

““Living in the Kingdom””
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14; John 18:33-37
November 26, 2017

In order to be recognized as a prophet, you have to have been right. At least a bit. If you believe are speaking truth to power, but the truth you speak isn't true, the best you can hope for is to be called a "false prophet." If your rant and rave about the way things ought to be, but it turns out you're just rambling, history will forget you. If your prophetic exhortations in the name of God don't make sense to the people...well, actually that's okay, if they make sense in retrospect. Such is the case with Jeremiah.

He's in competition with other prophets to tell the people of God in exile *how to live as the people of God in exile*. Some are saying that the stay will be short. God will get them out of this quickly. But Jeremiah sees that this is not a short-term situation. And he was right about that.

And so the people have a choice about how to live as foreigners. They could close their eyes and pray real hard that God would topple Babylon tomorrow and everything would be just fine. They could isolate themselves in this new land and wither. They could completely conform to the new culture. They could poison the new place with hatred, and it would be understandable, as they have been traumatized: losing loved ones, their community, their city, their temple, and their autonomy. They could give up on God.

But they made a different choice in the end. During this time in exile in Babylon, the Israelites became people of the book. They wrote down and organized their story, interpreting and preserving it, thanks be to God. They remained committed to their faith, but they had to wrestle with hard questions. In their story, they had believed that Jerusalem was invincible and that their God would always let them prevail over their enemies. The people were forced to rethink their understanding of God and to reinterpret their relationship with God.

They made a home in exile, they took time to look for God in a foreign land. Their faith grew and strengthened. This place became part of their story. Babylon changed them. And they changed Babylon. They trusted that God would stay with them. And so, in hindsight, Jeremiah was right and his word from God proved true: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

I don't dare compare the state of the 21st Century church to Babylonian exile, especially in the U.S., and especially in the Bible Belt. But we love a Christ who says to Pilate "My kingdom is not from this world...For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." As people who follow the teachings of a Jewish teacher from the boonies who walked the earth two thousand years ago and believe him to be the true revelation of divine power — power, by the way, demonstrated in vulnerability and death — and as people who claim resurrection and who get up on Sunday morning to go sit on wooden benches and sing together, we live in two worlds. We dwell in two places.

We live in the land of me-first, instant gratification, idol-worship, disposable stuff, disposable creation, disposable people, disposable relationships, cruelty, and me-last. And we live in God's beautiful creation, abundant grace and love, care for neighbor, and you-love-us, we-love-you. And most days it seems the first

place is winning. So what are we to do as people of God living in this weird world? We could give up on God. We could be consumed by the culture in which we are immersed. We could poison it with hatred. We could send our thoughts and prayers to this broken world. We could turn our backs on it and isolate ourselves.

Or we can seek to live in God's realm and wrestle with questions of faith and be transformed by what we see and let our faith grow in this land. On this final Sunday of the church year, I want to tell you how I saw you do precisely that over the past twelve months.

Since last Reign of Christ Sunday, we cancelled church twice! Once in January for one of our lovely Alabama ice storms. And then again in October when tropical storms threatened to make a mess of things. I'm not suggesting that canceling our worship service is kingdom work, but caring for one another is.

In Advent's Sermons from the Steps, our kids collected honey, pajamas, socks, chocolate, and gas cards to help people in need. *"...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you."*

In mid-December, we had a festive party upstairs and invited our homebound members to join us. The Rev. Lydia Casey was commissioned to be our Parish Associate — and she has been a tremendous blessing to me and to the congregation. After our Christmas pageant, we raised over \$2,000 for the Presbyterian Home for Children through our Baked Goods Auction. On December 21st, at our Service of the Longest Night, we poured salt into our baptismal font to offer to God the tears we were shedding.

On Christmas Eve, we gave glory to God in soaring music and we heard the true story of a little lamb named December. The next morning we gathered for Pajama Sunday and unwrapped gifts that gave our worship service a very unusual order. We celebrated the New Year with a service and brunch upstairs.

The rest of the winter brought us the Souper Bowl of Caring, a visit from Eva Kendrick of the Human Rights Campaign, and yours truly getting to be part of a UAB Muslim Student organization event which could have been called "A Muslim, a Rabbi, and a Minister agree to be on a panel..." We celebrated the life of dear Dot Murrah. And with deep joy, the winter also brought us Gary and Ann Ray.

As spring approached, so did a whole lot of stones. Starting on Ash Wednesday, we used stones in every conceivable way as we worshiped on Sundays and Wednesday nights. On Maundy Thursday, we took those stones and placed them at the cross in our own spin on Jewish tradition. In Lent we were visited by a gospel choir from Maryville College, a big group packed meals for Rise Against Hunger, and I had my own faith deepened in a new way by this congregation's outpouring of love at the death of Dian Bailey.

With joy, Easter arrived for the resurrection people of God. In the weeks that followed, we celebrated with an egg hunt, a visit from the Birmingham Girls Choir, and then the dedication of our fellowship hall as Barron Hall in memory of Preston and in honor of Nell. Jessica Hatch brought laughter and tears that day, telling stories of this congregation and busting my heart right open when she anointed Stewart Wilbanks the modern-day Preston Barron.

Summer was on our heels, and with it came Youth Sunday. We heard words of gratitude from Sarah Patton, and the Youth got us all off our duffs and doing energizers in the pews. At our annual Talent Show, there were musical performances and dancing from kids and adults and a very silly skit to thank Jennifer Garza for eight incredible years of service as our Fellowship Supper Chef.

In June, we confirmed three youth — Olivia, Adrian, and Sarah — on Pentecost Sunday. We had a big crowd head to Regions Field for baseball, fireworks, and fun. Edgewood's biggest group yet marched in the Pride Parade downtown, witnessing to God's radical hospitality to a huge crowd. A group of us were dinner guests of the Birmingham Islamic Society to learn about Ramadan. And we kicked off our summer of studying the Psalms. Down at the National Cemetery in Montevallo, tunes from the Beatles were the backdrop to a service celebrating the life of Barbara Murphy.

As summer swept on, a whole bunch of our kids, and a few of our adults, spent time at camp at Living River. Our Youth Group made its pilgrimage to Montreat. We tried a little something new as Jesse Crowe led our music one Sunday. School started up and we found eclipse glasses in our Backpack Blessing. We celebrated Rally Day in a completely different way. And with joy we received Sharon, Chloe, and Brian into membership. And Marilyn Merkle died unexpectedly, and we wept again.

In September, more than a dozen of you marched for the National Alliance on Mental Health. Ann Ray led us in starting a crucial conversation and Lydia preached powerfully about mental illness. We started the work on our brand new roof, and then on the work and painting on the first floor with huge thanks to Stephen Steward, Dave Garza, Mary Brooks, and Melissa Tate. Rich and Lara Jesse joined the church, and a few weeks later we baptized their ridiculously adorable daughter, Rose.

Autumn gave us our first Blessing of the Animals on the front lawn on a Wednesday night. It was fun and holy and wonderful. And then, just an hour after the festivities, Lil Warren, our longest-tenured member, died. With Lil in our hearts, a group of us helped build a house in Ensley with Habitat for Humanity and a special Reformation Day workshop created banners for Advent. In the middle of it all, we lost Millie Albright, the sixth death this year for our congregation. We remembered them, and so many others, on All Saints' Day.

Most recently, we've had eye-opening visits from Birmingham AIDS Outreach and PC(USA) Mission Co-workers in South Korea. Just a couple weeks ago, we welcomed Will Webb into membership here, continuing to grow our community.

“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.” As we look to a new church year beginning next Sunday, dear Edgewood, continue to seek God in all that you do. Continue to witness to Christ as Lord. Continue to live weird little Christian lives in this bruised and battered world.

You are both foreigners and at home. You are called by God and prophets and scripture and the Spirit and our story and Christ Jesus to be in this world, but not of it. You carry a great burden — a great, cross-shaped burden — and I must tell you that you carry it well. You have been promised a future with hope, for you are the Reign of Christ. Amen.