

As If Just Saying It Makes It True

^{NRS} Jer 31:27 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals.²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.

Every once in a while someone will ask me what Presbyterian means- why are we called Presbyterians? I'm always tempted to tell them it's Greek for "People who love long meetings." Of course it's really from the Greek word for 'elder', but 'people who love long meetings' seems more accurate most of the time.

In case our monthly session meetings aren't enough three times a year all of the Presbyterian churches get together and have a big party over at some church big enough to have us all. I say party...in actuality it's a fantastically long two day meeting.

Now believe it or not, I actually have a pretty good time at these things- of course I'm not always laughing at the same time as everybody else. I mean there's always some poor guy who decides a speech isn't good enough and so he has to come up with a multimedia presentation. And, and you can set your watch by this, either the computer or the projector will not work at first. And there's always that rush of the techies just looking for a button to push or a cord to wiggle. And even when it does work- the last

meeting we had a guy from synod come and I kid you not, he had a presentation in like 6 point font. I mean I'm 32, and I couldn't read it. You can imagine how that went over.

The part that gets me the most though happens right at the start of the meeting. Before anything really begins they always try and break us up into the four regions we all come from- Northeast, Northwest which is our region, Central, and South. Now everybody is already set when they do this. And every church we meet in has pews, so it's always this terrible scramble with people climbing over one another and then trying to find a place to gather that's always broken up by pews. And what we're SUPPOSED to be doing at this time is offering up our prayer concerns. But this is almost never what happens.

No what always happens is either a kind of sad attempt to show off or an even lamer grab at free advertising. For instance there is always some person who shouts out that they've had some new people visiting their church, with as much excitement as if they've spotted an endangered species. And it always pains me when we get so excited over things that really just ought to be happening anyway. It's like those bumper stickers "My kid shows up at whatever Elementary school." And then there are the sly attempts to grab advertising, advertising I might add, that none of us are interested in. I swear, if the Clatskenie church tells us one more time their having a dang fish fry and that everyone's invited, I think it's going to be the end of me.

The best part of all this is that there's always some poor schmo who has to write all these things down, and then in the middle of worship, they have to list off each of these things offering them up to the Lord for prayer. I've said it before, but when there are things like Iraq and Darfur going on in the world- if the Lord really does take time out

to write down on his day planner that Clatskenie is having another fish fry and he's invited, I'm going to have some very hard questions for him about priorities.

Of course every once in a while the person offering the prayers is even funnier than the prayers offered up. My good friend over at Rose City Park, Katie Pate, made the terrible mistake of telling her region that Rose City was celebrating some recent remodeling. She went into a little more detail with the group, making the perfectly rational assumption that the person praying would kind of smooth everything out. No, the person offering the prayer gave thanks for the recent improvements at Rose City Park particularly grateful that they were now free from the smell of raw sewage in their basement. Honest to goodness, I started laughing and I almost couldn't stop. I kept imagining a sign on the sign reading, "Rose City Park Pres- new and improved! Now sewage free!"

Of course this little hiccup is the exception that proves the rule that so frustrates me about this time. In prayer we are supposed to come before our Lord in honesty. We are supposed to bare ourselves, knowing he knows everything we're carrying around with us anyway, so we might as well bring it out and lay it all down- the good, the bad, and the ugly. But, unless it's a mistake like this, we never bring our raw sewage before God in prayer at Presbytery. We never bring anything that might make the other churches worry about us, or worse, make them feel like we are anything but a strong and mighty fortress for the Gospel. We never tell them that we have leaders who are just absolutely ground up by everything they are doing. We never tell each other we have pastors that are tired, so tired it's hard to believe in good news some days, much less tell others about it. No, we paint these ridiculous pictures for one another- every church

better than the next, every church more alive, more on fire than then last one, as if just *saying* it makes it true.

This is how I imagine Jeremiah's community must have heard him. Our text this morning comes near the end of the book of Jeremiah- at chapter 31. And this is important, because we can't really understand it unless we know what happened in Chapters 1-30, which in a nutshell is basically is a bad story about how the Babylonians were threatening, and the Jews could think of nothing better to do than to eat, drink, and be merry.

Jeremiah hammered the Jews again and again warning them in Bill Cosby kind of language that God brought them into this world, and he could take them out again if they were just going to trample on justice, oppress their workers, and basically make a mockery of the faith. The book of Jeremiah opens with the prophet proclaiming judgment telling Jeremiah God oversees them- to pluck up, over throw, break down, and destroy.

And in the rest of the book this is exactly what happens. The Israelites continue their downward slide until the Babylonians march in, storm the gates, and cart off the king, the best of the leaders, and leave a puppet king to keep the peace. And because it seems like Jeremiah is kicking Israel when she's down, criticizing her at a time of war, he was hated, received death threats, and even was imprisoned without food or water. He would have died if this guy Ebed-Melech hadn't pulled him up out of there. And yet in despite of the way they treated him, treatment that would make any normal person

completely turn their back on Judah- Jeremiah here in 31 reverses course, and offers consolation and kindness instead of criticism.

While at first Jeremiah told proud Judah God would pluck up and destroy- NOW, after Babylon had swept in, now Jeremiah said, now God would build and plant- and the time for this is coming soon. He even uses this bizarre image in the first line- the time is coming when God will sow the land with the seed of people and animals. I didn't understand this image at first, but it's as if God is going to the Garden Corner, buy some packages of seeds, animal seeds and people seeds, and is going to plant some cows next to the tomatoes and some red heads next to the radishes. Of course all he's saying is that God is going to make this barren land abound with people and with livestock again. And most beautifully he tells them God is going to make a new covenant with them- but not one carved in stone, but one written on their hearts. He tells them a day is coming when they won't even have teachers, because everyone is going to know the Lord and walk with him all the day long.

All this sounds great, but his timing, well his timing isn't all that great. His timing isn't that great. It's hard to hear what he's saying given everything that's happened. When everything seemed fine Jeremiah was all about destruction and judgment. But now that everything has gone to hell, Jeremiah's telling everybody all this good news. I mean Babylon's already come in and wrecked the place. It would have been great if he told Judah all this BEFORE this, right? It would have been easy to believe and trust in this message of building and planting and everything being great BEFORE the invasion- but now they're all sitting around in this big pile of scorched rubble. I mean how do you trust in this beautiful picture of how everything might be,

when the world that's staring them in the face is so obviously broken and hopeless? I imagine them all sitting around and staring at him like he's nuts wondering if he believes that just *saying* that God will rebuild them, that God will make a new covenant with them written on their hearts- if he thinks just *saying* this makes it true.

Words are a tricky thing, aren't they? On the one hand they seem like the weakest, flimsiest things in the world. It's one thing to say something- it's another to actually make it happen, right? I heard some great dating advice the other day. This is for all the young ladies out there. I was talking with this mature, wise woman the other day, and she told me she's only just now figured out how to date. She says the trick is to completely ignore every single thing that comes out of a man's mouth and only pay attention to what he actually does. Pretend you have a mute button on the remote control in your head and just ignore whatever he says- whether good or bad, and just look at what he does. She said a lot of men are obviously a lot less great than they make themselves out to be, but some are actually better than they think. Oh she said, if she could have figured this earlier she could have saved herself a LOT of trouble.

So on the one hand words seem like the flimsiest thing in the world. We distrust words, because they are so easy to manipulate and twist. But! But- and this is what Jeremiah knows is that while it isn't always easy living with words, we can't live without them, either.

For my birthday Melis got me the perfect book- if there was a book written for Ken this was the one. It's like there must have been a nerd section in the bookstore- next to poetry and literature. It's a book written by Ryszard Kapuscinski, a Polish foreign

correspondent. It's called Travels With Herodotus. And it's this fascinating story of how he came to be one of the first people in Poland to travel outside the country while it was still under communist rule- and how utterly unprepared he was to do this.

The first place Kapuscinski goes is India. Now I know a few folks here have been to India- it's a wild place for 21st Americans to travel, and with TV and the internet and Survivor Malasia or whatever, we're pretty much a been there seen that kind of people. Imagine what it was like for this poor guy who had NEVER so much as traveled outside the small city he grew up in in Poland, much less even another European country- imagine what it was like for him to get into a plane in Poland, and walk out in New Delhi. He didn't speak any of the Indian languages. He didn't know English. So the language was strange. The culture was utterly foreign. The people didn't look like any he had seen before- I mean not even in pictures.

So, he began studying English as fast as he could, cramming words into his brain as quickly as possible. He said he actually had to put a cold towel up to his temples feeling like his head was going to explode at the end of the day. And where as today if you were living in another country you might watch their TV to try and pick up the language, he found a cheap copy of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls. But little by little by little English began to sink in. Like any other writer, every day he carried around a notebook and just wrote in it all day long. And as much as possible he tried to write in English copying down words he saw, advertisements, you name it. And then he noticed the most fascinating thing- something I've been thinking about ever since I read it. He noticed that at the end of his days, he found that he could only remember the things that he had words for. He could only remember the things he had words for. The things he

didn't have a word for just passed unnoticed, but if he had a word for it, it stuck. He writes: "I realized upon my return to the hotel that in town I had seen only that which I was able to name: for example, I remembered the acacia tree, but not the tree standing next to it, whose name I did not know. I understood, in short, that the more words I knew, the richer, fuller, and more variegated would be the world that opened before me, and which I could [see] and capture." (p. 22 Travels With Herodotus)

So yeah, words can be empty, they can be easy to say and hard to enact. But it is with our words that we see the world, and it's with words that we imagine, that we hope, that we dream of how our world might be different- better. If you ever wondered why dictators burn books, this is why. It is in books, it is with words we begin to imagine how the world might be different. And if we can imagine it, if we can dream it, if we can see it in our minds- we can work to make it happen.

It's true that Jeremiah just saying these words about God creating a new covenant, about God restoring this people destroyed by war- it's true that just saying them doesn't bring everything to fruition. But his words, his prophetic imagination- this gave the people a vision of what tomorrow might look like, a vision that helped them get through the day.

You know I plan to keep laughing when I go to Presbytery. Sometimes laughter is the only way to get through things like this. I will laugh when they call anyone under 50 'dear' or 'hon', something that happens at almost every meeting. It used to make me mad- but I'm growing to realize they really don't mean anything by it. And I will laugh

when someone refers to the fact that our churches really ought to start using the 'internets', something that has actually been said.

But you know what I'm not going to laugh at anymore? I'm not going to laugh when someone describes their small church full of tired leaders and more problems that you shake a stick at in glowing terms. I'm not going to laugh when Clatskenie tells us that their last fish fry was even bigger than the last and that every person in the whole town came, even though I know that can't possibly be true. I'm not going to laugh when some person says how grateful they are for their new pastor who is fabulous, amazing, and awesome all rolled together, even though in a few months they are going to realize this person really isn't Jesus, Superman, and Liberace in a black robe and start thinking if only they had someone more funny or younger or older why maybe things at their church would be better. I'm not going to laugh because even though I know that what we're doing when we lift these prayers isn't really the truth in terms of how we are- it is the truth in terms of how we might be. And yeah, just saying these things won't make them true, of course- but if we stop saying them, if we stop dreaming, if we stop hoping, why they'll never be true.

You know I wonder if maybe this is how we ought to think about stewardship, too. You know, normally what we do is we spend all our time talking about a few things we're doing that are going really well, things that are interesting to folks. We do this thinking, hey, people like to support things that are going well, things they relate to.

But what if- what if we didn't give based on how happy we are, or how entertained we are, or how interested we are in what's going on, or even how much we

agree with this or that? What if we gave based not merely on what the church is like now- but on all that we might be? I wonder what that would be like? **Amen.**