

“PARADIGM SHIFT”

Jeremiah 1:4-19

Sunday, July 3, 2016

INTRO: The Book of Jeremiah is one of the great prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. It is, in fact, the largest single volume book in the entire Bible. It is a great book because it speaks to all parts of the Old and New Testaments, partly because of Jeremiah's passion, and partly because of the way he speaks through the ages to our present time. Jeremiah was fortunate enough to hear God directly, and unfortunate enough to have been called to deliver a message no one wanted to hear. It has been said that Jeremiah was a bit of a 'Bullfrog,' croaking out God's word, shaking up the spiritual landscape, and giving the people around him unwanted notice of the coming storm. Their world was about to turn. There is a song I heard some time ago, entitled "Canticle of the Turning." (Ian will be playing it during this morning's Offertory and later this month we'll be singing the words.) The last verse and chorus capture the theme of Jeremiah's divine mission for me: "Though the nations rage from age to age, we remember who holds us fast: God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp. This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound, 'Til the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all the tears, for the dawn draws near, And the world is about to turn.

(Let us pray....)

Every one of us, whether we admit it or not, are the product of our training and experiences. We tend to see things the way we see them because someone else saw them that way before us and taught us to see them that way as well. As those ideas and experiences go into our minds over and over again, a particular paradigm or pattern of thinking and living gives shape to our lives.

Webster's Dictionary defines a Paradigm as: A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality. A paradigm describes the principles we use in understanding our world; a paradigm is like a window through which we view and explain aspects of reality. Steven Covey, in his best known book "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" says, "Our paradigms, correct or incorrect, are the sources of our attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately our relationships with others. Paradigms are powerful, says Covey, because they create the lens through which we see the world."

Every set of beliefs, every way of looking at the world is a paradigm. Scientific paradigms change through history as more is discovered, and the old ways of looking at things are seen to be defective. And we change the paradigms we use as we go through life to match our growth and maturity. And often, the move to a new paradigm is a transformational, life changing moment.

The 7th Century B.C. was a disastrous time for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. It was truly an age of moral and spiritual crisis. Their old ways of living had become defective. The people of that day had allowed more and more of the world and self to slip into their hearts and minds until God was almost entirely crowded out of their lives and forgotten. (Sound somewhat familiar to our world today?)

What was had ceased to be. Their first love for God was gone. Holiness was forgotten. Israel no longer delighted the heart of God. Those once filled with God were now filled with themselves. Their paradigm as the Chosen People of God had become weak and defective. Their old worldview was quickly fading away. Their world was about to turn.

When we find ourselves at a crisis moment, when our paradigms no longer work, surely there must be a proven strategy....a strategic plan....to help us fix the situation that we find ourselves in.

No so with God. When God sets out to cause a paradigm shift....to change the ways of our heart and mind....when the world is about to turn....God almost always starts with a baby.

The God who would create a world out nothing except words - the God who would place a rainbow in the sky signalling a new beginning - or the God who would make it possible for a pair of senior citizens to have a son in their old age - is just that sort of God who would think it cool to call Jeremiah, an insignificant young teenager, to speak words....to shift the prevailing paradigm in ways that would shake the very foundations of his world.

Listen to what God said to Jeremiah: “Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you: A prophet to the nations—that’s what I had in mind for you..... I’ve given you a job to do among nations and governments! Your job, Jeremiah, is to go out and change the prevailing paradigm....pull up and tear down, take apart and demolish....and then start over, building and planting....restoring My sovereignty over all of life.”

Jeremiah may have felt very much like a fish out of water. However, he learned quickly, though, that God does not call the equipped. Instead, God equips the called. God promises to be present and to supply Jeremiah with the words that will accomplish God’s purpose.

And so, with fear and trembling, Jeremiah stepped into his ‘Divine Moment’ to challenge the hearts and minds of his Jewish sisters and brothers toward a new worldview - a new paradigm - to live well and to live rightly, and to become the people that God has called us to be.

So what does all this mean for us on this Canada Day weekend, July 3, 2016? Is there a word from God for us in this ancient text this morning?

Since Medieval Times, our view of the world has undergone enormous shifts: from believing that the world is flat, to understanding that it is a sphere; from believing that the earth is the centre of our solar system, to understanding that the sun is; from smoke signals to smart phones; from the little house on the prairies to an international space station.

In every new generation, God continually calls us to look at our lives, at the church, and at the world through lenses which are rarely prescribed - lenses which bring into sharper focus the places of breakdown and decay - the growing moral and spiritual apathy - the gradual crowding out and erosion of the things of God, for more and more of the things of this world.

“Our world,” says Henri Nouwen, “is a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul.”

The paradigm we have allowed to shape and inform our hearts, minds and actions is no longer working. The church as a movement of God's redeemed people is gradually diminishing in both presence and relevance on the streets of life. Many, inside and outside the church, have even forgotten why we exist.

Every Canada Day, Canadians from coast to coast to coast gather in parks and backyards to remember and celebrate the bold new directions the European explorers and the Father's of Confederation took to carve out an amazing new country in a land so wild and savage. And from that historic beginning Canada has continued to evolve and change to meet the emerging challenges of the day.

In your lifetime and mine, a cultural tidal wave has hit. The Ozzie and Harriet world of my 1950s childhood is over, washed away by a tsunami of change, birthing a whole new world and a whole new set of ways of making our way in the world. This is truly a season of discontent, destabilization and change all over the world. A rising tide of inequality, dislocation, isolationism and uncertainty is moving across the globe.

And yet, as the bible says, there is always hope for new beginnings. If the Word of God to Jeremiah has any significance for us today, it is this: we need to look forward not backwards. God is always doing a new thing in our midst.

The same God who called the young Jeremiah to be God's world changer; is the same Jesus who assembled a gaggle of ex-fishermen, tax collectors and assorted peasants and sent them out to change the paradigms of their world; and is still the same one who continues to call us, His Church, in this new time in history to do the same as intrepid followers of Jesus Christ.

People of God, God wants you and me. Our presence and our voices still need to be heard. As surely as God chose Jeremiah for such a monumental task, we too have been chosen by God for something important that God is doing....right here at St. Paul's, Simcoe....to be partners in the mission that Jesus began....to shine God's love to a lost and hurting world....bringing hope to those who have lost all hope. My friends, we are the voices of love in a world filled with hate. We are the voices of justice in a world of injustice. We are the voices of peace when the world is at war. Remember what Jesus said, "You did not choose me. I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear much fruit, fruit that will last for eternity."

By now, most people have either read or seen J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, "The Lord of the Rings." In one of the early scenes, the Hobit Frodo is talking to the wise Gandalf about the journey before him: "I am not made for perilous quests," cried Frodo. "I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why was I chosen?"

"Such questions cannot be answered," said Gandalf. "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."

C. S. Lewis once said, "If you read history you will find out that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next....Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

People of God, you have been chosen. God created you and promises to walk with you from birth to death, reminding you as the song says, "I was there to hear your bawling cry....I'll be there when you are old....to complete what I've begun."

Living into the realities of the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven, to be God's new creation people here and now, is the only paradigm that matters ultimately. We may feel overwhelmed and inadequate, just as Jeremiah did. Nevertheless, we have been chosen and called to give birth to the signs and symbols of God's mission and ministry right here in this place at this particular time. As the words of our next hymn ask: "Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around?....Will you come and follow Jesus....let his life be grown in us....and never be the same?"

Fullness of life, you see, is really not about doing everything well. Fullness of life, as Jeremiah found out, was trusting in God's promise, being faithful to God and living into that vision every day....to venture ahead in faith and devotion to Christ into the new world that God is birthing around us.

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