

*Cautious Optimism*

Jeremiah 31:31-34 | John 12: 20-33

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You can sense a shift in the mood when something long awaited is about to be fulfilled. The suspense and anticipation grows as everyone involved waits for the moment to arrive. I'm thinking about students straining to focus on their exams just before a big graduation. Or a couple's frustrated bliss in the days before their wedding. What we have been waiting for is about to come to pass and there is a certain energy in moments like these. There's a similar spirit at work on sadder occasions too, perhaps as a family has gathered in vigil around a loved one. You may feel the paradox of adrenaline and exhaustion at the end of a race still several paces from the finish line. Here we are now in a long race, with reasons to hope that we are nearing the end increasing every day. Some of the runners are slackening off. Others have gotten a second wind. We all relate a bit differently to that odd energy that animates us at the end.

Of course I'm talking about our shared experience of the pandemic. They say that lots of people anticipating their new freedoms are planning road trips and buying airline tickets and making reservations at their favorite restaurants. All are navigating the questions that come with new territory in our common life -- inside or outside, masks on or off, is 6 feet strictly necessary or would 3 be just enough? We know we can do more but exactly how much more? Others are not so sure the end is so near and wonder if we aren't getting ahead of ourselves a bit.

Here we are in our spiritual time, too, on the fifth Sunday of Lent. Our annual sojourn in the desert is drawing to a close. Palm Sunday will soon start the final steps in Holy Week. It is a natural time to ask - Where is God at the end of a long race? How do we sense God's presence as we approach the end?

In answer of questions like these we don't get much support from the Gospel of John. The most mysterious of the four gospels draws out the end over multiple chapters - and I'm not sure exactly how to say this, but the behavior of Jesus just gets weirder and weirder as the end draws near. He is by turns mournful and mystical, loquacious and prayerful, tender and prickly. He wept with Mary at the bedside of Lazarus. He falls to his hands and knees to wash feet of Peter. He talks repeatedly about the meaning of his own mortality and delivers several baffling monologues and distressing prayers. If you think people are acting out or being strange as things come to an end, maybe it helps to remember that even Jesus struggled to keep it all together in the end.

I suppose it's not unusual to worry as we reach the end of something we've been living with, even if what we've been living through hasn't been all that pleasant. We tend to accustom ourselves to our circumstances. Nobody wants the pandemic to continue, but the end means we need to negotiate all sorts of new circumstances - how to travel, how to work, how to school. There may even be aspects of our lives now that we're reluctant to let go of. It makes me think of the Jewish people coming home to Jerusalem after their long exile. Homecoming was the goal and desire of those who lived in diaspora. Jeremiah was the prophet of this return from exile. "The days are surely coming," Jeremiah would say, speaking of the future's promise and all the possibilities it would hold. And yet coming back home meant dealing with the same old troubles of home. Jeremiah's oracle was realistic about the inevitable reckonings. Some have eaten "sour grapes" Jeremiah concedes; some have teeth still "set on edge." There were scores to settle, boundaries to negotiate, a city to defend.

You might call Jeremiah the prophet of “cautious optimism.” He is alert to the dangers and difficulties the Hebrews face in the New Jerusalem. And yet he is also fully invested in the success of the New Jerusalem. Perhaps the most famous story told about Jeremiah is how he purchased a field of land during the Babylonian siege. The prophetic historian emphasizes with vivid detail the way in which Jeremiah delivered the transaction. In contrast to the private nature of most real estate transactions, Jeremiah made sure that everyone saw him do it and knew how much he paid for it. He signed the deed in front of witnesses; he counted out the coins and weighed them on scales for everyone to see; he had the deed of purchase framed and delivered in a vessel made for the occasion. Jeremiah purchased this land not for himself but for the community, as a gesture of hope in a future they could not yet see. “Thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah had proclaimed, “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought and sold in this land.”

When the prophet says, “the days are surely coming,” he is really speaking of the new covenant that God has promised to establish. We know from our own experience that we can use the encouragement when one way of life is coming to an end and a new covenant is emerging. What if we imagine our circumstances with the faith that Jesus has in new life? With the faith that Jeremiah has in a new covenant? How then would we be emboldened to act in public so that others could see us? I think of all those who proudly wear their masks. I think of all those proud photos of upper arms and bandaids and vaccination record cards. This is how we finish running a long race, with little gestures of love, encouragement, and hope. This is how one way of living fades into the past and a new covenant emerges between us.

It might be worth considering then - as we proceed in the final weeks and months of this difficult time - what do you want to be seen doing? The days are surely coming. God is calling us to invest in the new Jerusalem. Let us be generous and conspicuous in our love for one another. In this way we will remember that God is faithful and will help us to finish the race.