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by Tom Weikert

Jeremiah 31: 27-34, Ps. 119: 97-104, 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5, Luke 18: 1-8

When Jesus Comes Will He Find Faith?

Oh God: You have revealed your glory in Jesus Christ our Savior. Prosper your church to persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name. Amen.

Will He find faith? Jeremiah's book is the longest in the Bible except for Psalms. We have been hearing selections from Jeremiah off and on for some weeks now on Sundays, and coincidentally the Prayer Book has had us reading the book pretty thoroughly on a daily basis. Jeremiah prophesied for over forty years during a critical period in his nation's history, and his later admirers edited and supplemented it for another several generations before it took its present form. Much-most-of Jeremiah is in- your- face negative judgment against idolatry and call for repentance; the word 'Jeremiad' has come down to us as a synonym for lamentation over the consequences of failure to respond to inspired advice. Jeremiah calls for reform in the 6th Century BC and there IS reform, but it is followed by a renewed falling away and then by the not coincidental destruction of Jerusalem, of its kingdom and its temple, and of the exile of the people to Babylon. Yet among all the gloom and doom Jeremiah uttered hopeful oracles such as the ones we read today, which were interpreted later as fulfilled in a more hopeful era. These hopeful oracles, like so many in the Jewish Scriptures, were then seen by Christians as more especially fulfilled in the work and the promises given to us in Jesus Christ. 'I will watch over the building and the planting... You will be judged for your own sin, not that of your ancestors... I make a new covenant; my law of love, sweet love, will be within you, in your hearts; you will all know me and I will forgive.' When He comes again will he find this faith?

Will he find the faith described in 2 Timothy? Will he find that we have continued to use the Scripture to equip us for the work of taking Jesus' message to all nations, including this one? Will he find us maintaining the integrity of that message in all its glories of hope and charity and-yes-judgment - "In the presence of God and Jesus Christ who will judge the living and the dead I urge you"-Will he find that faith? "For the time is coming" it says, "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine: their ears will itch, itch, itch, to find teachers to suit their own desires and they will turn from the truth of God to contorted and malevolent human myths.

Will he find faith? Friends, the Holy Spirit blows where it will; it blows into places and then out if it so wills. In the early centuries the Christian Faith flourished in Central Asia and in what is now Turkey; today it has all but vanished from those lands. The Faith blew into Europe and seems to have blown out again; some of us have visited there and can confirm that notion by relating personal experiences. Lee and I have seen the great cathedrals in Vienna, Cologne, and Paris standing empty most of the time except for tourists; Deacon Steve saw myriad smaller churches on his pilgrimage, all empty or nearly so.

Will he find faith? The Holy Spirit blew into our country with great force and now may be blowing away. Many of us doubt the stories with which the media inundate us but have some sources that still give confidence. One of those sources for me is the Pew Research Center. The Center relates in a news release its latest survey of religious belief and observance in the United States that those who identify as Christians in the United States have declined at a rate of over 1% annually over the last 12 years to 65% and believers of other faiths have increased only slightly. Atheists, agnostics, and ‘nothing in particulars’ are growing rapidly. The most rapid declines in faith and observance have been among the young and those who dwell in the Northeast, yes, the Northeast, the part of our country most founded on fervent Christian belief, the part colonized by people who found England’s Reformation too tepid and who founded schools like Harvard and Yale to train their clergy. The Spirit blows where it will.

Will he find faith? The Spirit blew into Japan in the 16th Century as related in a fictionalized history I read with some friends recently; there were hundreds of thousands of converts and then the wind blew away under persecution. Oh, the persecutors were resourceful; of course they attacked the body with isolation, starvation, and physical torture, but they had many other tools, tools often used today by persecutors with happy faces who fervently will deny any part in persecution. Where they control employment they find ways to subtly deny preferment to believers. Where they control courts they use them to squeeze and crush believers. Where they control schools they censor, they embarrass, they humiliate the young who fall into their power. Where they control the media and popular culture they mock and blaspheme incessantly.

Will he find faith? In Japan in the 17th Century and more recently in Russia and now in China and elsewhere the persecutors have taken hostages. ‘Shut up about your faith and the one you love will live’ or ‘Shut up about your faith and the one you love will be promoted’. Persecutors attack the faithful with difficult, sometimes valid assertions: ‘Your faith is illogical’ ‘Your god is silent’ ‘Your god doesn’t fit our culture’ ‘Your Christianity is not authentic’ for instance.

Will he find faith? And yet the Spirit blows with hurricane force today as the Church grows over vast swaths of Africa, Indonesia, and China...China! A hundred million Christians, maybe many more. Why does it grow there? I believe the growth is related to the willingness of people to pray always and not lose heart. It is related to the willingness of people to proclaim the message, persisting whether favorable or not, evangelizing patiently and enduring suffering. I believe the growth is related to the legacies of people like my Anglican Hero Saint from last week’s calendar, Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (sker-es-kuski), who passed to his heavenly reward on October 15, 1906, let’s call him Joseph. Joseph was born and raised as a Jew in one of the lands of the Czars of Russia. Orphaned as a child, Joseph was very bright and so was sent off to rabbinical school where he encountered a New Testament produced by London missionaries. He became convinced Jesus was the Messiah and went off to study especially in Germany. He emigrated to the United States and was baptized by the Baptists; he studied with the Presbyterians and then at an Episcopal seminary. He was ordained Deacon and sent off as a missionary to-China! There he was made priest and later Bishop of Shanghai. He founded a St. John’s College which churned out many Chinese leaders until the communists shut it down in 1952. Joseph’s enduring work was the translation of the Bible and the Prayer Book into various

Chinese dialects. His health failed yet as he weakened from paralysis in the last decades of his life he continued in that work, typing thousands of pages with just one finger of one hand. Will Jesus find faith in China? I believe He will.

Will he find faith here? We can pray always and not lose heart. We can open our checkbooks as we have recently, giving almost \$2000 in a special offering to advance the mission. And with God's help we can maybe even get over our Episcopalian dread of causing offense and learn to speak the name of Jesus and share his message with others.

Amen.