from Judah to the exiles, and he was also preaching to the locals, trying to tell people to accept the present and not rebel—that in due course things would come right again.

Those who remained in Judah were quite likely overwhelmed by the scale of their loss. Like the people in Ukraine today after the bombings or those in Florida after Hurricane Ian, nothing was the same. Homes were destroyed, produce and animals gone. And in this case, particularly after the rebellion, there was no functioning government to turn to. The people were just trying to find a way to survive. And they had little reason for optimism. They only had to look north and see what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel that had been conquered by the Assyrians. All ten tribes disappeared in the mists of time. On a scale of one to ten on the “I want to crawl under a rock” measure they were way beyond a ten. We have the benefit of hindsight. They did not. From their point of view, it was over.

But the prophet gives them good news. He does not provide a specific timeline, something I am sure they wanted, but he does bring good news. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the Lord. Jeremiah promised that this disaster will not last forever. God promises rebuilding and new growth. And God also promised a new covenant, one “written on their hearts.” The message given was to persevere, to not give up. God is bigger than

any circumstance. Things might look terrible now, but God has not abandoned them.

In the story from the New Testament, we see the persistence of a widow for justice. This woman refuses to give up. In the story we meet a judge who “neither feared God nor cared what people thought.” There was nothing that could intimidate this man. He was a total narcissist. He didn’t care about giving this woman justice. She didn’t have enough money to give him a healthy bribe, so why should he do anything? But she kept coming before him time and time again, saying, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” Finally, he gave in and saw that she got justice, not because he cared, but because she was driving him up a wall. Our English text says that he was concerned she might come and attack him. What it **really** says in Greek, however, is that he was worried she might give him a black eye. That would probably have been figurative, not literal. His reputation and job security might be impacted.

This very interesting little parable begins as a story about prayer and not losing heart. It transitions to a story about justice and ends up with a question of faith, because Jesus closes this parable with the odd statement, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Discouragement is not a lot of fun, and a lot of Christians are discouraged right now. At a clergy meeting I attended this week I learned that it is not just small churches like ours that seem to be shrinking, the larger churches are too. It’s just not as noticeable in a large congregation. It’s tempting to think that the situation for Christians in our nation is the worst that it has ever been. But that is absolutely not true. Don’t believe all those people who wax on eloquently about the strong faith of our founding fathers and how this nation was founded as a Christian nation. Half of the founding fathers were Deists, and only about 17% of the population went to church, far lower than today. There were more men than women in early America and they were much more interested in drinking and chasing women than attending church and tithing. One minister in the early 1800s even wrote that “. . . there are American families in this part of the country who never saw a bible, nor heard of Jesus Christ . . . the whole country, from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico, is as the valley of the shadow of death.” Now that’s cheerful!

It is tempting to feel helpless, like we’re being carried along on a tidal wave. Those enduring the time of exile felt like this, with justification, but even their situation was only temporary. God had a plan. God always has a plan. And WE have a choice—to seek God’s plan for our lives individually and corporately, or to give up and withdraw from our sisters and brothers in Christ. One stunned minister from my group was told by a man who had been a member for 17 years that he “just wasn’t into it anymore.” For whatever reason this man lost his way, he lost his sense of purpose and belonging, and he thought that what the world seemed to offer would make him happy. But all human beings are spiritual beings, and all of us have spiritual needs. All of us also have a higher purpose for our lives. Our lives and our future are found in being connected with one another. God creates **teams**, not lone rangers, and each congregation is essentially a team.

The pandemic changed us. It broke people's church-going habit. But the pull taking people away from church was happening long before the pandemic. That pull has always been there. You think the devil wants people in church? But Jesus argues that if the unjust judge will do the right thing for this widow, even if for the wrong reasons, can't we expect God to do the right thing for us? Can't we expect a loving God help "his chosen ones"?

God has given us fulfilling work to do, but society has encouraged us to seek instant gratification. We want what we want now—instant relief, instant communication, instant wealth. We don't want to have to work for it. And we certainly don't want to have to wait for it! Amazon has taught us that we can get what we want delivered to our door within 24 hours. But God is not Jeff Bezos and does not give us instant answers to prayer. Just imagine for a moment how chaotic the world would be if God DID instantly answer every prayer. God loves us far too much to do that.

So if there is an area of your life right now where you just want to throw in the towel and give up, pray about it. There are times God does want us to make a change, where we truly are stuck in a rut that is not productive. But anything worthwhile is also worth fighting for and persevering for. No marriage is good without effort. It requires work. No child raises themselves. Children are an enormous amount of work, and we don't usually see the fruit of all that hard work until they are grown. My three kids are wonderful human beings now, but if you had seen them as teenagers you would have never guessed the end result. It took FAITH to raise those children, faith, prayer and sheer perseverance. I might have wanted to trade them in on a puppy on more than one occasion, but I didn't. I persisted in trying to do what was best for them. God has a long-term plan that we can't see, for us as a congregation and for us as individuals, which is why Paul says in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Amen.

Jeremiah 31:27-34

²⁷ "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. ²⁸ Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the Lord. ²⁹ "In those days people will no longer say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

³⁰ Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge.

³¹ "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the Lord.

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.

“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

Luke 18:1-8

18 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should
always pray and not give up. **2** He said: “In a certain town there was a judge
who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. **3** And there was a
widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me
justice against my adversary.’

4 “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t
fear God or care what people think, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering
me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and
attack me!’”

6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. **7** And will not God
bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will
he keep putting them off? **8** I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and
quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”