

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

What Do We Do Now?

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Jeremiah 29:4-9; John 21:15-19

What do we do now? That was the question that was running through my head as I sat in my chair at the South Texas Blood Bank in San Antonio. I asked myself that question because on my way to give platelets there had been an announcement on the radio that a small plane had flown into one of the twin towers. By the time I was part-way through my draw another plane had hit the other tower. My chair had a television and I watched in horror as to what was unfolding in New York. It was soon apparent that we had been attacked. In that moment I began to realize that life would never be the same. That the world had radically changed. I began asking myself, "What do we do now?"

What do we do now? My guess is that many of us are asking ourselves the same question in this moment? What do we do now that schools are out, parties are outlawed, the normal places where we eat and gather with friends are closed, layoffs have begun, travel is restricted, our friends and family are becoming ill and people around the world are dying? Just as surely as we were attacked on 9-11, we have been attacked again, this time by a tiny virus, only 120 nanometers in size, covered in spikes that allows it to attach itself where we do not want it to be. It is a silent, invisible enemy that traveled around the world unseen and unwelcomed. It did not need a passport or a ticket to travel. It arrived and has led to the infection of tens of thousands and deaths of many. As we stare at a world few could have imagined the question is, what do we do now?

This is not a new question. I say this because it forms the back story for both of our morning's lessons. In the Jeremiah passage, the people who are receiving this message from the prophet are those Jewish leaders who had been taken into exile in Babylon. The situation was as follows: with the defeat of the Assyrian Empire around 600 BCE, the nation of Judah had become a vassal state of Egypt. And for almost ten years Judah was poorly run and heavily taxed. Ultimately Babylonians pushed the Egyptians out of the area we now call the Holy Land. Judah with its capital at Jerusalem, surrendered to Babylon and became its vassal. Not content with this situation, the leaders in Jerusalem rebelled. It was not long before Babylon's power asserted itself. The Jewish leaders were taken as prisoners into exile. There they asked themselves, what do we do now? What do we do now that we are powerless? Again, that same question was being asked by Jesus' disciples in our story in John. What is interesting about this story is that the disciples had already seen the risen Jesus. They had watched him be arrested, tried, crucified and then raised. One would think that they should have a clear idea of what they ought to do, but this was not the case. We know this because they had gone back to their old jobs. For Peter and others this meant back to the Sea of Galilee and to fishing, which is where we find them. We might suppose that their attitude was, well it was a great ride with Jesus, and we are glad that we escaped with our lives. So what do we do now?

The gift of both passages is that they can help us see what we should do now. But before we allow them to answer that question, we need to allow them to tell us what we will not do now. Let me explain. In both of our stories the assumption of the people involved is that the answer to the question, what do we do now, is we will go back to our old ways of life as if nothing ever happened. For the Jews in exile in Babylon, we

know this is the case because of the cryptic words at the end of the reading. Listen again. *“Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them says the Lord.”* What is this about? It is about the fact that among the exiles were those claiming that God would immediately destroy Babylon and return God’s people to their old lives; return them back to Jerusalem and the Temple. They were being told that they would return to the good old days. Jeremiah disabuses them of this notion. The world had changed and would not be the same. This is also true for the story out of John. As we saw a moment ago, the disciples had returned to their old ways of life. It was as if they were pretending that their three years with Jesus had been a nice diversion from an otherwise average life. That his life, death and resurrection had been interesting but not life changing. Jesus, however, will have none of that. He understood that the world had been fundamentally changed in his death and resurrection. He understood that life would, and should never be the same, and so when he engages in this conversation with Peter, Jesus is inviting him to leave the old life and to do something different.

There is an old saying that you cannot step into the same river twice, meaning that rivers are always changing, always flowing. This is the same for our lives which are ebbing and flowing, such that they will not be the same after the virus has run its course. Just as lives were not the same after 9-11, or after Vietnam and or after the Great Depression and Great Recession, they will not be the same now. Life changed. And it will change for us. I will never look at toilet paper on the shelf of a grocery store and not wonder if I ought to buy it. I will think about people around me and wonder if I ought to have my hand sanitizer with me. For better or worse, life will never be the same.

So, what do we do now? The answer is simple. It is at the heart of both of our passages, we bless the world. That’s it. We bless the world. This is what God’s people have been called and tasked to do ever since Abraham and Sarah were asked to leave everything that they knew and loved and travel to a far distant country. We can hear this in the Jeremiah story. *“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”* God’s people, even during the terror and upheaval of exile and loss, were to seek the welfare of the place in which they were taken. They were to remake their lives and remember that God was with them helping them to be a blessing, which they did, for more than two-thousand years. The same can be seen in the John story. Jesus not only tells Peter to feed Jesus’ sheep, meaning to care for all of God’s people, but Peter is to leave his own life and follow. What transpires from that following will be the creation of an inclusive, loving Jesus’s community that will feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome all. The followers of Jesus, if you will, were to seek the welfare of the world.

So what do we do now? We bless the world. We seek the welfare of the place and the time in which we live. And this is what you all are already doing, which is one reason I am so proud to be your pastor. I say this because so many of you are finding ways to bless the world. You continue to bring in food for families in Pontiac, call friends and family, make cards for shut-ins, do “drive by greetings”, go to local mom and pop restaurants to help keep them open, take meals to friends and leaving them on the doorstep, shop for others, make masks and praying for all of those in need. you get it. You understand what we are to do now. And so this is my challenge to you for this week, to continue seeking ways that you can bless the world and work for the welfare of the community in which God has placed you.