

## Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: March 21, 2021 Year B 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33

Title: Sorting Things Out

Focus: During times of rapid change, we seek to listen for God's direction as we sort out what to keep and what to set aside as we move forward.

### First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.



### GOSPEL: John 12:20-33

<sup>20</sup>Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup>"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

### Making a Transition

This is my sister Agda. Her name is a family name from my mother's side of the family. It's Swedish.

This picture was taken, as you can probably see, selfie-style. She's standing outside the home that she and her husband Tom have shared for over 25 years in Kent, Washington, a Seattle suburb. They've raised their daughter Sam in that home and they were active in their community. Sam attended local schools growing up, then went across the country to the Univ. of NH to college. Last year, Sam married a young man from NH whose whole family all live within a half hour's drive from one another.

When Sam, their only child, got married to Scott in New Hampshire (I, Uncle Scott, officiated at the wedding), Agda and Tom decided to relocate themselves. After 25 years in this house and over 30 in the Seattle area, they packed up and moved. In this picture, Agda is standing on the front walkway to their house. Over her shoulder is the "For Sale Sign" and you can see the orange United Moving Truck out at the street. They moved just 2 weeks ago—with the truck hauling their stuff to NH and the two of them flying across the country.

## **Moving is Stressful; Change is Stressful**

Tom and Agda, my brother in law and sister, have chosen this—to relocate. It's what they want to do. Tom has retired and my sister has a new job in the region with a promotion. They want to be near daughter Sam and SIL Scott (and any future grandchildren.) And yet even though they chose to make this change, moving is still stressful. Change is stressful.

## **Sort, Donate/Give Away, or Keep**

One of the tasks for my sister and her husband that has required a lot of time and physical and emotional energy is sorting stuff. You accumulate a lot of stuff in 25 plus years and it takes energy and dollars to move it. Sorting necessitates that you consider the items' value in light of your present circumstances and future need.

From time to time over the last several months, my sister would unearth and rediscover things and ask herself what to do with them.

- Sometimes she'd take a picture of an item and send it to our brother John and me.
- Sometimes the picture would be with a question: "Do either of you have interest in this?"
- Sometimes we'd reply, "That's cool, but no" and she'd set it in a different pile to give away or offer it for sale.
- Sometimes the message would be an excited "Look what I found!" and we would reminisce and say "Cool—I remember that!" or "Look at Uncle Rob in the cowboy hat!" or whatever.
- At Christmas, I got a box from Agda with some family treasures in it—keepers for me: Some mementoes with my Grandpa Moes' initials on them, an Episcopal prayer book that was my mother's when she was in college . . .

After 25 years in the same house and over 30 in the same community, my sister moved just two weeks ago. I talked with her about change and the stresses of that—the

stress created both by the long list of things to be done by a certain date and also the stress of coping with significant change within a period of time.

She recognized that it wasn't just one thing changing, but many:

- New job for her
- Retirement for Tom
- Moving cross country
- Saying "goodbye" to friends from the area
- So, new home, new community, new friends, new job. . .

She also recognized that they could have experienced even more change:

- Though they've each had a work change and Tom retired, then didn't have a true job loss.
- Neither one of them has had a significant illness or health change

How about you? I'm guessing you haven't moved in the last two weeks, but surely my sister's circumstance is universal enough that you can relate to it, whether it's your own previous move or your own time of experiencing multiple changes in a short period of time.

## Today's Readings

Today's texts—the first reading from Jeremiah and the Gospel text from John—also acknowledge that change is hard.

**In Jeremiah**, the prophet speaks for God, who promises the coming of a new covenant. It is distinguished from the previous covenants which the people broke. God, who has given the Law to Moses, now declares that God will write God's law on the people's hearts. The newness of the covenant is not its content, but in how it will be internalized.

Reading this text from our vantage point in history, we see this new covenant fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, but the promise would have had a particular context to those hearing it as they were living in exile. They can look forward to being part of a community of faith that is forgiven as an act of God's pure grace.

**In John**, the change for the disciples and the surrounding community is hearing that "the hour has come." Up to this point in John, references to "hour" are always pointing forward: repeatedly in John up to this point, Jesus has said, "My hour has not yet come." For instance, he said that to his mother at the wedding in Cana in chapter 2.

Jesus uses an agricultural metaphor to describe his own death: in order for the seed to bear fruit, it must die. It must have been a puzzling, unsettling message to hear that defied their expectation.

- Both texts present scenarios in which God initiates change.

So, by extension, the texts also invite us to look for God's presence or God's direction in the midst of that change. Where is God directing me? Where is God guiding me? And, maybe also not just "me," but where is God guiding us or the congregation of Good Shepherd? Where can I see God at work or . . . ?

## **Sort, Give Away, or Keep During Times of Change**

Maybe we're not all literally loading up the United Moving truck, but clearly this last year has been a time of change and adaptation for all of us. It has been a full year since we last worshiped in person beyond the Worship Team folks bringing you the service. Since then, of course, within and through Good Shepherd Church we have adapted by providing worship remotely.

At school, work, church, and at home, we've learned how to connect on Zoom and in other online formats.

- I see 85+ year olds commenting on Facebook posts and chatting during the live-streamed service.
- We've got middle schoolers and high schoolers playing creative scavenger hunts and other games through Zoom.
- We all know generations of family members connecting online for weekly Zoom calls or for holiday meals.

Even if we're not loading up the moving van, the rapid change that we're all experiencing and the new things to which God is calling us urge us to engage in the same kind of sorting process that my sister has done to prepare for her move.

- **We're all presented with this circumstance that gives us the opportunity to sort:**
  - Taking into account the new things we've learned, the adaptations that we've made, the reorientation we've experienced about how we use our time, how we relate to others, and the things that we've missed while we've been in isolation, how shall we sort all of that?
- Welcoming or inviting God to be a part of this process, how shall we reflect as we move forward?
- How shall we determine
  - What to rejoice in or give thanks for, but also let go
  - What to share with another or give away and
  - What things shall we embrace and keep?

With selling one's house and literally moving, there's a physical task—getting stuff boxed and ready for the truck--and there's a date on the calendar establishing a deadline. Maybe we don't face a task and a deadline quite so stark and clear, but there is an opportunity presented by our collective circumstance.

- How have we adapted?
- In what ways have we resisted?

## Focusing our Reflections

In our particular context of change and adaptation and we're reflecting as we moving forward at Good Shepherd, I've shared an article with our Governing Board and staff that I think will help us in the sorting process by helping us ask questions as we emerge from the COVID period. The article is written by a pastor serving in Roanoke, Virginia. I think the article has a helpful framework that will help us ask pertinent mission-oriented reflection questions.

### Preparing to serve a post-pandemic world: How do we R.A.T.E.?

Guest commentary by George C. Anderson. Posted February 5, 2021 in *The Presbyterian Outlook*.<sup>1</sup> He uses the acronym RATE to refer to the phases or stages in which we have found ourselves during COVID:

#### **R for Reacting: figuring out what we initially needed to do when the pandemic hit.**

- How do we keep people safe?
- Church leaders figured out how to offer worship taped or online.
- Postposed events like weddings, memorial services, and baptisms.
- The hope was that these safety precautions would last only for weeks or maybe a few months.

#### **A for Adapting: How we learned new ways and developed new skills when it became clear that restrictions were not going to end soon.**

- It became clear that restrictions were not going to end soon.
- Some churches struggled to adapt. Some, like ours, figured out new ways and developed new skills.
- Staff and members learned multimedia skills.
- Churches established YouTube channels to make online worship and education readily available. We established Zoom accounts for hosting meetings.
- Things we'd tested a bit soon became much more widely used, like online giving.
- We increased ways of extending pastoral care in ways that did not involve in-person visits—we strengthened communication across the congregation.

#### **T for Transitioning: How we've considered and then put in place initial plans to resume as health conditions have improved and vaccinations begin to have an effect.** This is really where we are now. . .

In a letter distributed to Good Shepherd folks about a week ago on March 12, I described the plan approved by the Governing Board for resuming in-person worship. Building from a recommendation from the COVID Task Force based on health data from our region and also taking into account input from the church office

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/02/preparing-to-serve-a-post-pandemic-world-how-do-we-r-a-t-e/>

staff and worship team, **the Good Shepherd Governing Board has approved a plan to resume in-person worship beginning April 18.**

- This is our particular plan that is mirrored by churches, businesses and organizations everywhere.
- Leaders are asking, “How can we safely do *this?*”
- And, as we make decisions, how can we communicate in such a way that we recognize the differing tugs that people feel: While we are all perhaps eager to move forward, some are more cautious than others.

### **E for Emerging: How will congregations become new versions of themselves? The sorting process continues. . .**

- As we emerge, how will worship, education, fellowship and outreach will be offered in renovated ways? What will be different?
- What was begun during the pandemic that might be worth continuing?
- What can we give thanks for and also let go of? How can we acknowledge loss and grieve, while still letting go? What old programs and practices now seem less essential?
- What will be different about the church from its pre-pandemic life?
- What role will technology and media continue to play?
- How can grief over what was lost be managed and excitement be created about what is ahead?
- How can the congregation know it is not losing its identity but is evolving?
- How will we reconnect with each other?

### **Giving Thanks and Moving Forward**

My sister posted the picture that I showed you on her Facebook page with the heading: “It’s really happening!”

The responses from her circle of friends, community connections, and professional colleagues were touching.

- Surprise, some sadness:
  - Where are you going?
  - Happy for you; sad for us.
  - You will be missed.
- Thanksgiving and recognition:
  - Thank you for all you have done for the children and families in WA.
  - We will miss having you as an advocate for children and education.
- Well wishes during the transition and in the future:
  - Safe travels. Enjoy your new adventures.

**May it be so for us as we continue to adapt to change at Good Shepherd.**

- May we give thanks for God's steadfast presence with us.
- May we acknowledge that change is hard and be kind to ourselves and one another.
- May we sort out opportunities and present realities and ask for God's guidance and presence in the midst of change and in the midst of the hard work of sorting.
- May we rejoice in the things that have been a part of who we are and how we have functioned.
- May we let go of things that need to change.
- May we look forward to the future to which God is calling us.

**Close with prayer**

Change is hard. Be present with us.

Help us to be kind to ourselves and to one another.

Help us to trust you and embrace the mission to which you call us.