

“Testimony”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 23:1-6 & John 18:33-37

November 24, 2019 - Reign of Christ Sunday

The members of our JOY Sunday School class are all twitching right now because they have spent the past three months grinding their way through the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and they are weary. Jeremiah is known as “the weeping prophet.” He’s a prophet of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He sees the Northern Kingdom already conquered and smells doom for the Southerners as well. And he’s right about that, as Jerusalem will be sacked by the Babylonians in his lifetime.

This morning’s reading is near the point where Jeremiah’s oracles start to turn a bit more hopeful. He sees that God will not abandon, even as the people have gone so far astray. And he grafts onto the lesson we had from Isaiah last week, about the shoot that will come from the devastated stump. Listen for the turn toward hope from the twenty-third chapter of the book of the prophet Jeremiah:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It’s been several years since we spent New Year’s Eve with my mom in New York. She has, over the years, taken to the cultural buffet, co-opting as many New Year traditions as possible in order to get as much good luck as possible. She makes a variety of foods, each with a special meaning to someone else’s grandmother. She makes everyone in attendance pass a dollar to their neighbor. She pinches her nose to eat a piece of pickled herring on a cracker and, much to the horror of my northern-Minnesota-raised spouse, intends to toss the rest of the jar in the trash.

This is the final Sunday of the church calendar. After worship, a crew of helping hands will be in here putting up the tree and the greenery and the candles and the paraments will change to blue, all to get us ready for the start of Advent next week. Advent is not only our time of waiting and preparation for the birth of Jesus, it’s the start of the church year. And so today is our New Year’s Eve, and since I started working as your pastor in 2014, I’ve taken a page out of my mom’s playbook in creating a new tradition, insisting on us taking time on the Sunday designated as the Reign of Christ the King Sunday to reflect upon the ways we have worked to serve Jesus in the past year.

It was Pope Pius XI in 1925 who instituted Christ the King Sunday, partially in response to growing nationalism. Many of us Protestants thought that the reminder that our allegiance is to Christ before any nation or earthly ruler was a good idea, and so we worked it into our calendar as well.

“My kingdom is not from this world” Jesus tells Pilate. They are speaking different languages of power. Pilate would never understand the kind of power Jesus had. He would never understand that the reign of God is not about compulsion and violence and Legions of soldiers. Jesus “came into the world, to testify to the truth.” The reign of Christ is about service and humility and the small acts of compassion that point to an overwhelming grace. It is not the reign of a general, but of the shepherd that Jeremiah describes in his vision of justice and righteousness.

As we look to the preparations for the *inbreaking* of this curious reign in the jubilation of Christmas, I want to present to you testimony about how you have spent this year making this world a bit more ready to receive such joy. I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I was a witness to joy shared at last year’s Advent Workshop, and then so much more through the season of Advent: We welcomed Shaye and Staci and Bekcett Warman into membership, with Shaye and Beckett being baptized by Staci’s grandfather. Emma Richardson turned Barron Hall into a mad scene of fun and laughter as she taught us about Christmas in Scotland. At our Christmas pageant, the donkey was briefly waylaid, but now-Auburn-freshman Camille Ford was quick on her toes and made all those amazing kids stars. After the pageant, our Bake Sale Auction raised over \$2,000 for the Magic City Acceptance Center. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, our own Sammy Turpen — who will become the Rev. Sammy Turpen this spring! — preached to a proud and loving congregation.

I can testify to the spirit of love present when we celebrated Epiphany in our pajamas and then baptized Levi Hillis a week later. I can testify to resilience, as we learned how a tornado destroyed First Presbyterian Church of Wetumpka and then saw on the local news as our brother, the Rev. Jonathan Yarboro, found his double bass, undamaged amid the wreckage, and played it for the reporters.

I have seen a congregation faithfully say goodbye to one they hardly knew in Jim Halsey, and to another who was truly the matriarch of this church, in Momma Nell Barron. From the day of Momma Nell’s funeral, I have one of those “never will I forget” memories. I returned to the church from a cold and rainy cemetery to find Amy Crowe, Melissa Tate, and Lynn Frennea with their fancy church clothes covered in dust as they worked to clean out the Younger Elementary classroom to get it ready for repairs and painting. I know it to be true that Nell would have loved that image.

Elsewhere in February we had repairs and painting done in here and we went to basketball and hockey games together and the Rev. Layton Williams preached about the movie *The Sandlot* and told us about her new book. This is a community that works together and plays together and learns together.

Lent arrived our Ash Wednesday service, and we created a new prayer station in our main foyer. We talked about color through the season as we looked inside the light. With glee we welcomed Julie Kimbrough and Scott Metheny into membership, and it seemed like we might calmly coast toward Easter.

We did not calmly coast toward Easter, and through it I can testify to the power of community.

First, Mike and Alice Morgan and their entire family were walloped with a brain cancer diagnosis for Mike, and you did what you somehow always do and showed up and fed and loved and raged with them.

On Saturday April 6th I was at a retreat for UKirk Birmingham students, leading them through a frank discussion of the Bible and the birds and the bees. As we got ready for supper, I got a call from Melissa Tate that Sid had not yet gotten home from his hike in the Sipsey Wilderness.

For everyone's sake I won't recount every detail of those days. But I will say that I witnessed a group of terrified people rally to do whatever needed to be done for each other and for a family in crisis. I learned that you do not mess with Melissa and Grace and Brittany. I watched amazing people put their tremendous skills to use to help a stranger and his family.

And then, in the middle of a muddy parking lot in the middle of nowhere, I had the privilege of witnessing one of the most unabashedly happy celebrations that has ever rocked the state of Alabama. The words "we've got him" were like a World Series-winning home run and a National Championship winning triple-overtime touchdown combined. After getting back to Birmingham and visiting with Sid and Melissa at the hospital, I remember so clearly walking into Barron Hall and finding the room just pulsing with gratitude that Sid was lost, and had been found. I remember noticing how exhausted you all looked. You've never looked more like family.

We had the most unusual Palm Sunday in memory, with extra loud Hosannas and a visit from some of the rescue crew. How appropriate it was that the inaugural book for our One Day Book Club that afternoon was called *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*, by Anne Lamott.

We caught our breath and found the solemnity of Holy Week. We'd just finished our Maundy Thursday service when the skies opened up with a fury. The Way of the Cross on Good Friday was soggy, but at our service that evening Chloe Herbert found a newt under her pew and it somehow felt holy. We celebrated the Great Vigil of Easter with our neighbors at Shades Valley Pres, and on Easter Sunday all the colors and emotions of the Lenten season gave way to resurrection.

The weather started to heat up. We managed to surprise Miss Rose with a celebration of her fifteen years here caring for the little ones, complete with flowers from her very first baby, Will Murray. Our annual Talent Show was fantastic. I witnessed a congregation delighted as Karina Steffek seemed so excited to be baptized. Rising third-graders Maggie Mitchell and Isaac Casey received Bibles from y'all. We were treated to another amazing dinner during Ramadan at the Birmingham Islamic Society. We attended LGBTQ Night with the Birmingham Barons yet again.

And then, as May came to a close, our hearts were pierced again as Mike Morgan died. I was in Germany, and I remember feeling absolutely lost and devastated that I wasn't here. But I can testify that y'all showed Christ's love to Mike's family and we even had our own dinner here to celebrate the big guy.

You testified to the truth of Christ's love for all of God's children when, for the fifth consecutive year, EPC marched in the Central Alabama Pride Parade. At our own More Light Sunday service, Lynn Bailey shared his heartfelt testimony about the welcome he and Rick had received in this place.

The summer brought a study of the book of Daniel, our annual Hymn Sing, brand new pew cushions, and a Presbyterian Kickball League. The Senior High Youth went to Montreat. And we went on a space odyssey for three

weeks in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing.

In August, Annette and Sabra Calamusa joined the church in anticipation of their November nuptials. Evann Byrd joined the EPC family as our Youth Director. Rally Day kicked off the school year with another wonderful potluck.

More recently, we commissioned Sam Patton for the Peace Corps in Indonesia. Olivia Martin helped lead worship in an Interfaith Climate Strike Vespers service. We walked for the National Alliance on Mental Illness for the third year. The Rev. Patrick Harley brought a taste of UKirk Birmingham to a Wednesday supper. We blessed all those wonderful pets on the front lawn. Our Habitat for Humanity crew helped build a home. Lili Kane got us started in launching a new Women's Group. Don Hagan announced his big bike trip. We remembered those we have commended to God's care on All Saints Sunday. A group of us read Dargan Ware's novel. We're in the midst of a collection for the VA Medical Center.

Beloved, this is not simply a laundry list of the Stuff We Did this past year. It's all evidence!

I know it's not comprehensive. I wish we could recall every hand held, every hour spent, every way gone out of in service. That's all evidence too.

It is your testimony. It's your testimony to whatever you find in this community.

It's your testimony to a reign of Christ that looks more like justice and righteousness than scattered sheep.

It's your testimony to the truth of what following Jesus means to you.

As we start a new year by the light of one candle next week, remember that a new year is filled with opportunities to testify to God's love, to Christ's reign, to how God is calling forth a vision of peace.

We'll gather here in a year and check in about it all.

So help us God. Amen.