

Lent 5, Year B – March 21, 2021
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33
Epiphany, Winnipeg
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Remember way back in the last century, starting early in 1999, when the world started to panic about what was going to happen when the clocks turned over on January 1st and we started a new millennium? If you don't remember that because you didn't exist yet, you might find it strange what we did. People started to worry because all the computers in the world had never been programmed to recognize a year beyond 1999, so we wondered if all the computers would just be confused and stop working once January 1, 2000, came along. They said planes would suddenly fall from the sky, cars would just stop working, the electrical grid would fail, and chaos would break out everywhere. So people stocked up on food, and some people built underground bunkers, and some people in some places even stocked up on weapons because they'd have to be defending themselves from other people who wanted to come and get their food or stay in their bunker. I don't think anyone stocked up on toilet paper.

As the new millenium came roaring down the tracks I kept imagining two different scenarios. In one, I woke up on January 1, 2000, and there was no power, and dead cars lined the road, and there was shouting in the streets and the phones didn't work and in the distance I could see the smoke rising from the wreckage of a crashed plane.

In the other scenario, I woke up on January 1 and checked the clock and it was 8:00 a.m. or so. I got up, poured a cup of coffee, looked out the window as cars drove by and planes flew by safely a few miles overhead. I flicked on a light in the den, fired up the computer, went online to check the news, and nothing had happened. Nothing.

As I imagined those two scenes, I feared the second one more, where nothing had changed. My old worries would still be there because no new terrors had taken their place; I'd still be insecure in all the same ways and I'd still have the same hangups I always did. The old order of a world that made there be so many people who had nothing, nothing at all, would be safely preserved for everyone who benefits from it. Whatever was wrong with anything wouldn't have been shaken up to make way for something better. It might sound strange, but I was more afraid that everything would just stay the same than that everything would change.

The computers didn't crash in the year 2000, but in the year 2020 we got this virus. And so much did crash, and so much did change...and I'm not happy about it. I don't need to tell all the ways, because all of us have seen and heard and felt what COVID has done to this world and this community. We see and hear and feel how it's shaping us and tugging at us and churning and turning us upside down inside.

So we welcome the good news that's starting to take shape now. More and more of us are getting that shot in the arm that takes us a step closer to something better than what we've known this past year, and I for one can't wait for the change. But I can't help but wonder what to hope for and what to look for as we move ahead. We all hope for the things we've been able to do before, like sing in church and laugh over dinner with friends...or hug...or see someone smile without that mask in the way, or have fourteen people over to the house or travel somewhere without a quarantine at the end. But do we really want things just to return to what they were? So that whatever was wrong with the world just keeps on

being wrong, like nothing's changed? So that whatever you worried about back then will continue to trouble you now, so that if I was grumpy or judgemental a year ago I'll go right back to it in a month or two; so that if our country and economy just accepted that some people could be left behind and put aside we can just keep on with it now? "Normal" before was never perfect. It needs a shake up. But it's all we've known, and it is all being shaken up now and something different is on the way. But we don't know what it is.

It's like a line from a short prayer by Nadia Bolz-Weber: "I'm so afraid that I will never be who I once was. And I am also afraid that I will be."

We're living in a strange in-between time right now. But it fits while we make this journey through Lent; while we reflect and repent and turn away from ways of brokenness and sin that we've known; while we turn back to our God who writes the ways of life on our heart. This strange in-between time is a good space to be in while we move to this holiest time of year when we will watch and wait between a crucifixion and death and an empty tomb that overflows with new life.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke a word for us in these in between times a few minutes ago. It was a word from God about a new covenant, a new relationship, a new way that was not like before. Jeremiah's people at the time were in the middle of a national disaster: Their nation had been taken over by a foreign superpower, and the holy city and the holy temple had been destroyed and left in ruins. So many of the people had been carried away to live in exile, and so many more of the people had fled for borders to the west or to the north, or just to the hills to hide and wonder and wait and, they hope, to be safe.

The story goes that it is a mess and a tragedy that they've made for themselves. But God sees that it's time for the mess to end, and God begins to speak into that tragedy, and God says again and again, "The days are surely coming when I will restore you and you will be home and there will be compassion and dancing and working and loving and living again. The days are coming, says God, when all that's gone wrong will not be held against you, and all that's gone wrong will be made right, and you will be home. You people will live."

But it won't be the same.

It won't be the same for us. And that's good. Because now God says, and Jeremiah spoke it right out loud, and Bernie read it right out loud, "The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with my people," says our God. Not just like the before time. Not like nothing has changed when so much needs to be changed. But something new.

Something new is coming out of all this life that we're living. It's happening right now, and every day, because our God is always making something new. I don't know what's coming. None of us really do. It won't look just like it did before. Because when something dies and something rises something is new. When someone dies and someone rises, the world is made new. God is doing a new thing, making a fresh new way and a new day. Those days are surely coming. AMEN.