

“BEFORE THE END OF SUMMER...”

**Text” “The harvest is past, the summer
is ended, and we are not yet saved.”**

Jeremiah 8:20

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I invite you to take a little visit with me today to one of the classic passages of the Old Testament in the 8th Chapter of the Prophecy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a dominant figure of his time, around the turn of the 6th Century BCE. For half a century he remained influential with the changing pattern of Kings and rulers, much like the influence Billy Graham has had in our time. I enjoyed reading, The Preacher and the Presidents, a recent book where the authors (Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy) tell the story of how a farmer's son from just down the road in Charlotte has influenced American Presidents for more than half a century. Some of Billy's earliest sermons were here at Sharon Presbyterian Church.

Jeremiah prophesied in troubling times. The Barbarians were rumbling to the north. Israel, the Northern section of the divided Kingdom, had been plundered and destroyed two centuries earlier. By the 6th century, Tiglath-Pileser III was long gone. King Nebuchadnezzar ruled the Middle East from Babylon. He would soon over-run Judah and destroy Jerusalem, and the long days of The Exile would begin.

Jeremiah was sent by God to warn them that their nation was in trouble. He minced no words. He was a chosen man of God, but his fierce anger could erupt at any moment without warning. He told them it was simple: commit yourselves as individuals and as a nation to the Lord and God will take care of you and bless you mightily. If you refuse, a privilege he always gives his children, he will simply walk away and leave you to fend for yourselves. What part of that do you not understand?

Sounds tough; and it was. But he had a softer side, and it shows now and then in his prophecy. For example, Chapters 32-34 regarding the New Covenant which God will make with his people, is reassuring and uplifting. Here in Chapter 8 we find one of the most moving Elegies of all time.

Something dreadful had happened in Judah. It was most likely some kind of natural disaster, possibly a severe drought, or an earthquake. Some say it was a monstrous plague. History does not help us. Those who chronicled what was going on were far more concerned with the dangers from the North. The Babylonians were still threatening. But in Jeremiah's heart and soul, this natural disaster took precedence: men, women and children were dying and no one knew what to do.

As our text opens in 8:20, it was drawing on to autumn. The prophet says that the summer was coming near to its end. The changing of the seasons means different things to different people, but all of us are conscious that time is marching on. Fall takes us either back to school, off to college, home from vacation, and to some listening it signifies the beginning of the autumn years. "When Autumn Leaves Start to Fall" used to be a popular song.

Jeremiah penned these lines, (Are you listening?) "The harvest is past, the summer is ended we are not yet saved." It sort of slaps you in the face, with its insistence of the urgency of things. Whatever the natural calamity was to them, to us it is more of an awkward reminder. "My heart is heavy within me," he continued, "dismay has taken hold of me." Then come the words of the lovely anthem which Mimi Harkness sang so well, Jeremiah asked: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here?" - Meaning, that peoples' hearts were breaking and there was no one around to mend them, no soothing ointment to pour over their wounds, no relief, and no medicine powerful enough to heal them, no physicians to tend to them. (Imagine a world without doctors and hospitals....) The Balm of Gilead was

especially desirable because it had wonderful healing properties. Gilead was off to the east where the sun rose each morning. For that and other reasons Gilead had become the land of hope and dreams. Is there no balm in Gilead?

Then come the words of our text: so simple, but so alarming and so deep with meaning. Listen again: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not yet saved.” In other words, something remains to be done; the job is still unfinished. We have a long way to go and not much time to get there. The summer was nearly over. The autumn came next. Then winter. What do you think he meant?

“We are not yet saved.” Relax now. Pull down the barriers and objections you might have to the revival-tent terminology of the words. Don’t shut your mind so tight that you will miss the message. Kierkegaard, the great Danish Theologian, once commented on how difficult it was to make a Christian out of those who think they already are.

We have heard the jargon, although not usually too much in traditional Presbyterian Churches. Actually, in context, Jeremiah is not referring to our modern use of the word “saved” at all. We tend to glorify it as a personal gift, our ticket into heaven. But, he is referring to a community event, to the recovery of their equilibrium, the renewing of their way of life, to find themselves again. The little things they had done to bolster their lives and circumstances had caught up with them. All the compromises they had made through the decades were beginning to tip the scales against them. Jeremiah’s prophecy had a dual purpose: to build up and to tear down. To build up those whose countenance had fallen, but to tear down those who were too proud.

He offers no mumbo-jumbo, no little mantra to chant a few times to win salvation. He just asked them to stop for a minute, near the end of summer, and think about where they were and what they should be. God still has a claim upon your life.

You will soon hear that we are about to head into a new Mission Study here at Sharon. It is a self-led study to determine where the congregation is and where it feels it should go next. Things are changing everywhere in the church and the nation. This study is designed by the Presbytery to help churches find their way in this fast-changing society. It is normally conducted when a Congregation has gone through different times or in the change of a pastor. You have had more than a full share of changes here in recent years. It calls for us to think and pray and study, to drop back and take a good look at where God wants us to go, to take a look-see at what could be done better, and to find what new programs and ideas of things God might be calling us to do. It asks that our time-worn old prejudices and individual preferences be dropped by the side of the road, and while honoring the past, to prepare for the future. Things can get lost along the way.

In the book of Revelation, John points to the heart of the trouble: He wrote to the Church at Ephesus: “I have this against you, ‘You lost the love you had at first.’” Somewhere along the way the joy turned into the routine of things. It was not protected. We treated it casually, when we should have circled the wagons around it and defended it with all our might.

But listen, you don't really lose love; you throw it away; you get careless with it; or you yell at it; or you ignore it, and one day it is gone. Graham Greene wrote through one of his fictional characters, "God will never rob you of grace. You can only do that to yourself." Love never ends.

Jeremiah would rephrase it, "The problem is that you cut yourself loose from the vine." Jesus later said, "I am the vine; you are the branches, apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:05) We need to keep connected to the source of our strength, the same way your electric lamp has to stay plugged into the outlet

It is given to every one of us to spend a lifetime creating the person God intended us to be. It is a full-time job standing up for what you believe, taking criticism from those who try to compromise you, becoming unpopular because you refuse to give in. It is a full time job to keep your integrity alive and spotless. It is a full time job to keep growing in matters of the spirit.

I taught a Bible Study at a Church some years ago. I still smile when I think about it. When we announced the study in Worship, an officer of the church came to me afterwards and said: "I sure wish I knew the Bible like you do. How did you get to know so much about it?" I asked, "Do you read your Bible?"

He said, "Oh no, my Bible got away from me years ago." "Got away from you," I said, "what does that mean?" "I don't know what happened to it," he continued, "but one day I was looking for it and I couldn't find it." "Why didn't you buy another one?" He said, "I never got around to it." Well, I gave him one of my Bibles. I made him promise that he would read it, and that he would come to the Bible Studies. He didn't.

This same man, and many others like him, have told me through the years that they wanted to know more about God's Word. Let me tell you what happened. In his case, I said, "Fine Bill, I will help you. We have a Bible class scheduled on Tuesday night, come a little early and I will catch you up with the rest of the class." He stopped, shuffled his feet a little and murmured, "Ah Rev., Tuesdays are my night to play cards at the club." Others through the years have substituted my bowling night, or basketball or visiting, or my favorite television show. One man even told me 30 years ago that Tuesday was his night to watch wrestling – back in the days of Donn Eagle and Gorgeous George.

So with Bill, I liked him, I told him about a new Friday noon day Bible study we to hold downtown for working people. Coincidentally, even providentially, we planned to meet at a restaurant not far from Bill's office. I still smile when I think of what he said next. He stuttered around and said he wished he could come, but on Fridays he always went to the Harvard, Yale and Princeton Club to be with his old college chums. "But I would love to know more about the Bible," he repeated, as he walked away.

If you want to finish the job you have to begin it and stay with it. One of Cromie's Laws says: The best way to get a job done is to start it. If you want to understand the Bible you have to begin reading it. There is more, but that is the place to start. This and that sound like good excuses, but all added together, who is kidding whom? You only go around once. "Life is like a parachute jump," Margaret Mead wrote. "You have to get it right the first time." We need to concentrate, not zig this way and zag that.

I shall always remember the young father early in my ministry who brought a postcard with him to church one August Sunday. It was from his son who was away to Boy Scout Camp. He was smiling. It

read: “Dear Mom and Dad, we had a great field trip yesterday. We climbed up this beautiful mountain. It was a blast. Only when we got back, our counselor told us that we had climbed the wrong mountain. . . Now we have to do it again tomorrow. Oh well. Your son, Billy.” Climb it right the first time.

Throughout the Scriptures God always offers a second chance. He allows us to start over. That is the whole story of the Bible. That is the nub and central message which Jesus taught: “You must be born again; you can begin anew.” There is always the glory of the second chance.

But, but there is always the glory of the first chance, too, the crown which is awarded to those who do it right the first time around. Who willingly seek to serve the Lord from their first days until the last, who get it right the first time.

Life goes round fast. You never know what’s around the next corner. Don’t delay your opportunity for joy, for newness. Don’t be cautious when God calls you to something new. Some folk I meet know everything and no thanks, they don’t want to learn anything more. Been there, done that. It didn’t work then; so it won’t work now. They closed the door of all things new years and years ago.

Sure, it is easier to stay the way you are, but it's usually better not to. Every time you step out into the future, I guarantee you . . . when you get there Christ will be there to welcome you. It is an urgency I am speaking of. It’s love, it’s kindness, it’s everything good. But, as the Pennsylvania Dutchmen used to say, “Vee get too soon oldt, und too late schmartt.”

It never hurts to tell the ones you love that you love them again. Wives never tire of hearing husbands say “I love you.” And if she asks you if you love her, try responding that you told it to her 30 years ago and see what she says. When you recite the goodness of your life along the way, God will always say, “Yes, but what have you done for me lately?”

At our house we try never to say goodbye or leave home or hang up the phone without saying, “I love you.” No one ever seems to get tired of hearing it. I sure don’t. Neither does my wife. If I forget to say “I love you” to our children, they think I am mad about something. God is a person. Christ called us his friends. He doesn't mind hearing us profess our gratitude time and time again. He will listen every time. When you say, “Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord, to Thee,” he will never respond: ”Oh, I know, you told me that last year.”

We will be up in Pittsburgh for a Board Meeting next weekend. While there, I will officiate at a renewal of vows ceremony for two friends, Ann and Dick, who have been married 50 years. I used to think it was old people who celebrated Golden Anniversaries. Most couples do not formally renew their marriage vows, except maybe at their 50th. In this case, it happens that my wife Peggy was in their wedding all that time ago.

Whatever, I will offer a prayer for them and their children and grandchildren, and ask them to repeat their vows after me. Renewing marriage vows is a good reminder. Each time we have a baptism here we say it is a reminder of the Baptism we had in coming to Christ and his Church. Each of us needs to renew our vows to our family and friends, to ourselves but mostly, to the Lord. The commitment is for a lifetime.

I hope you were at your Television set late Friday evening when the indomitable American swimmer Michael Phelps added a 6th gold medal to his Olympic stash of victories. What a great example he is of the young people of America. He added two more to make it a record 8 this year. Peggy and I got home Friday just in time to watch the finals of the 100 meter butterfly race. It was a nice relief from the political gibberish which is forced upon us day after endless day. Phelps, as you know, won the race by one hundredth of a second, one hundredth of a second, the time it takes lightning to hit the ground. One writer chided that he won – “by a fingernail”.

The detail of the race is exciting to talk about. But I bring it to this sermon because it is also a specific and vivid example of our text in Jeremiah. Michael was behind the entire race. It seemed impossible for him to win. Even when they were within inches of the finish, it seemed certain that he would lose: the commentator said that six feet from the finish, his head was barely in line with his opponent’s shoulders. The race was over. The victory surely belonged to Serbian Michael Cavic.

But it didn’t. “It’s not over until it’s over,” as Yogi used to say. Miraculously Phelps chopped an extra half stroke to the wall, while his opponent chose to glide to the finish line. You could call it “lucky;” one one-hundredth of a second cannot be programmed or be seen by human eyes. It says a lot about Olympic competition.

But for our sermon, it also says something more, far more important to you and me and Jesus Christ our Lord. There is a shining symbol in that race that there is always time to turn it around, always time, even 1/100th of a second, to change the ending, always time to become a more willing servant, to win the victory.

In I Corinthians St. Paul asks: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize. Run in such a way that you will win. Athletes receive a perishable wreath, but we receive an imperishable one.” “So,” Paul says, “I do not run aimlessly...lest after proclaiming the Gospel to others I myself should not be disqualified.” (I Corinthians 9:24-27)

We only go around once, and as we do, listen one last time: “The harvest is passed; the summer is ended, and we are not yet saved.” You can do something about it: you can start anew, and you can end renewed, for now and forever more. Amen.