

## The Cost and the Promise

Sermon 142 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 22, 2022  
Jeremiah 4:19-31 and Revelation 22:1-5

One of the first Bible verses I ever memorized was from the book of Jeremiah.

*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm. Plans to give you a hope and a future. (29:11)*

It is a very popular verse, one we like to have inscribed in calligraphy on wall art and coffee mugs. One that, I suspect, many of us know by heart. I learned it in Bible Drill. It was one of 25 verses we had to know word for word; we had to be able to recall it exactly as it was printed in our NIV Bibles when time came for the big competition at the end of the church year. I can even remember reciting these words from Jeremiah 29:11 on the lawn of First Baptist Church of Charlotte on the day of the state competition. Someone pulled a fire alarm (maybe the stress got to them?) so for a couple of hours kids from around the state, along with parents and church leaders stood and kept ourselves busy with these memory drills.

While I do believe it is a good thing for Christians to have a good working knowledge of the Bible. You know, the basics like knowing that we have two testaments and that the first is shared with people of Jewish faith. We should know the relative order of the books and have an understanding of the different genres represented. At the most basic level, we should be able to locate the book of Psalms relatively quickly (it's in the middle). What I appreciate the most about the Bible Drill experience, is that because of it, because we prepared for hours and hours on end for these competitions, I can recall verses of hope and promise any time I need them.

While I and many of us have a hope-full experience of the prophet Jeremiah, largely because of this verse which promises God's plan and provision for our lives, the majority of the book has more of a Job tone. In fact, Job and Jeremiah are more similar than we might realize. Some scholars believe the two were written around the same time, making Job and Jeremiah contemporaries experiencing a broadly felt sense of struggle and despair. Job and Jeremiah both share the same theological concerns and they both curse the day that they were born. They're the only two biblical authors to do so. In their writings, these two express some of the darkest doubts voiced in the Bible, doubts about what it means to be enticed (20:7) into the service of God.<sup>1</sup> While Job's suffering seems more acute and personal, the suffering of Jeremiah is wide-scale. But perhaps it's to be expected. After all, Jeremiah has accepted the vocational of prophet.

As such, Jeremiah (and the whole company of others in the same vocation) [he] sees and understands the interconnectivity of all creation. A prophet can see that all of God's creation is set up in relationship – an inextricable web of mutuality – to quote a more modern prophet. When one part suffers, all parts suffer. When one part thrives, all parts

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis. *Prophecy*. 153.

thrive. In the ancient world – as evidenced in the writings of the ancient prophets – the prophets stood between God and the people of Israel, speaking boldly on behalf of God while experiencing the suffering of the people. “When there is ‘cleanness of teeth,’ Amos himself is hungry. When there is drought in Israel (1 Kings 17) or Judah (Jeremiah 14), Elijah and Jeremiah are thirsty.”<sup>2</sup> They suffer *with* their communities even as they beg and plead the people to change their ways so that God can bring an end to the pain. This is apparent in today’s scripture reading from Jeremiah 4:

19: *My anguish, my anguish! I write in pain!  
Oh, the walls of my heart!  
My heart is beating wildly;  
I cannot keep it silent;  
for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.*

...  
31: *For I hear a sound like a woman in labor,  
in anguish like one bearing her first child –  
the sound of Daughter-Zion panting;  
she stretches out her hands:  
“O woe is me! My life is fading away before killers!”*

Even as the prophet suffers with the people, their position is distinct from the community at large. The prophet suffers additional torment because while the people experience pain, grief, struggle, and loss, the prophet knows that the cause of communal suffering is sin. More precisely, “they suffer because the covenantal structure of reality has been violated... [and when that happens] the prophet suffers triply.”<sup>3</sup>

The prophet suffers first as a *creature of God* who catches a glimpse of God’s dreams for this world, for the good that was established at the moment of creation.

The prophet also suffers as *one of the people*. A human being living in covenantal relationship with God.

Thirdly, the prophet suffers as a servant of God who has been chosen and called by God to give voice to God’s involvement in a particular moment of history. As the prophet sees and understands the historical moment, he or she gets a glimpse through God’s eyes and therefore experiences the pain of both God, whose heart is shattered by all the evil and sin in our world *and* the prophet who sees the unwillingness of the people to listen, to recognize their own role in creating or perpetuating the problem, and to change in order to alleviate the suffering.

The prophet’s heart is full of pain and anguish.

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen Davis. *Prophecy*. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

It is no wonder Jeremiah joined Job in cursing the day of his birth. He understands the full picture.

For some time now, as long as I can remember, actually, scientists and climate watchers have been warning that human behavior is causing irreparable harm to our environment. At first, the easy solutions were things like carpooling and participating in the popular, “reduce, reuse, recycle,” campaigns. But despite those smaller efforts, climate scientists agree that the earth is changing, rapidly. In fact, an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported earlier this year that if there is no broad scale, global commitment to changing our collective behaviors, the world will become uninhabitable.<sup>4</sup>

The biggest concern right now is global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel, the one that reported to the UN in April of this year, found that according to their models (which include several different levels of emissions reductions), the earth’s temperature will increase 1.5 degrees Celsius in the early 2030s. That’s within the next 10 years.

To put it in simpler terms, unless we can reduce emissions drastically (basically taking them down to zero, globally), an increase of 1.5 degrees is pretty much going to happen. You might be thinking, 1.5 degrees? What’s the big deal?

Climate Scientist, Katharine Hayhoe, says it best (I think). Consider the earth as a human body. It is a body that is remarkably good at maintaining a very specific temperature in order to keep everything healthy and working together. For humans, that temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. When our temperature rises even just one degree, we feel it. It’s called a low grade fever. We all know how miserable even a low grade fever can be. We’re tired, we don’t want to exercise or socialize or go to work. We cannot be at our best when we’re running a fever... even a small one. So we seek out interventions to help get us back on track.<sup>5</sup>

Using the same logic, it is safe to say that the earth has a fever. We can debate whether it’s low grade or reaching a point where hospitalization might be needed, but the fact is, the earth is sick, and we know that our current behaviors (shared behaviors) are making the problem worse... quickly.

These trends are easy to see if you consider the whole world, not just our little corner of it. Sea levels are rising. Average temperatures are rising. Ice caps and glaciers are melting. There are more wildfires and major storms than in prior years. All of this is related to the “fever” the earth has.

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<sup>4</sup> UN climate report: It’s ‘now or never’ to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115452>

<sup>5</sup> Katharine Hayhoe. *Global Weirding: What’s the Big Deal With a Few Degrees?* <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCi6RkdaEggRVKi3AzidF4ow>

Of course, there are exceptions to these averages. This is always true of data. There are outliers. There are cold days in spring and warm days in the winter. There are years that are dry and years that are wet. But overall, the data is clear. The earth is warming and we are seeing the consequences on a global scale.

Closer to home, here in the Southeast, the symptoms of the earth's fever look like more mosquitos carrying diseases like West Nile. Like rising sea levels causing flooding that comes with stronger storms, and threatening damages to homes and cities near the coast. We have seen this in Charleston and Wilmington already. Rising sea levels can also cause permanent land loss, not just storm-related flooding. Between 1932 and 2016, Louisiana lost over 2,000 square miles of land due to the rise. This kind of loss triggers the loss of habitats and new migration patterns for all kinds of living creatures: creeping things, crawling things, swimming and soaring things, all forced to move or face extinction.<sup>6</sup>

These are the symptoms of the earth's fever.

These realities paint a picture that is far from Eden, far from God's dream for a world in which all of creation works together, every created thing in harmony with the other, one body thriving in relationship with God and with one another.

The more we listen and learn about this crisis, the more we begin to see the big picture, the one that stretches far beyond ourselves and our own individual experience. And as our perspective grows, our hearts begin to break, like Jeremiah's, weeping and lamenting the ways that we have broken our covenant with God. The one implied at creation and reiterated after the flood. We have failed as stewards of God's good earth.

But before we join the likes of Job and Jeremiah who throw their hands in the air, discouraged and full of despair, we need to read the last three chapters of Jeremiah, and the other Hebrew prophets, and the Gospels, and the book of Revelation in order to see that even when the trials, struggles, and tribulations threaten to overcome, God is always working toward New Creation.

There is a cost, and it is always relational, as God's own self is a relational God... Emmanuel, God *with* us.

In terms of this specific environmental crisis, we know what we have to do in order to right our relationship with the earth. Some solutions are simple: reduce, reuse, recycle... carpool, bike ride, walk... And some solutions are complex: reducing our national (and even global) emissions. Exploring and innovating newer, cleaner ways to produce the energy that we need.

We can become open to learning about this crisis, more about the fever the earth has, and as we learn we might discover that there are indeed ways that we can work together to

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<sup>6</sup> WISC Presents: A Faith Leader's Guide To The Fourth National Climate Assessment. [http://www.creationjustice.org/uploads/2/5/4/6/25465131/wisc\\_eewg\\_nca4\\_fact\\_sheets.pdf](http://www.creationjustice.org/uploads/2/5/4/6/25465131/wisc_eewg_nca4_fact_sheets.pdf)

heal the earth. Not for our own sake as individuals whose days on this planet are numbered from the start, but for the sake of the earth itself, and our relationship with the One who created it.

The Bible is full of hopeful images, storied examples of how God grieves when relationships are broken, how God calls humanity to repentance, and how God is always eager to create anew when the people repent and change.

One of the most hopeful images comes at the very end of the Revelation. If we were to read the Bible from cover to cover it is the concluding scene, after the whole love story between God and Creation has been through a great ordeal (to use the words from Revelation itself). There have been wounds and there has been pain. There has been hopelessness and sorrow. There has been exhaustion... to the point of giving up (on all sides!). But at the end of the day, and at the end of our Holy Bibles, a picture of flourishing remains:

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side for the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations... and the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.  
(Revelation 22:1-2, 5b)*

There is hope, even for our beloved earth. There is a promise for new life, for new creation, and possibly even for a renewed covenant between us and God. But this promise comes at a cost. And the price is the same as it always was poured forth from the lips of the prophets:

Listen.  
Repent.  
Change the way we live.

Then rejoice in the knowledge that God really does have plans for health, for prosperity, and for a future.... not just for us, but for all of God's creation.

Lord, in your mercy, may it be so.