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October 7, 2007

"Vuja De: It's déjà vu all over again: 'Jesus is Here'"

Rev. Valena Hoy

We are in a sermon series focusing on the first and second letters to Timothy. We are also focusing today on the prophet Jeremiah, the first chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is an amazing prophet, and if you've read the Book of Jeremiah you would also say, "Jeremiah, bless his heart." If you struggle with depression, Jeremiah is one to read because his call was so difficult and his burden was so great that many theologians, I don't know about psychologists, but many theologians believe that he suffered from great depression. As you know from someone who suffers from depression like I do, you can have some really low, low lows but then the nuggets of truth that come out of those lows are almost worth the darkness. Whatever struggles that you may have Jesus is with you through all of them. Jeremiah is a nugget of truth that I hope you'll get to know, so if you haven't read it it's good reading for this afternoon. We enter into the first chapter right at the beginning so we are going to hear his call story, how the Lord called him into ministry and in to prophecy.

Just to let you know a little bit about what Jeremiah has to look forward to. He is actually called at the prime of Judah's life. King Josiah is on the throne and the king is very concerned about the religious reform of the people and so things are going really, really well. Unfortunately the people don't respond as one would hope and Jeremiah has to prophesy some pretty hard things, and so Jeremiah goes with the nation through a high to the lowest of the lows, exile in Babylon. Jeremiah is actually exiled to Egypt. As we enter into this let's remember that this is a person, this is a time and a place and a people where God's word speaks.

Let's listen.

Old Testament Reading – Jeremiah 1:1-10

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin,

to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you,

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Now we move to the New Testament, chapter 4 of the first letter of Paul to Timothy. It’s interesting to me that in the call to Jeremiah, Jeremiah says to the Lord, “But I am only a boy.” The Lord says, “So what? I will put my words into your mouth.” It’s interesting that in this letter from Paul to Timothy, he talks about Timothy’s youth and the importance of it and the role model that it can be to the rest of the community. If you happen to be under seventeen years of age here, listen closely to these words because these words are not only for all of us but especially for those who are younger because your example can inspire us old people.

Listen for God’s word.

New Testament Reading – 1Timothy 4

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron.

They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving;

for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer.

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.

Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales. Train yourself in godliness,

for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance.

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

These are the things you must insist on and teach.

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I love those two passages and that the Holy Spirit put those together in such a beautiful way. Those words of God to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Beautiful words, beautiful. I’d like for you to think for a minute about when you were seven years old. If you are younger than seven I want you to think about your life, but for all of you older than seven I want you to think about the time when you were seven years old. What were the tables like that you ate at or you sat at? Maybe it was the kitchen table at home or maybe the dining room table. If you were a church goer the table you sat at on Wednesday evening or maybe you remember more vividly the table at your aunt and uncle’s house or at your grandmother’s house. Think about those tables. Which table among all those tables that you sat at as a child made you feel the most comfortable? At which did you feel the most welcome?

Hands down for me it was my Mamaw’s table. She lived in Rocky Valley; I’m sure all of you all know where Rocky Valley is. It’s right outside of Jefferson City, Tennessee which is right outside of Knoxville, Tennessee maybe you know where Knoxville it is. We lived maybe 80 miles away so we came over quite often, at least once a month. When we came to visit she would pull out her dining room table. When all of the leaves were in it filled the whole dining room; she didn’t have a very big dining room. She was unbelievable. She would cook and cook and cook for us and it was amazing food. When I sat at Mamaw’s table I sat next to my Papaw and my mom was diagonally across from me; I was on the left corner and she was on the far right corner, so I could eat all of the biscuits and all of the corn bread and all the fried chicken that I wanted, and of course the green beans that were so good for me with all that fatback. I loved eating at my grandmother’s table, and the thing is I think I loved it so much because she didn’t hold back. She

didn't hold back anything. She wanted that table full and my poor Papaw would have to eat the food that she fixed for us for dinner for the next two weeks. It was unbelievable the amount of food that she would prepare, but Mamaw didn't hold back, that was her way of welcoming us and of loving us and we loved it. I think about that table and that particular time, that particular space, that particular location and I miss it. I miss it, but I learned at a very young age even before I was seven years old how important it was to be welcomed at the table, to have a place, to have a place setting, to have your own glass.

I think that's what Jeremiah is learning in his call. Lord is saying to him, "You know Jeremiah, I knew the gift that I was going to give to you, the gift that I would put into you before you were even born, Jeremiah. Before you were formed in the womb, before you ever conceived. I knew the gift that would be in you. I knew how I would use you. I knew that you were going to be a part of my table. I knew that you would have a place." Jeremiah has a beautiful call. He holds back just a little bit, but then the Lord reaches and touches Jeremiah's mouth. For so many years I thought about this and Jeremiah saying "I'm only a boy" and I see the Lord with fingers like flames coming down and touching his mouth and Jeremiah going "Wow" like Listerine in your mouth or something. I think what the Lord was doing was telling Jeremiah "I'm gonna put my words in your mouth. My words." Jeremiah leaned on that. He leaned and nourished on the word of God. That's all he had. That's all prophets have is the word of the Lord, and if they don't say it right they are smitten. They lean entirely on the word of God and it so interesting after the Lord touches his mouth and says "I'm going to put my words in your mouth," He tells him, "You're going to pluck up and you're going to pull down. You're going to overthrow and you're going to destroy. You're going to build and you're going to plant." All of that Jeremiah is going to do with the word of the Lord. Pretty amazing, huh? Pretty amazing.

There are some beautiful scriptures that people memorize that they say to themselves in foxholes and in a hospital beds and I think it's because of the struggle that Jeremiah has and when something really beautiful comes out, it's like "Oh, thank you." Thank you for this beautiful negative truth. I just want to share one with you because I bet you've heard it. The Lord says "For surely I know the plans that I have for you. Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Has anyone ever heard that before? From Jeremiah. So many people lean on that scripture and say it to themselves over and over again, "Plans for your welfare not for harm, a future with hope." We cling to those words of hope and of grace and of love.

Before James and I got married we were here in Norfolk. James is from here and his mom was still alive; she lived only about a year after we were married. I loved her. She was just an amazing woman of God. One day she sat down with me. I'm not sure where James and Mr. Hoy were, maybe they were going to get ice at the store, but I have no idea but we were at the house by ourselves. She sat down with me and she said, "Valena, I want to tell you some things." I said, "Okay." She said, "I love you. Most mothers-in-law love their daughters-in-law because they love their sons. But let me tell you something, I love you because you love my son, but I love you for who you are." She said, "I have some advice for you. Some marriage advice." I'm like, "I'm ready to write this down." She told me three things. The first thing was "Don't lose yourself." She said "Marriage is a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful thing, two become one flesh, but Valena, James fell in love with you, so don't lose yourself. Don't forget the gift that is in you. Don't forget to develop that and to continue to grow and be the woman that you are being called to be. Don't lose yourself." The second one (you're going to love this) was "Don't iron" (laughter). Can you believe it? "Don't iron." I don't know if this would work for all marriages, but it has worked for ours. She said, "Valena, James can iron his shirts better than anybody else can, believe me." You'll see. He's right over there. He's looking really good (laughter). "Don't

iron.” I couldn’t believe she said that. The third thing was “Don’t hold back. Valena, don’t save it. Don’t save your love, don’t save your forgiveness, don’t save the china or the silver, don’t hold back. Use it. Live. If a plate breaks, so what? You’ve enjoyed it.” I love that. “Don’t lose yourself. Don’t iron. Don’t hold back.” Beautiful.

I think about the wonderful advice that Paul gives Timothy throughout the whole letter, but in this particular one in Chapter 4 it is kind of difficult because the church is struggling with some different things and there is some cult-like activity going on where people are saying “You can eat this kind of food but you can’t eat this kind of food.” They were also saying, “Don’t get married.” They don’t say why the cults are saying this, but they are. What Paul says is, “Instead of getting into all that argument, Timothy, what you need to do is when an argument starts to focus its attention away from God, don’t give it your energy. Just refocus your people and remind them who they are. The best way to remind them who they are is for you to remember who you are. Don’t neglect the gift that is in you. Don’t neglect the call of God that is upon your life. Don’t let it be just a memory, ‘Oh, yeah I remember when we all stood in a circle and Timothy kneeled down and we laid hands on him.’ Don’t let it be a memory, let it operate in your life. Let the gift of God operate in your life in such a way that it affects your community, that it affects the world.”

We are entering into stewardship season where we talk about our resources and how they can be used for God’s glory and His church. I went through an exercise in Houston, Texas with John Ortberg¹. Some of you may have read some of his books. He’s a wonderful Presbyterian preacher in California. He was preaching at this conference that I was attending. Sheryl Wood was there and Jane Hubbard and Lucy Gates, and I would like for all of you to participate with me. If you could take out your wallet. I’m serious. Take out your wallet. Pull it out of your purse, or your back pocket, or your coat pocket. John Ortberg held up his own wallet and he said, “This is actually the temple of 21st century.” There were a lot of pastors there and we are all “Hmmm, hmmm, yes. That was so profound, John Ortberg.” If you don’t like this, you can write me and tell me you didn’t like it, but really I’d like for you to send the e-mails to John Ortberg that you didn’t like this exercise. I’d like for you to participate. I want you to take your wallet and give it to someone who’s not related to you (laughter and talking). You can keep your eye on it. (The person receiving someone else’s wallet was told that they could be as generous as they wished in giving from the other person’s wallet.)

I thought what a wonderful exercise. Actually I received Sheryl Wood’s wallet, so I was like, “Cool. I can generous as I want to be.” As I got my own wallet back I realized this isn’t mine. This is not mine. These credit cards, this checkbook, these \$2.00 (laughter) are not mine. I’m just a steward of them. I’m just a caretaker of them. They are the Lord’s. They are the Lord’s.

Today is World Communion Sunday. I love World Communion Sunday because it brings back a lot of memories for me. In 1994 I was invited to be a part of a youth in mission work camp, and youth was stretched a little bit for me any way because I was in my twenties. I was invited with four other people in the Presbyterian Church to be representatives of the United States at this conference. There were people from all over the world. We met up in British Guiana, which is part of South America, right up in the north corner. I lived in this bunkhouse with all of these other people from different countries - from India, from Tanzania, from Cuba, from Jamaica, from Mexico, from Canada, from Europe, from the Netherlands. We all lived together. When we got there we received a plate and I thought how appropriate. I have this in my office; I keep it up in my office. We received a plate. We didn’t eat off of it; it is just like to put up in your office. It was so interesting that we got a plate because we learned so much when sat together at table.

At that time we classified countries as first world, second world, third world, but we don't really do that anymore. It was very interesting that people from Guiana, which at that time was considered as a third world country, but the tradition at the table to say "Yummy, that meal was good" to your hostess was to leave a little bit of food on your plate. We from America and especially from Britain were like "What do you mean you leave food on your plate? If you want to compliment the hostess in our countries you clean your plate." It's just really interesting the different characteristics of our different communities and our different countries.

We would go out at night some times and we had an appointment at the consulate to meet with all of our dignitaries. It was really cool. I was all dressed and ready to go. It was interesting the people that would stand in line to iron their clothes. As you can probably guess I was not in the line at all, but the people that stood in line to iron their clothes every day were the folks from England, from Tanzania, and from Guiana – all British-type cultures. Very, very, interesting. The people who wanted a private room or wanted just one other roommate were – surprise, surprise - North Americans, folks from the Netherlands and from England. The folks who wanted to bunk up with each other in the rooms with all of the bunk beds were folks from Central America, Jamaica, and India. Very interesting. It was a fantastic three weeks that we lived together. It wasn't easy, but it was really, really inspiring.

We had a minimum amount of money that we had to raise to be a part of the community and it was \$300. When I got to Guiana I had actually been in the Dominican Republic for seven weeks doing something else and then came to Guiana, so I had \$400 in my wallet. The minimum for the community, to be a part of this work camp, was \$300, so I gave the minimum, \$300. At the end of our time together we were all on each other's nerves and ready to go home. I remember just the day before we were leaving the two people from Cuba asked to go to the market. I turned to someone and I said, "Why on earth are they going to the market? We've been to the market every single day." I think it was the girl from India, who turned to me and said, "You know they've been saving their money all week. We all got the same amount of money" (unless you held back.). They had saved their money till the end of our time together to go to the market so that they could buy toothbrushes, underwear, socks, and soap to take back to their family because those types of items in Cuba were very difficult to get because of the embargoes that my country had placed on them. I have no idea what I did with that extra \$100. I probably did something stupid like buy a t-shirt that I don't even wear any more that went to the Salvation Army, but I held back. I held back. I held back from my community. I held back from the table that I sat at.

We come today to celebrate Communion, to celebrate at the Lord's Table. At the Lord's Table, Jesus doesn't hold back anything. He doesn't hold back His life. He doesn't hold back His spirit. He doesn't hold back His resources, or His love, or His grace. He gives it all and He asks us not to hold back. Not to hold back but just to let go and let the gift that He has already given to us develop and grow and reach out and love. What a gift we have. What a gift we have to have the opportunity to respond, to have the opportunity to be nourished at such a holy table, a table where Jesus is mysteriously here and can speak to each one of us at our particular time, at this particular location, and our particular hearts and lives. Don't hold back.

Amen.

Sermon Dictionary Notes:

¹ John Ortberg – teaching pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California who was formerly at Little Creek. Author of a number of books including *If You want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get out of the Boat, God is Closer than You Think, and Everybody's Normal 'til You Get to Know Them.*