

“COMMA PEOPLE”

Jeremiah 31:1-6, 27-34

Sunday, July 17, 2016

Brief Overview of Jeremiah: **GOD’S REDEMPTION PLAN**

Chapters 1-29 - Judgement of God - the punishment that the people of Judah would endure for their sins; but, then, right near the end of chapter 29, in the face of devastation and despair, God speaks a word of hope: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

Chapters 30-33 - God’s Amazing Grace - the promise of restoration—the joyful return of the exiles and the making of a new covenant with God.

Chapters 46-51 are composed of prophecies of judgment on foreign nations. Let us pray....

What a week this has been. Innocent lives and communities around the world have experienced the pain and chaos of their worlds falling apart - 85 people run down in Nice, France; 265 people killed in a failed military coupe in Istanbul, Turkey; and in Calgary, Alberta family and friends have saddened by the tragic deaths of Sara Baillie and her five-year-old daughter, Taliyah Marsman - and our friends Stan and Sharon Cox saddened and shocked over the passing of their son Bill.

What do you do when the wheels of life come off? What do you do when your life unravels because of some tragic event or piece of news you never wanted to hear? What do you do when your hopes and dreams fail? What do we do?

That was the question that Jeremiah faced all through his ministry. His world was falling apart all around him. Failure, collapse and chaos was all around him. The leadership of Israel was incompetent and corrupt. Poor quality kings had weakened the country so much that invasion by a foreign power was only a matter of time.

And so it was....in 587BC vengeance was swift. Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian army attacked from the east, subduing all of Judea except for the great fortress of Jerusalem, which had stood firm against all invaders for three hundred years. The people of Judah were forced marched, by their captors, eastward to the land of the Babylonians (modern day Syria and Iraq). The city of Jerusalem was plundered; their great temple lay in smouldering ruins. Every object of value was plundered. Anyone with any authority or skill to help rebuild the society was dead or gone. By the end of chapter 29, all hope seemed to be lost....abandoned forever.

Jeremiah lived through the destruction and demise of his homeland....having warned the people many times that this would indeed happen. “You made a covenant, a promise to God,” said Jeremiah, “and in return God gave you this bountiful land. Now that you have broken that covenant, God through the Babylonian armies has taken this land from you. And now God’s Promised Land will lie empty -- in ruin and waste -- for a generation. You will never return from your exile.”

The Book of Lamentations was also written by Jeremiah. The word 'Lamentations' means 'funeral song,' poetically describing Jeremiah's grieving over the complete destruction of Jerusalem. In the first verses of Lamentations we read: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave!" For the people of Judah, the wheels of life had come off....and all hope was lost for the people for the people of Judah. It was a dead-end.

Recently I came across these immortal words of Gracie Allen: "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." Comedienne Gracie Allen wrote those words in a note she left for her husband, George Burns, to find after her death. Where we see finality and no new possibilities, God can see more. God still has another day, another season, another opportunity ahead for us. Wherever we are on life's journey, even if you are feeling like your world has come crashing down around you, God never leaves us without the possibility of hope and new beginnings, grounded squarely in the amazing grace of God. God's love can find us, come to us where we are, and take hold of any and all situations and conditions, and carry us forward, getting us to where we are supposed to go. When things appeared to be at their darkest hour -- when their world was falling apart -- Jeremiah lifted their spirits with a renewed word of hope. God had not abandoned the people. Never place a period where God has placed a 'comma.' God is still speaking. A period says, "it is finished....it's over....no hope." A comma says, "there is hope for something more."

The same God who planted the garden of Eden and crafted humanity from its soil; the same God who placed a rainbow in the sky after the flood; the same God who could part the waters of the Red Sea; the same God who could take a young shepherd boy to defeat the giant Goliath; the same God who spoke the dying words from the Cross, "It is finished!" and rolled the stone away on Easter morning raising Jesus from the grave, is the very same God who will restore the years the locusts have destroyed and replant the people of Judah back home in the Promised Land. "Listen up, you people", God has said. "There will be hope for your children and grandchildren....For the time is coming when I, the Lord, will restore the fortunes of my people of Israel and Judah. I will bring them home to this land that I gave to their ancestors, and they will possess it again."

Even in the face of disaster, God is not finished with God's people yet. So often we see a "period" in our lives, where God has only placed a "comma." A new day and a new future was in sight. "The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife."

Like an unfaithful spouse, Israel had constantly broken her vows of fidelity. By the time of Prophet Jeremiah, Israel was in absolute shambles. This was truly the darkest hour in the history of Israel. Uncertain about their future, Jeremiah preached a new word of hope....a comma in place of a

period. God was not finished with them yet. There is more hope for the future than there is despair in this moment. A new day was coming when God would establish a 'new covenant' with a new generation of God's People.

Ezekiel, one of the preachers who went into the Exile, wrote about God's new covenant: "And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. And you will live in Israel, the land I gave your ancestors long ago. You will be my people, and I will be your God. I will cleanse you of your filthy behavior. I will give you good crops of grain, and I will send no more famines on the land. I will give you great harvests from your fruit trees and fields, and never again will the surrounding nations be able to scoff at your land for its famines."

This is gospel: no matter what we do, or fail to do, we can't ever stop God from loving us. "God is not finished with us yet," said Jeremiah. There is a comma in place of a period. God will finish what He started. The Kingdom of God will surely come on earth as it is in heaven.

As the psalmist wrote of those ancient times: "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137: 1-4a).

But, there was a remnant who remained hopeful. They had heard of Jeremiah's prophecy of the coming of the new day of the Lord. God had placed a comma in the place of a period, lifting the people up so they could look beyond their exile to the vision of a new Day. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people."

More than just giving them their lives back, Jeremiah's message was that God had in store something hard to imagine: a whole new relationship with God. "The days are coming," said Jeremiah, "when God would make a whole new arrangement—one that depends solely upon God's unfailing love and unshakeable faithfulness." "I will be their God and they will be my people."

70 years later, God placed a comma where the people had put a period. Their exile was over, and they did go home -- to the only place a Jew could ever call home. "Oh, Jerusalem, we are coming back to you and you will be ours again!

Five hundred years later Jesus picked up the same theme in his ministry as he boldly proclaimed that with him this Kingdom of God had now finally come near. "We are entering a new age and a new covenant with our God", said Jesus. "If you will follow me and be faithful you will come into this new kingdom that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were talking about." "Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity! Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.

My friends, God is not finished with us yet. Where we see only a 'period,' God want us to see His 'comma.' Today Jesus still calls us to leave our past behind and follow him down a difficult path towards the Kingdom, "seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God." He told us to love our enemies, and pray for those who hurt us. If we want to be a leader then we need to be a servant to all, said Jesus. God's kingdom will come, not through force and coercion, but through love.

Yes....we've been called to follow the teachings of Jesus....but, if truth be known, we have often lost our way. There is a period somewhere in our life. We've all had to encounter some perils along the way. Yet the church continues. The church perseveres. There is always a divine 'comma' to our story. God is not finished with us yet.

So....what about us today? Is there a word for us - for St. Paul's Simcoe - in the 21st century? Are we like those worn out exiles mourning by some river, weeping, dreaming for a return to the good old days?

Well....let me suggest, there is an alternative. Jeremiah offers a word of hope for despairing people. Whenever we perceive the door closing, God routinely takes up a red pen and corrects our punctuation, putting a comma where we have placed periods. God is not finished with us yet!

At times it may seem like a wilderness journey we've been called to travel....but our journey toward home is with the assurance that God walks with us every step of the way...."even when you walk through the darkest valley," God said, "I will be with you."

In your assessment of who you are today and where your life is going, **NEVER, NEVER** put a period after it. Look for God's comma! Be open to the possibility of something new....something life-changing in your life, and in the world around you. Embrace the present and boldly step forward into God's unfolding future. The same God who started a good work in each of us is faithful to complete His good purposes in us and through us.

My soul cries out with a joyful shout,
That the God of my heart is great.
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
That you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,
And my weakness you did not spurn.
So from East to West, will my name be blest!
Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring!
Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn!

Christian faith is not about periods. It is about commas. When the storms of life are raging, when there appears to be more darkness than light, more despair than joy, let us dare to be a “**Comma People.**” It is Christ's new life which lies ahead. Remember, God said, “See, I am making all things new....”....for the world is about to turn!