

Sermon: "Refining and Baptism"

Date: February 6, 2022

Scriptures: Jeremiah 6:22-30; 1 Corinthians 13:8-14:1

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

Today in church we are remembering our baptism. As we are virtual for what will hopefully be only one "first Sunday of the month¹," we are taking the opportunity to spend the time that we would normally devote to the act of communion to remember the baptismal waters that breathed new life into our lives. Romans 6:3-4 says (NRSV):

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Baptism is a spiritually important act in the life of the church and in the lives of individuals. Baptism is one way that helps us begin to understand the glorious gift that has come into our lives through Jesus Christ. Our connection with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through baptism connects us to the Messiah that we trust with our bodies, our hearts, and our souls. We stop today to remember that baptism gives us hope for everyday life.

To help understand that hope, we are going to spend a moment or two with the prophet Jeremiah. We have been delving into the life of

¹ The United Methodist Church (and most churches within the Methodist tradition) often celebrate communion once per month on the very first Sunday. John Wesley taught (and many ministers have tried to encourage) that we should have communion as often as possible, but most congregations celebrate it on the first Sunday. As Methodist communities were often founded by "Circuit Riders" who rode from town to town preaching and offering the sacraments, the communities fell into the habit of having communion only a few times a year when the minister would be in town. Even though ministers are available to offer communion weekly, a lot of Methodist churches continued to have communion monthly or quarterly. It is often celebrated on the first Sunday of the month as we are giving the very first Sunday over to Christ to do as He commanded..

Jeremiah over the past few weeks for two reasons: first, Jeremiah is prominently featured in the lectionary.² While I do not feel obligated as a preacher to stick to the lectionary, there is a certain beauty to the fact that churches around the world are reading similar passages today. Second, Jeremiah is a fascinating figure in our scriptures.

Jeremiah lived and ministered at the end of the fall of Judah, the southern kingdom that emerged after Judah and Israel split apart into two kingdoms after the reign of King David's son Solomon. It is theorized that one reason we have such prolific records of Jeremiah's ministry is that Jeremiah was one of the last prophets to serve before the second of the Davidic kingdoms fell.

When people realized that the world was changing, scholars began to wonder. If Jeremiah's words were not recorded, what would happen after people forgot his words? If all of Abraham's descendants lived under foreign rule, how long would it take for the words of Jeremiah to be forgotten? It is theorized that Jeremiah's words are partially remembered because the people of God suddenly realized that a day might come when there was neither a nation of Judah nor of Israel, neither a temple in Israel nor in Jerusalem, and no living person with knowledge of what God had done for the people. Scholars might have feared but suddenly realized what might happen if the words of people like Jeremiah were written down in scrolls.

There are two reasons this theory makes sense to me. First, the logic seems straightforward. I know that I have moments when I read my grocery list on the bulletin board, go grocery shopping with a list of what I need to bring home in my mind, and realize that I bought everything but the things I needed. If I cannot remember that I need to

² The Revised Common Lectionary is a fairly commonly used set of scripture readings first publicly published as an ecumenical work in 1994.

pick up a container of whipping cream for two hours, what is the likelihood I will remember the nudging of the Spirit in ten years? To be entirely honest, I wrote about forgetting the cream when writing out this sermon, went to the store to get my groceries, and still almost forgot the cream. Writing down something this important makes sense, especially given the context.

Second, Jeremiah is not the kind of book that someone would record for fun. Look with me at our reading for today. The Lord tells Jeremiah that a powerful threat is rising up in the north. The Lord reveals that there is an army on the march towards the people. The army is full of terrible enemies with bows, arrows, and javelins. They're coming on horseback and they are cruel! The Lord reveals all of this to Jeremiah.

Is Jeremiah surprised? No. If you squint a bit at the text, you can almost see it in the wording. It can be read in such a way where the words are heartbreaking. I imagine Jeremiah looking down, kicking a rock with his sandal, and saying "Yeah, I know." The Lord said the enemy is coming, and Jeremiah pointed to the people gathered by city gates, standing in clumps in the market, or milling about in the streets. Jeremiah notes that they seem to almost whisper to each other: "Don't go out into the fields! They'll get you!" The Lord seemingly came to say that destruction is coming and Jeremiah pointed to the people with slumped shoulders and sad faces. You can almost hear Jeremiah say: "They already know my Lord. They already know..."

Who would write this story for fun? Even the Lord seems sad at this revelation. Judgment is coming and the Lord tells them to put sackcloth on. You can read the response like a loving friend wrapping a shawl around their shoulders. The enemy is coming, but God draws near and invites the people closer..

Even as the Lord speaks in this passage, it seems as if the Lord already knows that this way of doing things will not work. A foreign nation is coming to try and remind the people of their relationship with God. It is a story as old as the kings of Israel. Ever since the days of the judges, it seemed like there was always somebody. The neighboring nations would threaten the people and God would send a prophet to remind the people of God and their covenant. Prophet after prophet tried to bring the people back to God. Having a king did not help. King Saul broke the covenant and the Philistines started pressing in on the borders. Time after time it seemed that the people would forget, a fire would burn, and the people would be cast into a new shape with the help of a prophet or judge. It had worked for a time, but no more.

Now it is clear: the fire will burn and burn, but the dross will never burn away. The refining process will burn and work, but the metal will never burn hot enough the process will never work long enough to purify the silver. For generation after generation the metal had been refined time after again, but that time had come to an end. Try as God might try to make things better, this ancient way of refining that had happened time and time again was coming to an end.

Perhaps you are wondering what any of this has to do with baptism. I want to propose a simple idea to you that is in no way original and in no way my own. What if this act that we call baptism connects us to the very thing we need? What if the very thing we celebrate today is what happens after the world and relationship with God came to a place where change needed to happen?

How many of us live our lives saying how we wish we were better people? How many of us understand that our lives are often filled with “junk silver”? We see that things are not going the way they should be

going. We raise our fists to heaven and shout that life is unfair. Afterwards, we turn around to do something completely unfair to someone else. We see that there are problems in the world and occasionally we see problems within ourselves.

What if God did find another way after everything seemed lost? Many people in history have said “I can’t believe in God because of all the nasty things that happened in the Bible.” What if God recognized (in passages like this one in Jeremiah) that the utility and purpose of that kind of way of life was over? What if a new way had to be made and that new way was made in Jesus Christ?

Think for a moment about what 1 Corinthians 13:8-14:1 tells us today. Love is at the center of the existence of what God created through Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke, taught, and did many things, but the church has stated that with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Christ’s teachings sprouted from a seed into the church. The church of Jesus Christ was a community that was radically different. While a nation worried about borders and invaders, the church was called to worry only about having faith, hope, and love in their lives. While a people might need to worry about neighbors coming into their neighborhoods, ideally the church was called to focus less on other people and more on striving towards love. While a kingdom might have to worry about a temple, a palace, or a wall, the church was called to focus on putting aside their toys and growing into spiritual maturity found within a life founded on faith, hope, and love.

The church created by God was radically different from what came before it. The approach of Christ was radically different than sending in one more judge, one more prophet, or one more worker. It is not that the faith of the Hebrews was flawed: they worshiped and modern Jews continue to worship with integrity and honor. The coming of Jesus

Christ put a fork in the road of faith which created a people who did more than welcome people into a community of faith, hope, and love. The community called into being ideally was focused enough on their relationship with God and living loving lives that they could leave space at the table for other people to believe what they would believe while they focused on their own faith.

Now, did the church always act ideally? I think we all know at some level that we are a people that has become intimately familiar with our need for repentance. I think even Paul knew that as he told that church that they needed to strive for love. In the New Revised Standard Version I have often thought that the 13th chapter should have been extended by the next two words: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love...”

What are we doing here today? Yes, we are hopefully singing in our homes, but that’s not all. Yes, we are hopefully thinking about the scriptures, but that’s not all. Yes, we are hopefully praying together, but that’s not all. I believe that one of the foundational principles of worship is that we are here to pursue love. One of the reasons I personally work the three words faith, hope, and love into a lot of my prayers and sermons is that it hopefully reminds us of those three things which will remain so that we will remember to pursue them.

Baptism itself is one way we pursue and are pursued by the love Paul speaks of in this passage. We come to the waters with a hope that we will live a faithful life. We come to the waters with the faith that God can meet us in the water. We echo the words of John the Baptist as we baptize with water and pray for Christ to send the Spirit into our lives. We bring a child, we enter into the water ourselves, or we gather to support someone in baptism because we believe that God is doing something special in a life.

Why do we gather with that hope? I think we all at some level understand what Jeremiah felt like long ago. We see the world around us, we recognize that things are not the way they should be, and we ask God for help. We may not cover ourselves in sackcloth, but we admit that both the world and we have problems. We may not gather in clumps to talk about the monstrous armies that might wait in the woods outside of town, but we do admit there are scary things within us. We take on the baptismal waters and let it cover us like a blanket. We lean into the loving arms of God, for we recognize that the way of living that calls for more refining, more fire, more refining, and more fire simply has a limited level of effectiveness. We come to the water because something needs to change and we ask God to start to change us.

Baptism is beautiful. Baptism connects us to the life and love of Jesus Christ. Baptism breaks the chains that bind us and can free us from ourselves. In Christ, there is hope for new life that is surrounded by faith, hope, and love. When we enter into this relationship with God or even ask God to keep working in us long after we have exited the waters, God is faithful to meet us and lead us.

So let's strive to find that love today. Let's remember who we are, whose we are, and strive for love. Let us give thanks and enter into prayer.