

Old/News – Jer.36:1-4, 21-24; 31:31-34
(18Nov18)

Ecclesiastes, one of my favorite books in the Bible for sharing the dim appraisal I refer to as “realism,” gave us the line “there is nothing new under the sun.”

This reading from Jeremiah introduces a despicable and ignorant leader in government. His ignorance is in so intentionally ignoring this message, and despicable because he doesn’t care about the people he’s governing. We might draw connections to leaders who refuse good advice and seem concerned about nobody except themselves. There’s nothing new under the sun. This story is old news.

But as we seek association, let’s hear background of this Narrative Lectionary passage: Jehoiakim’s father Josiah was one of the great kings. He rediscovered what we know as the book of Deuteronomy, and when he heard *those* words from God read for the first time, he was so moved he tore his clothes, and went on to reinstitute a grand celebration of Passover for the first time in a couple hundred years (2Kings22-23). Picture if we had all forgotten about Easter, the central salvation festival of our faith, and then got it back.

Jehoiakim is exactly the reverse. He hears God’s Word from a prophet and ignores it completely, going so far as this memorable image of cutting off each passage as it is read to burn it up. I wonder whether he carelessly dropped them into the flame or crumpled and threw them?

Josiah had been killed by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt, who also then deposed another son of Josiah’s and made Jehoiakim king. In the meantime, the Babylonians became the mightier power and Jehoiakim served them as vassal for three years, paying steep tribute through heavy taxes, until the Babylonians attacked, laying siege to Jerusalem, eventually killing Jehoiakim and installing his brother as king, until deporting him and many of the officials and elites into exile.

Around Jehoiakim, his people suffered, with food supplies cut off and no resources to support life. It’s a telling detail that the king is waiting out

winter with a warm fire going, into which he’s feeding the scraps of the scroll, since many of his people were freezing and starving. It’s in a palace he built without paying his workers (22:13). Worse, this focus on luxury is the opposite of his father’s pursuit of justice, of helping the poor and needy.

That amplifies the tragic detail in verses we skipped over that Baruch the secretary had read the words of Jeremiah to an assembly of the crowd, who repented and listened exactly to what God was saying to them. With words that doom and destruction could be averted, the people believed.

But when those words were read to the one in authority, he thought he could get rid of what seemed like bad news, like fake news, as we’re overly prone to say now, in perhaps an ancient book burning, an effort to stifle truth.

Of course it didn’t work. As Dr. King reminded us in a mix Lindy Wilson put together for the mosaic event yesterday, “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” So just after these verses, it simply says, “The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll” with an addendum that Jehoiakim would remain unburied, with no one from David’s lineage to sit on the throne, a reworking of God’s method.

Another method, a development of something new under the sun, this being on a scroll indicates spreading literacy at the time. Earlier, we heard of Isaiah’s lips touched with a burning coal, a purification meaning the message was mainly oral then. We may take the spoken word as an event, but the written word as a record. It would not be so easy for Jehoiakim to be rid of these words, written down to persist beyond destruction and exile even to our own day in each of our Bibles.

But it’s not just about a new medium, about God now being able to communicate to us not just with the benefit of the printing press or on radio waves and TV broadcasts and podcasts and YouTube and weekly emails on our smartphones or to use this sermon as it is posted on Facebook. Sure, God can make use of any of our new media.

The main point, though, is that God's Word and promise is not stopped, cannot be ignored by burning a scroll or shut up by changing the channel or defeated by the destruction of entire cultures. "God's Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes who fear it" we sang in the words of Luther's hymn on Reformation Sunday.

In the first place, we may take this as good news that God's Word remains forever, that the catastrophes of despicable and ignorant leaders, even while failing to do it any great honor or service, cannot threaten entirely to undermine God's Word and work.

Even though Passover's central saving story had disappeared for a while, still God was present and operating and engaged. To the people in exile, another prophet would proclaim that it is not in their ability or memory, but in the love of a Mother God saying, "Can a woman forget her nursing child? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Even if churches close their doors or we were to forget Easter and never say an Alleluia and neglect to celebrate God's consistent gift of life, still God's Spirit would breathe that new life into us, raising us from death.

This promise is persistent. It outlasts current events, transcends our ancestors and descendants, overrules rotten rulers, compresses oppressions, and unravels the tangles of newest-fangled innovations. It is news that is more than old; it is eternal.

Still, we may wonder not only about an arc of the universe or God's big picture plans, but may rightly ask about our own lives. I don't suspect that's only western enlightened individualism, not just selfish-preservation, but a fair and faithful protest. Psalms trust God's attention to remembering overall, but still find voice to lament and ask, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" Today's Psalm is the most desperate communal lament, asking how the people could sing praise when in exile and things had gone so wrong. What were those people to do, who had listened to God but suffered because their leaders hadn't?

What in the face of homes burning up? What of the death of the Great Lakes? What of injustice with racism raging across generations where—in the strong words of our youth Big Read book—"The Hate U Give Little Infants F***s Everyone," where educational achievement gaps and arrest rates and abuse patterns don't just harm individual children but come around to bite us all and make life worse.

And what simply when life doesn't go how you'd wish, when you're not ready to sing songs of joyful praise, when your voice trembles instead or is distracted and preoccupied? In ways large and small that life itself is interrupted, or you are ignorant and not going along with how God would have things go?

For that, I can't say why God doesn't simply right the wrongs and change it all. Instead of intervening to shout down opposing voices, for whatever reason our God chooses forgiveness. God who always remembers, who will never forget her love for you, still promises to forget, in remembering sin no more.

In the face of what doesn't go right, confronting what I call "realism," God chooses to reiterate, to keep speaking the promise. When a king burns the Word, God speaks and writes it again. When you forget or when new problems threaten to overwhelm, or death or life make you question, God repeats.

Jesus speaks it again, offering the promise as himself, as God's presence to go with you at this table, reiterating words of God spoken through Jeremiah, of a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. This covenant can't be broken, because God's promise for you can't be broken.

It's the promise spoken to Demi James in baptism, still at the start of her life, and not dependent on anything else to come, but consistent through all of her moments, of healthy days or sickness, of fun with older siblings Leo and Alexa or when she's feeling picked on, for the great days of learning at school or when she wishes she had more friends, for wins at sports or losses, for relationships filled with contentment or frustrations, for new jobs and for the daily grind,

her greatest successes and worst failures, through whatever happens in politics to come through her life and immigration debates and environmental efforts and economy and wars that drag and on and on, on all the way to the end, but even beyond that to a promise of life to come.

For now we speak that promise and keep repeating it, a reminder of God's love and life that won't be undone. But for this good news, today God declares a new thing yet to come, of the time when we won't need prophets and scrolls that can die or be burned, won't need Bibles and sermons that are easily forgotten, won't need Sunday School and all the reminders, much less dealing with questions of religious insiders or despicable and ignorant leaders. "No longer shall they teach one another, 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. I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it...on their hearts; and I will be their God," and you shall be God's people."

Hymn: "Each Winter as the Year Grows Older"
ELW 252