

HEALING OUR NATION

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still confined in the court of the guard:

Thus says the LORD who made the earth, the LORD who formed it to establish it--the LORD is his name: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah that were torn down to make a defense against the siege-ramps and before the sword: The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and to fill them with the dead bodies of those whom I shall strike down in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness.

I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

Jeremiah 33:1-9 NRSV

This Thursday is the Fourth of July. As always, there will be parades, backyard cookouts, and people decked out in red, white, and blue. Folks in Boston will gather on the banks of the Charles River to watch fireworks and listen to the Boston Pops play “Stars and Stripes Forever.” Tourists in Washington, DC, will gather on the National Mall for a star studded “Capital Fourth” and the chance to see the Washington Monument silhouetted against the rockets’ red glare. New York City will carry out its own extravaganza, and all across Long Island we’ll hear the celebratory sounds of bottle rockets shooting across the sky. Outwardly, it will be a typical Fourth of July. Inwardly however, this year will have a different feel to it. The usual fun will be mixed with sorrow. This year when I celebrate our nation’s birthday, I will also be remembering the day that our nation and our friends were so brutally attacked.

I know that September was almost 10 months ago, and I understand those people who want to celebrate the Fourth all the more because we’re still here and we’re still free. But something has changed. Something is different. And I’m not sure when, if ever, things will be the same again. I suppose it’s because I’m still in mourning; and while I believe we have much to celebrate as a nation, I also feel that we have much healing left to do as well.

Thinking about our own nation's problems, I can't help but remember the prophet Jeremiah whose nation was in much worse shape than ours. Jeremiah had been telling the people of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, for years that if they didn't shape up and keep their promises, their covenant with God, that something bad was going to happen. They paid no attention, and eventually the Babylonians overran the nation. The Judeans who had not been captured fled for safety to Jerusalem, their capital, but things only went from bad to worse there. The Babylonians surrounded the city and a siege began. With no food or other supplies coming into the city, things looked hopeless. By this time everyone was so annoyed at Jeremiah for being right that the king imprisoned him. It was in prison that God told Jeremiah to do a very peculiar thing. God told the old prophet to do something hopeful. God told Jeremiah to buy land.

What an odd command, buying land in the middle of a siege in the full knowledge that your city will soon fall and you will likely be dragged off to who knows where. And yet God said buy land so Jeremiah sent a messenger to do just that. Why? Because God knew that it was time to look beyond the present crisis to the future, the distant future when somehow and some way all would once again be right with the world, whether Jeremiah lived to see it or not.

It is in the context of looking forward to a brighter tomorrow that the words we heard read this morning were written. Before making any promises, God first reminds Jeremiah who it is that makes these vows. Verse 2 says, "Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it--Yahweh is God's name." God helps Jeremiah remember that the one who makes the promises is the same one who made the world, the same God who keeps the planets twirling and the stars shining, the same God who will be there when the Earth stops spinning altogether. God gets their attention by saying, "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (33:3).

And what does God have in store for Jeremiah and the people? First more bad news, that in addition to the Babylonians the Chaldeans were going to attack, but someday things would look up again. Verses 6-9 ring with hope as God says, "I am going to bring [the city] recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them." God's wonderful promises for their future include recovery and healing, rebuilding and security, forgiveness and prosperity.

Did God keep these promises made so long ago? Yes, somewhat. Years later some of the people returned from the Babylonian exile and eventually rebuilt the temple. But in time the Romans invaded and after decades of occupying Jerusalem, destroyed the

temple in 70 AD. And so the promises wait to be fulfilled in another time beyond earthly time and in another place beyond this earthly place.

What about us? Where is our hope for healing today? Perhaps as people of faith we need to hear the promise God made to the people of Jeremiah's day, "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (33:3)." Do we really believe this? Do we really believe that if we pray to God that there will be an answer? Jeremiah did, and yet he did not see the promise fulfilled in his lifetime. Part of keeping the faith means keeping a view of the long run, realizing that our existence is only a moment in time in comparison with all eternity. We have no idea what God will do or when God will do it. Being people of faith doesn't mean being privy to what's around the next bend, but it does mean believing that God is with us whatever comes our way. And so we keep the faith that God's promises will be kept, even though they may not happen in our lifetime.

It is also worth noting that our country's relationship with God and ancient Israel's relationship with God are totally different. Before having a king Israel was a theocracy, with God in charge speaking through priests and judges. Even after Israel became a monarchy, God continued dialoguing with the nation through prophets and priests. The nation was composed of one religion and they had a specific covenant with God. As far as they were concerned, God's blessing was contingent upon their faithfulness in keeping the covenant. As the world's first modern democracy, America has a totally different relationship with God. We do not share one religion, we have no national covenant with God, and therefore God's blessing or lack thereof is not dependent upon America's keeping religious promises. When people look back at the good old days when more people went to church, they are also looking back at a time when we had legalized segregation and discrimination in America, and a time when women were still being treated as second-class citizens. All of this is to say that I do not believe that when bad things happen to our country, be it the yellow fever epidemic of the 1870's, Pearl Harbor, or the attack on September 11th, that God had anything to do with it. That's not to say that God can't give us hope in the wake of such events.

When our nation declared its independence from England in 1776 it was also a declaration of hope. The nation's founders had noble dreams and plenty of good ideas, but they had no notion of what lay ahead for the colonies. They didn't know that more than 200,000 Americans would die fighting one another in The Civil War (www.bradycampaign.org). They didn't know about environmental hazards or nuclear weapon stockpiles. Neither did they know about all the good that America would inspire: democracies worldwide, public education here at home, the invention of jazz, sending a man to the moon, and countless medical breakthroughs.

Like the Judeans, like our founding fathers and mothers, we move ahead even though we can't predict the future. We move ahead because we believe in what we're doing, or we move ahead simply because we have no choice. As we do so, let's remember God's words to Jeremiah: buy land. Keep hope. Believe in God's promises. For while we move into an unknown future, we do so with a known God.

As we move into this unknown future I believe that God's Spirit is available to each one of us, to comfort and sustain us. And I believe that God uses our church to bring healing to our community and our world, healing to families who are missing lost loved ones, healing to homebound members who need to know they're not forgotten, healing to the hungry on Long Island, the homeless in DC, and the starving in Africa. We all stand in need of healing, and we all have a need to help our world heal. So as we listen to the sounds of fireworks this year, let us also listen for the sounds of God who said, "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." These are words of promise. These are words of healing. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

Edited by Colleen Brown Only

June 30, 2002

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, Creator of the world and of us, we give you thanks and praise for all of life's blessings: butterflies in green meadows, whales in deep seas, friendship and courtship. And yet amidst these blessings, we know there is much pain. Heal our nation that has been so hurt and wounded. Bring us wholeness and a sense of well-being. Use our nation to help heal other nations on Earth, nations ravaged by AIDS and hunger, war and oppression.

We thank you for the blessings of freedom and liberty. Help us never to take these gifts lightly and to always use them wisely.

We thank you for the good work of our youth and their leaders in DC this week. Thank you for the lives they touched and we ask in turn that the lives of our PFers might be touched in a special way for having participated in the trip. Help us all to see the world differently and with more compassion...through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.