

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Oct 17, 2010

South Plains
Anniversary Sunday

Valuing The Past

The banner hanging on the construction fence outside the sanctuary carries the slogan “Valuing the Past – Visioning the Future.” Jeremiah was a prophet who valued the past of Israel so highly that when his people broke with the past and failed to live up to their heritage, he proclaimed the Lord’s judgment on them. That judgment was the Babylonian exile. But, Jeremiah was not a pessimist. When the word of the Lord came to him during the darkest days of exile and gave him hope that the days were coming when Israel would once again be faithful, Jeremiah proclaimed that hope in chapters 30-33. The common denominator in his proclamations of judgment and hope is God’s covenant in the past and in the future. The prophet knew how to value the past.

You don’t have to be in Mr. Jefferson’s country very long before you realize how much stock we place in our past history. We love the old buildings, the old stories, the old trees, the old university, the old Three Notched Road, and especially the old patriots: Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison. It’s one reason we love living here. But, we have to be careful. We have to know how to value the past or else it becomes a burden, stifling the future and leaving us stuck as fossils in a past no longer useful and life-giving.

That same caution applies to churches. So as we celebrate 191 years of our past at South Plains, I want to learn from Jeremiah how to value the past. I suppose the place to start is to learn what’s worth keeping from the past. Jeremiah focuses on this word “covenant,” an agreement between the Lord and his people that took several different forms in the history of Israel. There’s the covenant with Noah, God’s promise never again to flood the earth and destroy almost everything. There’s the covenant with Abraham promising land, children and blessing. There’s the covenant with King David that Israel interpreted to mean an everlasting dynasty of Davidic kings. Above all, there’s the covenant on Mt. Sinai with the giving of the Commandments. The Lord says to Jeremiah that the covenant, the relationship between the Lord and his people is worth keeping in every sense of that word “keeping.”

This is not “keeping” the covenant the way the Egyptians kept their Pharaohs by embalming them or the way libraries keep documents in a temperature and humidity controlled environment. A covenant remains valuable when people live up to their promises. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31).” The covenant will be new in the sense that the Lord is offering a fresh start for the same relationship. God renews his promised care and guidance and strength and love and comfort – all the blessings of his presence. He asks Israel to renew their commitment to that relationship.

Valuing our past means renewing our old relationship, our covenant with the Lord. Jeremiah is clear about what this renewal will involve: the law, our identity as God's people, and forgiveness, all summed up as knowing the Lord. "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest (31:34)."

I think there's a lot of confusion today about the place of the law of God in Christianity. We have a tendency to write off the law as legalistic, rigid and narrow, the opposite of God's grace. That's unfortunate because the opposite of keeping the law would be lawlessness and anarchy, a perpetual state of terrorism when no one could depend on society keeping even the basic rules of civility and public safety. The Jewish meaning of "Law" is closer to guidance and instruction. God gives the commandments to Israel as dependable instruction for how to live.

When those 33 miners were buried 2000 feet underground they received instructions on eating, maintaining sanitary conditions, exercising, and staying healthy. Those instructions were life-giving. The Law of God offered Israel, and still offers us today the gracious guidance for healthy, productive living. When we hear it as instruction, when we receive it as grace, when we understand it in the spirit of Christ, it gives life.

According to Jeremiah, this happens when the Law of God is written on our hearts. It's not a rule book

intended to address every situation. It's certainly not an assembly line that spits out people stamped, molded, screwed and painted together according to somebody's specifications for what a Christian ought to look like. Implanted in our hearts, the Law of God is like a pacemaker coordinating the flow of blood with the demands of our environment and the decisions of our souls. The new covenant means a new heart for God. This new heart enables us to keep the covenant and value the past.

It also means a new identity: "I will be their God and they will be my people." Actually, there's nothing new about that identity. All along, Israel has been and remains today the chosen people of God. When you were baptized, you became part of God's chosen people. Of course, like ancient Israel, we do not always act like people of God, godly people. The covenant invites a response on our part. We got some wedding invitations that were quite elegant. As with any invitation, we can keep it under the hankies in our dresser drawer as proof that we were on the guest list; or we can respond to that invitation and show up at the wedding party. It's the people who show up when God calls who are people of that new covenant.

Finally, the new covenant promises forgiveness. "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more (31:34)." Forgiveness is a selective kind of forgetting. It's not like amnesia that wipes out all record of the past. If absolutely nothing were remembered about our sins,

there wouldn't be anything to forgive. God chooses to forget our guilt and invites us to forget it. God decides to forget the hurt we caused in the heart of heaven. God sets aside, not the earthly consequences of our sins, but the heavenly punishments for them. God says, "I'm not going to focus on the wrong David Garth has done. I'm going to give my attention to the good that I can still bring out in that guy."

When the young man announced his engagement over the internet, his mother Susan said nothing to the rest of the family for a whole week. To say she had counseled caution to her son was an understatement. The girlfriend had not been to her liking. But, when he made the decision to marry her, Susan also faced a decision. She sat down with her daughter-in-law to be and said, "You and I have said and done things that were hurtful. I want to put the past behind us. I want to move forward in a better relationship." The girl replied, "I do too." Neither women tried to excuse or reinterpret the past. They simply have tried to forgive each other and move forward. Will they be successful? Who knows? But, they have made a new beginning in an old relationship, an unspoken covenant if you will, a fresh start.

Anniversaries like ours today can focus exclusively on past events, past glories and triumphs, historical figures who brought us to this place in our journey. If that's all we do in marking 191 years, we will have missed an opportunity to build on our history. I am

confident that the people who were the backbone of South Plains over the years, the people to whom we are most indebted today, were not motivated by the hope of fame beyond the grave. Their energy and determination came from hope in God's faithfulness for the future. Their eyes were on the horizon; the days that are surely coming says the Lord, when God's law is written on our hearts, when we will be identified as God's people in our deeds as well as in our name, when we will be forgiven. Or, to sum it all up in the words of Jeremiah, the new covenant will mean that we have held on to what is most valuable in our past and let the rest go in order to know the Lord.

We're not there yet. Sometimes we don't believe we're really forgiven. We may look like the people of God on Sunday morning, but sometimes that identity is disguised by our behavior on Monday. The Law is penciled in, but not written indelibly on our hearts. We are a work in progress.

Whenever I read the Old Testament, I have to be reminded that prophets like Jeremiah were more than spiritual gurus. They may have complained and pushed and encouraged and prodded the Israelites to act more like the people of God, but they also promised tangible signs of God's presence. During Israel's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, it is Jeremiah who says that "houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land (32:15)." It is Isaiah who prophesies a return to the Promised Land. The hope they preached included a

political promise that “you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace to the Promised Land (Isa. 55:12).”

I believe Kirk Hall is the sign of God’s promise to South Plains, a sign as tangible as the land God promised to Israel. It’s not a guaranteed retirement plan that should encourage us to sit back and wait for good things to happen. It’s a lure to get us into God’s future. Last weekend I was walking along a trout stream where the posted signs inform the public that fishing is permitted only with artificial lures. When I watched carefully, I could see trout hiding in the shadows of the rocks and boulders of that stream. The fisherman’s lure is intended to entice the fish to come out and meet the angler. Kirk Hall is God’s lure enticing us and others to come out and know the Lord.

The lure is for us first. It’s our invitation to a new relationship with our Savior. Recently, I gave you an assignment to pick out an unchurched friend to pray for. You don’t need to tell me or anyone else who you are praying for. Just pray for them for next couple of months. Then, invite them to come to worship with you during the Advent/Christmas season. That can be one part of our response to Jeremiah’s promise that “the days are surely coming...” a new covenant, a new start, a new heart, a new identity. We will know the Lord. Our past will be more valuable than ever before.