

## What Life Will We Lose? What Life Will We Gain?

Let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of generous love, be with us now as we consider what life we will lose and what life we will gain. Speak to us through our ancestors in faith. Amen.

Beloved friends, What life will we lose? What life will we gain? On this fifth Sunday in Lent, our reading from Jeremiah provides a meaningful starting place from which to interact with the gospel reading and our questions about loss and gain of life. Hearing this passage feels a bit like humming along to a familiar song on the radio. The words have universal appeal and the tone draws us in.

The prophetic writings in the book of Jeremiah were written during the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, approximately 600 years before Jesus lived. The temple would fall to the Babylonian army in 587 and the people in that part of that kingdom of Judah would be forced into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah anticipated the destruction that was coming and often urged people to repent and reform in ways they could have impact.

Within Christian and other faith traditions, we name as prophets those individuals who observe the times in which they live and articulate clear insights about where the community seems to be headed. A prophet will most often direct difficult, uncomfortable insights to those in power or those who are comfortable in the midst of injustice. **I wonder, who is one modern-day prophet you appreciate for the way they tell difficult, uncomfortable insights?** They may be in the public sphere or even in your private life. Would anyone like to speak aloud the name of such a disarmingly honest modern-day prophet? *Bernie Sanders. Liz Cheney.*

A fiercely honest prophet will also offer words of hope and possibility – an invitation to imagine with them a better way. **I wonder, who is one modern-day prophet you appreciate for the way they speak hope and possibility into present-day difficult circumstances? Would anyone like to speak aloud the name** (again, in the public sphere or in your own life) **of a hope and possibility bearing modern-day prophet?** *Maya Angelou. Michelle Obama. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

In today's reading, Jeremiah leads with hope and possibility, mixing in words of challenge. We heard this from the voice of God as Jeremiah perceived it: *"I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors..."*

You know the stories of how your ancestors experienced their connection with me, God says. Yet the one thing that is constant about life is change, so pay attention to new ways you need to live out my law of Love in the world. Jeremiah continued hearing God's voice:

*"But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' says God: 'I will put my law in their minds and on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"*

I am the love that abides with you in this time as well as in generations past, God says. My law of love is imprinted in your minds and on your hearts. Jeremiah continued hearing God's voice:

*"No longer will they need to teach one another or remind one another to listen to God. All of them, high and low alike, will listen to me,"* says God, *'for I will forgive their misdeeds and remember their sins no more.'"*

God seems to be saying to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE people of Israel and to us today, do not lean solely on recitation of the teachings of your ancestors (their ways of understanding my presence with them), but show one another, day by day, how you are hearing my voice and how my voice of Love empowers your individual and collective living.

You will make mistakes. You will sin by erring from the way of Love. And you can lean into my grace to know your misdeeds are forgiven – washed away by grace.

Members and friends of St. Croix United Church, we will soon enter into a time strategic visioning. As a congregation, we will discern and articulate our core values, vision and mission such that the wider community will know who we are, what God we worship, and how they might partner with us toward deeper and broader love and justice. Jeremiah might offer us this challenge: **If you tell the St. Croix Valley community that you are listening for my voice, what will your actions tell them that you are hearing from me? (asks God) Further, what life would they lose and what life would they gain by being in relationship with us?**

Let's turn to our gospel reading from which we draw those questions today: What life will we lose? What life will we gain? The setting for today's reading is a gathering for worship during the festival of Passover. Amidst devote Jews were also neighbors of Greek ethnicity. Jesus seems to address his comments to whomever might hear him, knowing they will land on any given person's ears in a unique way based on that one's own life circumstances.

We heard Jesus say, *"The truth of the matter is, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain: but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest."*

I hear Jesus inviting us to not cling too tightly to any particular circumstances we know, but rather to practice vulnerability – to let Love crack us open in our living and in our dying.

Jesus continued, *“If you love your life you’ll lose it; if you hate your life in this world you’ll keep it for eternal life.”*

In the church of my upbringing, I somehow understood eternal life to only be referring to after death (the mysterious afterlife). But we are part of life eternal and it is clear that we are co-creating heavenly and hellish circumstances every day in this Earth space we inhabit. Jesus wants us to know that our living (whether we are loving it or hating it) will continue with us in the Earth.

And he says, *“Anyone who wants to work for me must follow in my footsteps, and wherever I am, my worker will be there too... Now my soul is troubled. What will I say: ‘Abba, save me from this hour?’ But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Abba, glorify your name!”*

In this passage, Jesus speaks to us of surrender to the will of God’s love in our lives. Jesus continues to invite us to let go of and lose the death-dealing, hell-creating ways of living and to pursue and gain the love-dealing, heaven-creating ways that we can live.

In her book, *Simple Ways: Towards the Sacred*; writer, meditation teacher, and psychotherapist Gunilla Norris offers beautiful words about breath. So I invite us to focus on breath for the remaining moments of this reflection. She writes:

*“When we are born, we are born into a relationship with air, with breathing. How closely the words wind, air, life, and spirit are linked in human thought. We are creatures into whom life is breathed.*

*A word we have for inhaling is inspiration. When we are fully inspired, not only are our lungs filled—our beings are also filled, with hope, with potential, with the impetus to express possibility.*

*Expired, we are over and done with, stopped... finished.*

*Our life is lived within this paradox. With every inhalation we are given life. With every exhalation we must surrender that life, for another breath to be given to us. If we could fully enter the rhythm of this paradox we would live with immediacy, and be intimate with birth and death and with life itself.”*

Words of wisdom from Gunilla Norris. She goes on to offer a poetic meditation. I invite you to close your eyes if it assists you in receiving her words of blessing fully:

*Unobtrusively,  
softly, gently, air enters the body.*

*For a moment we are expanded,  
somehow made more.*

*Then the air leaves us.  
The sound of its leaving  
is like the swish of a skirt,  
or the distant breaking of a wave.*

*There is no one who can feel this for us.  
Only we can feel the rich gift of it.  
No one can live this moment,  
or any moment, for us.  
It is ours alone.*

*Yet we are not alone.  
Every moment Life is there,  
infusing us  
with the radiant risk and splendor of being.*

*It is breathtaking.”*

And finally this wise teacher, Gunilla Norris, asks us these two questions:  
*“Can just this next breath be one I receive instead of take? How might  
there be more breathing room in my life?”*

Friends, what life will we lose? What life will we gain? I further ask us,  
what will be the substance of the life we share with one another and in  
ever-widening circles of community? May we share the life of Love that  
Jesus patterned for us – empowered Christ light, because that Love is  
counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
March 17, 2024 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent)  
Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33