

SERMON TITLE: “The End is Where We Start From”

TEXT: Jeremiah 31:31-34

PREACHED AT: Coaldale Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: March 25, 2012/5th Sunday of Lent

ENDINGS

In a poem called “Little Gidding,” the American poet T.S. Eliot penned a famous line that I have borrowed for the title of my sermon, and which I am going to use to frame our reflection upon the word of the Lord through Jeremiah this morning:

The end is where we start from.

This past Tuesday I was invited out for lunch with a young pastor from the Ukraine who was visiting a few churches in Alberta.

His name was Yura, and he was a very expressive and enthusiastic young man, full of questions and ideas about life and ministry. We talked about many things, including life in post-communist Russia and the joys and challenges of spreading the gospel in this context.

At one point in the conversation, he said this: “I have a picture of everyone in my town as my future brother or sister in Christ. Unless we know the end—the result—we won’t know what we should do to get there.”

This is true in all areas of life: unless we have a picture of the completed bridge or the road or the house or the homework project or whatever, we won’t know what steps to take in order to get there.

This is just as true for the life of faith. All of our efforts at following Jesus are guided, enlivened, and motivated by the end, the result, the goal, the *telos*.

*The **end** is where we start from.*

My new Ukrainian friend didn’t use this word, but he was indirectly talking about what the New Testament refers to as the *telos*. It is a word that communicates the proper end of a thing.

The *telos* of an acorn is to be a tree. The *telos* of a caterpillar is a butterfly. Or, to use an agricultural metaphor, the *telos* of a truck box full of seed is a field of weed-free wheat ☺.

Telos is a word that speaks of completion, maturity, and fulfillment.

So. What is the *telos*, the goal, of a human life? It's an interesting question to consider, and I think it is a good question—and a question that is among the themes of our text from Jeremiah today.

JEREMIAH: JUDGMENT AND HOPE

To say that the prophet Jeremiah's career took place during tumultuous times in the history of Israel and Judah would be to put it mildly!

The nation of Israel had been a conquered and occupied people for over a hundred years by the time Jeremiah arrived on the scene. The Assyrian Empire had been in control since 735 BC. Shortly after Jeremiah's career began, the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians and *they* took over much of the Ancient Near East.

These years were not good ones for God's people—they were characterized by harsh oppression, mostly bad leadership (inside and outside of Israel), attempted revolts, and general corruption and depravity all around.

While there were many political and historical reasons for the events of the day, Jeremiah interpreted the situation of his people *theologically*. They weren't just random events—God was speaking to his people through them, and Jeremiah wanted his people to hear this.

He spent a good chunk of his career offering the twin messages of judgment and hope:

- **Judgment**—the people's exile and suffering was due to their failure to keep covenant with God that went all the way back to the law given in the wilderness after the Israelites had been liberated from Egypt; if you read the book, you'll see that Jeremiah paints fairly graphic pictures of the consequences of Israel's sin
- **Hope**—God is merciful and forgiving. God was not finished with them yet. There was more to the story. There were better days ahead.

Our text this morning obviously belongs in the latter category.

But I think it is important to remember that Jeremiah's message of hope is first spoken into hopeless times.

Jeremiah is writing to exiles, whose experience is one of dislocation, confusion, suffering, and regret.

He is writing to people whose experience of God is one of absence or of punishment. He is writing to people whose world is falling apart.

EXILE

One of the best descriptions of the experience of exile I have come across is from a novel by Serbian author Dragan Todorovic called *Diary of Interrupted Days*:

There is no narrative of exile.... Exile... is a chopped-up existence. Exiles live their days as a series of small coloured stones whose final order is never fully revealed to them.

I have some stones in a jar here, and I'm going to put them to the side as a kind of visual aid for the remainder of the sermon to remind us of who these words of hope were given to.

As human beings, we tend to think of our lives—whether as individuals or families or churches or even nations—as *stories* that are going somewhere. We think of our lives in terms of narratives that have hope and purpose.

Yet this is not the case for those in exile: “There is no narrative of exile.” It is a chopped up sense of life. A bunch of stones that might be interesting to look at, but have no real order to speak of.

It is to people in this context that Jeremiah speaks God's word:

The days are surely coming... I will make a **new** covenant with my covenant-breaking people... I will write my law on their hearts... They will **know** me, from the least to the greatest... I will *forgive* them and remember their sins no more...

It is a powerful picture isn't it?

It is an image of our hearts reflecting God's heart.

We have a picture of the good that we were made for flowing out of us naturally as an expression of who God made us to be, not inconsistently and too often infrequently, as is so often the case now.

No more of the battle between the sinful self and the self we want to be (Paul describes this in Romans 7:14-25).

A new covenant, a new heart, with God's law, God's vision of a human life, inscribed upon our hearts.

Our sins forgiven, remembered no more.

This is the word of the Lord given to a group of weary exiles living “chopped up,” disconnected, disobedient lives.

This is the word of the Lord spoken to a bunch of stones that don't seem to have any pattern or meaning, whose "final order" is a mystery.

STILL IN EXILE?

We are not exiles in the same sense as those whom Jeremiah was writing to. But even if we are not politically oppressed or marginalized, I think that we, too, are exiles in a sense.

Maybe we see ourselves in these stones too.

Our hearts are "chopped up" and divided, just like the people Jeremiah was writing to. Even though we have chosen to follow Jesus, even though the Holy Spirit indwells and leads and guides us and is conforming us into the image of Christ, we have not yet reached our *telos*.

We are still hampered and hindered by sin. We still experience pain and frustration with ourselves and with a world that still groans as it awaits its redemption.

We experience this in a wide variety of ways. Fractured relationships, unfulfilled expectations (whether in relationships, vocations, church, whatever), the pain that comes from the death of those close to us... the list goes on.

And even if our current experience is mostly good, we know that the NT also uses the language of exile to describe the status and experience of followers of Jesus.

We are described as, among other things, strangers and pilgrims—exiles in the land. We are called out, set apart, and out of step with the values and assumptions that drive the broader culture around us. This, too, can be disorienting and painful.

We know that God's world is good and we were made for it, but we also know that neither our world nor we are as we were intended to be.

The fit is off. Even as Christians, we are still familiar with feelings of exile.

Perhaps you have experienced well-meaning Christians talk about the life of faith as one in which everything all of a sudden arranges itself nicely into a well-ordered whole—as if placing our faith in Christ somehow makes everything in our lives and in our minds come together in a nice rationally-ordered and coherent package where the reason for everything that takes place in our lives and in our world makes perfect sense.

As if, in following Jesus, the stones are instantly arranged into an obvious and transparently clear pattern.

This is an impossible ideal, and when it inevitably goes unrealized, it can often lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and confusion.

Following Jesus certainly involves us in the big story of a world and a people returning from exile. And this is truly good news!

But I think that even as Christians we ought to still expect somewhat of a “chopped up” existence.

We ought still to expect the final order to never fully be revealed to us while we journey. We ought still to expect to walk by faith and not by sight. We ought still to expect *both* the deep joy that comes with the new life Jesus is working in us *and* the longing for the experience of home that eludes us in our present state.

Perhaps Lent, more than any other time during the Christian year, is where we ought to *expect* to feel like exiles, even if we are profoundly hopeful and grateful ones.

Lent is when we experience sorrow for the ways in which we, like the people of Israel, have brought about our own exile.

Lent is when we repent for the ways in which we contribute to the brokenness of our world, even while we look ahead to Easter and the joy and strength that come from knowing the one who gave himself for us and who can be trusted to lead us home.

We may not always know exactly how the “small coloured stones” of our lives contribute to the big picture of God’s story, but following Jesus has never been about having the pieces lined up precisely as we would like them. We walk by faith, not by sight, after all, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:7.

Indeed, part of what it means to *follow* Jesus is to trust that the one we are following knows more and sees more than we do, and can be trusted to and re-imagine and redeem all of the chopped up pieces of the world he has made and for which he died.

This is the Christian hope. This is the hope of Easter that is coming. Exile is never the last word.

This is the hope of Jeremiah speaks during Lent this year—that one day, our hearts will reflect God’s heart as they were intended to.

2 CORINTHIANS: IMPERFECT LETTERS

Six centuries or so after Jeremiah wrote to Babylonian exiles about the new covenant God would write on their hearts, Paul wrote these words to one of the very first communities of Jesus followers in Corinth:

2 You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. 3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

I can't prove this, but I think Paul must have had Jeremiah 31 in mind when he wrote these words.

I think he must have had the image of the Spirit of God writing his law and purposes, his beauty and goodness on human hearts when he spoke of these early believers as a "our letter, written on our hearts"—a "letter from Christ, written not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

I think he must have had Jeremiah's confidence in the God who can put the lives and experiences of "chopped up" exiles back together.

Perhaps you are thinking, "well this all sounds very nice, but what if these are just words—a nice pipe dream, but not much more?"

After all, even though Jesus has come and lived and died and conquered death, even though the new covenant has been implemented, people still behave the same as they always have—even *Christians!*

We don't really *look* or *sound* like a "letter from Christ." Why should I think that this new heart with God's law in it is even possible?"

It's true. Followers of Jesus do not always look like a very good or compelling "letter." But neither did the church Paul was writing to in first century Corinth. They were a pretty miserable bunch, actually, full of infighting and jealousy and disunity and confusion. It was hardly a model church!

Paul said what he said not because of what he saw "on the ground" but because of who he understood God to be and because of his conviction of the promises God had made.

What was true for the Corinthian church is true for us in Coaldale and Lethbridge and around the world. We are the letter from Christ to the world, even if we don't always look like it.

OPTIMISM VS. HOPE

I recently read an article by Yale theologian Miroslav Volf about the difference between optimism and hope.

Optimism is based on what the author called “cause and effect” thinking.

We are optimistic about the economy if the government does this or that. We are optimistic about our kids’ prospects if they show evidence of studying hard and making good choices. We are optimistic about our romantic prospects if so and so calls us back or asks us out. We are optimistic about a job opportunity if the position looks like a good fit for us and we know the person doing the hiring. The list could go on.

In each case, optimism is the result of specific things that have already occurred in the past.

Paul would have had few reasons to be optimistic based on his observance of the Corinthian church. Jeremiah would have had few reasons for optimism based on the track record of the group of exiles he was writing to six hundred years earlier.

But both Paul and Jeremiah were filled with hope.

Here’s what the article says about hope:

Hope, unlike optimism, is independent of people’s circumstances. Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation and on correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God’s promise....

Optimism is based on the possibilities of things *as they have come to be*; hope is based on the **possibilities of God** *irrespective of how things are*.

As Christians, we are a people not of optimism, but of hope.

STONES

Back to this jar of stones. It doesn’t look like much, does it? But these stones are part of a story.

They were collected over a period of years by one of the seniors in our church and given to a young woman from Germany who has been volunteering with us throughout the past year.

This young woman decided to start a coffee hour for seniors once a month where we could get together and share our stories and our lives with one another.

These gatherings have been very popular, and this young woman has become well loved by many in our church.

These stones were a simple gift from one of our seniors to this young woman—a way of saying thank you for investing in and loving us who have been around long enough to have some of our rough edges smoothed out, like these stones.

On one level, they are just stones. They don't mean anything.

But on another level, they are a symbol of inter-generational and cross-cultural friendship and respect. They symbolize the importance of giving and receiving gifts from others who aren't very much like us.

The meaning of these stones is revealed in lives lived.

The same is true for us, as followers of Jesus and as churches, I think.

We live in between the times—after Jesus instituted the “new covenant” Jeremiah spoke of, but before the effects of this new covenant are fully realized.

We do not yet have the new heart that Jeremiah speaks of, where the will of God automatically and naturally flows out of us.

But we are on the way. We have tasted the forgiveness Jeremiah speaks of. And if we have cast our lot with Christ, this new heart *is* being formed in us, even when it may not look or feel like it.

Even when the stones of our lives seem to have no discernible pattern.

This is true because we know the ending that is our beginning. We know the end that is where all of our faith and striving starts from.

We know, of course, that the end that we start from is not a “what” but a “who.”

Our end is Jesus Christ—our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—the one who redeems and reassembles the chopped up experiences of exile, the one who rearranges the stones of our lives into patterns of meaning and beauty.

This is our God. This is good news.

Thanks be to God.



