

“Let Me Dwell With You”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 7:1-11, 23:1-6
November 25, 2018
Reign of Christ Sunday

In these three passages from Jeremiah, we get a pretty good feel for the prophet. We hear about his reluctance to accept his call, his message of repentance for the people of God, and then his vision of a more hope-filled future.

God tells Jeremiah to lay aside his excuses — God knows what God’s up to with this young prophet. “Do not be afraid” — familiar words from last week and almost every week and certainly words we will hear in the Advent season that arrives next week. God has work for Jeremiah to do — and it won’t all be fun and easy. Working with the God of Israel is no Underwater Basket Weaving class. There will be planting and building, but also plucking up and pulling down.

We see the hard part of the job, as Jeremiah stands at the temple gate and tells the people that they need to take a good look at the way they are seeking to follow God and ask themselves how they’re doing.

Today is New Year’s Eve in the world of our church tradition. Advent arrives on the next Lord’s Day, and with it the calendar flips. We start a new year with the waiting, the patience, the contemplative blue of Advent as we prepare for the arrival of the Christ child. I like to take this opportunity to take stock — as Jeremiah would have us do — to see where we’ve been and what we’ve done this past year.

When Advent arrived last year, so did four big blue banners on the back wall. They were lighted from below each week as the images cut into them by EPC members told the stories we were telling to get ready for Christmas. We had our annual Advent workshop, and the Youth were told that there was one rule for their glitter tattoo station — no face tattoos. And they kept to that rule until the pastor plopped down and demanded a Christmas tree on his left cheek.

Less than a week later, Birmingham became a wintry wonderland with an early snowstorm...on the night Bobby Jo Valentine was to perform in our sanctuary. Bobby has been to Alabama twice now in four years, and twice it has snowed. We carried on and had our lovely Christmas pageant upstairs, followed by a Bake Auction that raised nearly \$3,000 for relief efforts in Puerto Rico. Our Service of the Longest Night brought a profoundly sacred quiet and many tears. Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday, so we did our Third Annual Pajama Sunday in the morning, and the much fancier Christmas Eve service at night.

On the 11th Day of Christmas, a bunch of EPCers gathered at Red Hills Brewing for a whole lot of laughs, not knowing that when we’d show up for worship that Sunday the sanctuary thermostat would read 51 degrees! In classic Edgewood fashion, everyone pitched in to create a worship space up in the toasty fellowship hall, where we sang and prayed and wondered if we should meet up there more often. A week later, the heat was back online and we heard the words of a modern prophet, Rev. Dr. King, on Beloved Community Sunday.

February brought a Board Game Bash/Chili Cook-off/Olympics Opening Ceremony Party, an evening with Wayne Flynt in a packed sanctuary, Emma Richardson becoming an EPC member, and Ash

Wednesday falling on Valentine's Day. Throughout Lent we worshiped on Wednesday nights in a circle of worship with Taizé singing and a focus on the Suffering Servant. Each Sunday in Lent we added something to the big cross — a basin, anointing oil, a spray-painted sign, and a tiny cast iron rooster. We also got outside the building: to go to a Birmingham Bulls hockey game, to move a whole lot of brush out and a whole bunch of mulch in on a church cleanup day, and to stand as a faith witness at the March for Our Lives in Railroad Park.

Palm Sunday ushered in Holy Week and on Maundy Thursday our Parish Associate, the Rev. Lydia Casey, and I created prayer stations the led us all on a journey through the building and finally to the foot of the cross. On Good Friday Amy Crowe represented us in the ecumenical Way of the Cross, bearing the cross's weight on her courageous shoulders.

It turns out that when Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day, Easter falls on April Fools' Day. We declared that *He is Risen Indeed!* — and that Mary Magdalene mistaking him for the gardener was *just perfect* that day. The Choir sang a delightful anthem, complete with whistling! And then, of course, sent us home with the Hallelujah Chorus, which Kathy Silvie and I always dance to at the doors. The next week we had a blast with our Annoyingly Theologically Appropriate Egg Hunt on the front lawn.

May brought us more new members in the three generations of Camille Ford, her mom Deborah, and her mom, Mary Nell Wyatt. On Mother's Day, it was time for Youth Sunday, as Olivia Murray and Adrian Steward assured us, "The kids are all right — well done, EPC." The next week was Pentecost; we gave our 3rd graders their Bibles and we collected a huge pile of Pentecost flamin' hot snacks for the Magic City Acceptance Center. And the next week, we welcomed Pavlina and Karina and Judy, and joy-of-joys, Judy was baptized!

June brought Pride Week — our own More Light Sunday service sandwiched between deluges. First, we watched more terrifying dark clouds than baseball, but still had a great time at Regions Field. Then a wonderful Pride Parade ended with the skies opening and drenching all the marchers. We know some Alabamians snickered, but we decided all that rain was a blessing poured out upon our open and affirming congregation.

Later in June Sid Burgess conned the Men's Bible Study into going on a fantastically humid hike one Friday morning. Edgewood sent the second most kids to Living River camps of any church in our Presbytery — and we were narrowly edged out by an 800+ member congregation. Eva Leigh Metheny and Sarah Alice Morgan and I braved Adventure Camp, and they didn't even make too much fun of me.

Summer was upon us, and with it a study of the Parables of Jesus, another trip to Montreat for the Youth Group, some guest preaching from one of the UKirk Birmingham students, and a joint service with Robert Emerick and our friends at Riverchase Presbyterian.

School started back up, and so we blessed all y'all's backpacks with...Brussels Sprouts? The BYG Birmingham Youth Group kicked off for the fall, with new Youth Leadership in place with Bailey Glassco, flanked by awesome volunteers in Rosemary Leach and Fran Woodruff and Amy Crowe. We had Rally Day in worship, and then sweated profusely as we picnicked at Homewood Central Park.

September brought good news in the Flowers family becoming members — that's Amy, Scott, Camryn, and Angel! And then more good news when we learned that our congregation had been selected to be

part of Life Is Calling — a special initiative at Samford University that will bring innovative ideas and a big grant with which to explore them. (You'll be hearing a lot more about that come January.) Our Blessing of the Animals got soaked, but all the animals got along great up in Barron Hall.

Who will ever forget World Communion Sunday, with Bill Woodruff kneading dough on the communion table, running upstairs, and returning with a loaf of steaming bread just in time for it to be broken and shared? We worked for Habitat for Humanity and Jackson Garza fed the hungry crew. Reilly Kane smiled through her baptism. We gave Halloween treats on the front lawn. We watched the UAB Blazers absolutely demolish the University of Texas at San Antonio at Legion Field. And just last Sunday, Shaye, Staci, and little Beckett met with the Session and joined the congregation. Beckett and Shaye will be baptized on December 9th.

So much has happened this year. I haven't even mentioned the rebirth of one of our Sunday School classes as the J.O.Y. Class, the incredible generosity y'all have shown to one another and to all our mission partners, special birthdays for Bob Burney and Mary Brooks, and the ministry that happens between Sundays in the form of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Girl Scouts, the Birmingham Girls Choir, and UKirk Birmingham.

I'm certain I've left out other amazing stuff, but never mind, Jeremiah is tapping his foot and shaking his head. Well done, Edgewood, in acting justly and not oppressing and inviting God to dwell with us. And yet, we must celebrate with all humility and lean, at last, on the sovereignty of God. The world into which we have sought to speak words of peace and comfort and hope is one that struggles oh-so-deeply to do righteousness.

God speaks through the prophet: "let me dwell with you in this place." And the political vitriol drowns out the prophet's voice. The cries of the vulnerable, ignored and rejected, ring in our ears. Each syllable of God's plea to dwell is punctuated by another gunshot that ends that life of someone whose incomplete future is ended.

Jeremiah gets cranky, so I'll allow myself the vision of him standing, not at the gates of the temple, but at the automatic doors of the malls. He wonders aloud to any who will listen what it means to give thanks in one breath and then use the next to empower our God-given muscles to wrestle other humans for gadgets and jewels and underwear. He can't believe his line about "shed[ding] innocent blood in this place" might apply to the mall, not fully able to comprehend why Americans might feel the need to all bring deadly weapons to go buy Christmas gifts.

We have had a truly sacred year of ministry here. But we have also had losses and struggles within our family of faith and pain in encountering the troubled world around us. Thanks be to God for people with which to walk through it all — the peaks and valleys, the storms and sunshine, the plucking up and the planting.

And thanks be to God for this:

"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."

The New Year is upon us, and we will begin it as we always do, looking to Bethlehem for the birth of new light to guide us in our call and in our repentance and in our search for hope from the God who yearns to dwell with us. Amen.