

March 21st, 2021

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Rev. Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

“Begin Again”

Happy spring, everyone! Yesterday our calendar told us that the Spring season officially began and this weekend’s weather definitely proved it! Spring is such a hopeful season and it is considered to be a season of new beginnings, of inspiration, and of new life. With the grass getting greener, with the sprouts that we see coming out of the ground, we see the signs of new life all around us. God is creating new things again. Of course, spring is a time for gardening. I am not a gardener by any means. Last year as a pandemic project I decided to grow herbs. Well, I killed all of them except for chives. Chives proved to be very resilient. They are actually growing already. I am amazed. But while we talk about gardening, just a few weeks ago, my husband and I watched a movie called “Beautiful, Fantastic.” It is a charming movie about a single young woman whose apartment that she rents has a garden. But that space could hardly be called a garden. It was full of thorns and weed and dry sticks everywhere. It needed a lot of work done. Apparently, just as the life of that young woman. She was dreaming about becoming a writer and artist but could never take a step forward as the routine of everyday life and full-time job sucked all the energy out of her to pursue her dream. So just like this woman’s life, her garden continued to be kept in rough and broken state. Until one day a mean landlord came and gave her one month notice. This young woman was either going to take care of that garden or she would be evicted. She had no choice but to start hard, strenuous, tedious work to make her garden look like one. As she began working on her garden, her life started to change. The opportunities came along to write but also to meet a nice guy. The more she worked on her garden, the more her life was changing. Don't worry I am not going to give anything away there are a lot of beautiful metaphors and images in this movie that touched my heart but this movie does have a happy ending with a new garden, full of beautiful and fragrant blooms, sturdy stents, rich green plants, and even a pond with fish.

I am sharing a bit about this movie today as it reminds me of the work that God is doing in the hearts and lives of the Israelites in the Jeremiah text that we have read today. After a time of plucking up and tearing down, God promises to plant new seeds, rebuild, bring hope and new life. But as those of you who are gardeners know, before planting new seeds, the old, dry sticks and plants need to be plucked up and thrown away. Before we can even talk about this new thing that God is doing, we need to address the old and the broken first. The book of the prophet Jeremiah is written to address the pre-exile context and ends with the siege of Jerusalem and taking the people into the Babylon exile. In the pre-exilic period, there was a lot of brokenness in the country. Many Israelites worshiped other gods, widows and the poor were not taken care of, the wealthy became more wealthy, the poor got ever poorer. Injustice, oppression, and violence were raging.

As I name these things for these ancient people who lived thousands of years ago, it seems like I am naming the things that are going on now as well. Child hunger has grown in the

last two years by 130 percent. More and more households even in the wealthier counties across the states are finding themselves experiencing food insecurities. And when it comes to violence, well, we heard the news this week about six Asian Americans killed in Atlanta. We cannot move to a hopeful and a new thing God is doing before we acknowledge the old thing, before we can name and lament what is broken. Lent is a perfect season to do that. Lent is a season when we enter into a place of deep acknowledging what is broken in our lives, in our community, and in our world. It is a season to look at that garden as it is, perhaps it is a space with dry sticks and weeds. In Lent we face our own muck. In Lent we are honest with God and allow God to enter into our hearts and our lives as a gardener who will do the work of transformation. Before the new plants can come up, the old, last years' dry and dead branches and leaves need to be cut up and thrown away, plucked up and torn down.

What are those dry sticks that prevent healing to flow in our relationship with others? What are the old branches that need to be cut off in our relationship with God?

Kate Bowler, who is an author, and a professor of History of Christianity in Duke Divinity School, wrote a book called *Everything Happens for a Reason and other lies I've loved*. Our Stephen Ministries did a study of the book. And in the book Kate talks about her research and study of the prosperity gospel and the theological thought of how if we do certain things, pray, worship, read our Bible, God will grant us certain things, well-being, health, wealth, and even a new car and a large house. But Kate discovered in her own life, as a colon cancer survivor, who lived a good life, was a good person, that perhaps it does not work like that. God is not a genie. God is not a getcha god. I agree with her. It seems to me that God seeks more of us. God seeks to be more than an entity who grants us wishes in exchange for our good behavior. God loves us and wants us to love God back. That is why that old approach with tablets and the law written on tablets in the wilderness doesn't work anymore, as Jeremiah writes about it. God wants to try a new approach, an incarnational approach. We Christians, look at this passage and the new covenant that Jeremiah speaks of in this passage as a covenant that Jesus lived out. Through Jesus' life and ministry of love and sacrifice and his death on the cross, new life in Christ is possible. A new, different relationship with God is possible, where the law of love is written directly on our hearts, and God does that work of planting that love in us. But also a new relationship with others is possible.

Last Sunday I got out of the church and looked at my phone and saw a message from my dad. It said "Forgive me for everything I did in the past and the harm that I caused you." I first was taken aback by this message and thought there must be something wrong with my dad. So I called him right away. When he did not respond, I first panicked, but then realized that it was Forgiving Sunday in Russia. Forgiving Sunday is a Sunday that marks the first day of the season of Lent in the Russian Orthodox Church but also invites people to ask God for forgiveness and ask their loved ones and friends for forgiveness. Sometimes the person who says the phrase "Forgive me" could have no remorse and says these words to observe the tradition. And I know my dad has done this in the past. But by the language my dad used I knew that he was sincere. You see my dad has been a recovering alcoholic for 18 years now and I knew that he was asking

for forgiveness for the harm and pain he caused me and our whole family with his disease. This proverb in today's text was so very prominent in the ancient world, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." We talked in our Bible Study how true it is. Psychologists and psychiatrists, and the 12 steps programs all say how whether we want it or not we are impacted by the actions of our parents, the good and the bad. Whether we want it or not, we learn to respond to those actions that turn into a behavior that we take into our adulthood. This new thing that God talks about in Jeremiah that each person is responsible for their own actions and life. Parents are not blamed anymore for what they did, as we know most parents did the best they could in the situation they could. Parents can take responsibility for their own actions and ask God and their children for forgiveness. And children can take responsibility for their own life, for their own healing, and ask their parents for forgiveness. Children are not in bondage anymore to what their parents did. We are free to shed the layers that don't work anymore, to clean out and get rid of the sticks and thorns that perhaps protected us before but are not effective anymore and even preventing us from living a life of peace and freedom. We don't have to eat the same grapes that our parents did. God is doing a new thing.

The death of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and other people of color and race, asked of us to face the brokenness, the thorns that still live on in our society. But even here God is doing a new thing. There is a renewed commitment to the work against racism and racial injustice, there is a renewed commitment to raise awareness and learn about issues of racism and racial injustice.

Friends, God is doing a new thing. So many new beginnings in this season of spring. New beginnings around transitioning into a world vaccinated and post-covid. And we, too, can begin again with God, open to the work of God to take place in us. We can begin again in our relationship with God, our loved ones, and when it comes to issues of injustice. Just like the heroine of the movie *We Will Get Up* and do the hard work of showing up to the garden and the gardener, and doing what we can one day at a time joining God in planting new seeds, seeds of hope, healing and love. I would like to finish with the poem "Begin again" by Sarah Are, @ A Sanctified Art . You are invited to respond.

"Begin again," life whispered in my ear; For some days are beginning days.

Pastor: God is doing a new thing.

People: Begin Again.

Some days are designed to be the day we try again, And on those days—the sun rises for you.

On those days, the birds sing for you.

On those days, God is cheering for you.

That's just the way God and beginnings work.

Pastor: God is doing a new thing.

People: Begin Again.

For when your heart is broken and your life is in pieces,

Or when the addiction or the depression have found their way back into your bones, Or when you lose sight of the person that you were called to be,

The wilderness will sing to you, "Begin again."

Pastor: God is doing a new thing.

People: Begin Again.

"Begin again" with the person you want to be. "Begin again" with the person you want to love.

"Begin again" with the knowledge of your faith. "Begin again."

The sun is rising for you.

Pastor: God is doing a new thing.

People: Begin Again.