

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.19.25

Jeremiah 31:27-34

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. 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. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (439)

The other morning, Milo was ready to get up. Milo is our third dog, the most recent to become a Goodman. He arrived from San Antonio, Texas in February 2021.

We sometimes tell him we're going to send him back to San Antonio, Texas.

We're joking—mostly.

He's a sweet boy, but he is *alert*. With white curly hair, he's a departure from our tendency to adopt black mutts, feists they're sometimes called, terrier mixes that can come in small, medium, or large—and we've had them all. But Milo, with his white curly hair: I sometimes call him the White Shadow because every time you move, he is *on* it. You go into the other room: he is right there with you. You go from sink to fridge, and don't turn around too fast because you'll trip on him. Heading to the bathroom in the middle of the night? The White Shadow's got your back.

Daisy, another we found on Petfinder.com, is from Atlanta and fifteen years old at this point, once sixteen pounds, now down to thirteen. She'll play with Milo every once in a while, but

mostly she'll sleep. Functionally blind, functionally deaf, she can take to her blanket on the sofa and ignore his goings-on.

Birgitta is twelve, born in a shelter in New Hampshire, and is probably the best dog ever to live ever. Part Schnauzer, part Poodle, she chillaxes on the driveway or the back lawn, sometimes just stands in the middle of some open space and wags her tail slowly like she's just taking it all in—the wonder of existence, the possibility of squirrels. She tore her ACL last year, and therefore cost us more money than any dog ever had. She's mostly recovered now, but limps sometimes with arthritis and collapses more often than not whenever Milo tackles her—which he does a lot.

So, Milo: that guy has cost us money. He came into the world with more teeth than most dogs—more by a lot. So stuffed into his mouth, they'd rot easily. After a couple of (unbelievably expensive) cleanings, the veterinarian finally just pulled out nine (I think), the ones too far gone, which left him with a more appropriate number and the promise that dog dental surgery was no longer a worry. We'll see.

Then there's his coat, which is very fussy. It has the potential to be beautiful, but we Goodmans don't want a dog with a beautiful coat. We want dogs who help us laugh at the end of the day, who help us lighten up when life feels really too heavy to bear. We don't want more to do—brush a dog's coat, brush a dog's *teeth*—but more warm bodies to sit on the sofa with us while we watch tv. So, we just let his hair grow, which becomes matted, and then we just shave it down.

He really does sit very well on the sofa—unless, of course, you get up to go to go to the kitchen or check your phone.

Lately, too, though, there's been some allergic reaction to something. He's itched himself bald in spots, chewed himself raw. Another trip to the vet and life spent with an inflatable donut around his neck, which makes him look like an Elizabethan clown.

Finally, there's the fact of his biological clock. The boy knows when it's five o'clock in the morning. And usually I can sleep through it, or go back to sleep, which has him go back to sleep as well. But the other day he kept checking, front paws on the mattress, snout in my face. "Are you awake now?"

"What about now?"

"What about now?"

A couple rounds of this and I sat up, groped around for my glasses.

Downstairs, through the kitchen, howling with excitement. Oh, to be outside! There's probably a rabbit by the lilac tree! There might be a bear near the compost pile!

I, standing in the doorway with the cold, dark morning in my face, turned back to get the coffee going.

And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I mean, if a mean old judge who has no interest in doing anything nice for anyone, still less for a poor widow who's been unjustly accused, finally relents just to save *himself* some annoyance, how much more will God grant to those who pray without ceasing, these who are only slightly annoying in asking for God's presence, we who really couldn't possibly annoy God in asking God's countenance upon us and God's spirit within us—yet not because of who we are but because of who God is. Love. Attentive love.

Jesus is beginning to worry the disciples won't make it, won't have what it takes to make it. He might even have begun to worry they still haven't grokked what this whole journey was about, how this whole journey would end. He'd told them twice, that the Son of Man would be handed over to the gentiles, and he would be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they'd flogged him, they would kill him, and on the third day he would rise again. He would tell them one more time, but it's still unlikely they'd understand.

Because everything prior to now had been so otherwise. Jesus had such appeal. Crowds followed him, ever-growing crowds. People, come close to him, were made better by him—healed of their infirmities, blindness lifted, unrest and distress brought to calm, brought to peace.

Of course, he was making more than a few people angry, but they were the ones typically made angry. Pharisees, the enforcers of the Law. Because Jesus' solidarity wasn't with the status quo but with the people whose bent-over backs were the foundation of the status quo. And the Pharisees had access to real power. In some far-flung villages they indeed *were* power. But Jesus had access to evermore power. So, the disciples didn't have to worry. They had no cause to worry, had no cause even to think they possibly should worry. Because how could this one with so much apparent power one day become passive—all these terrible things done to him without him ever raising his voice, raising a fist?

They weren't getting it, Jesus had begun to suspect, urgently to suspect. His own deadline was approaching, and they still weren't getting it—the disciples, and still less the crowds. And one of these days it would be on *them* to do.

But some things you really *can't* get until you're gotten by them, until you go through them. Because there's no analogue. There's nothing like it. This had never happened before—a god killed and raised and returned in new form, a people gathered to manifest a movement of peace.

They weren't yet in the Temple, they were yet on their way to Jerusalem, which this too the disciples might not have noticed—that they were actually *heading* somewhere, and weren't just meandering in itinerancy. Jesus, however, Jesus well knew it, having turned his face to Jerusalem long earlier in the narrative. They were heading to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

It was, after all, a proud city, and prophets were always about the business of deflating pride—true prophets were anyway. True prophets were (are) among us to warn us about where pride leads, how belligerence plays out, what continuing to live as we now live will bring about, how it all will come to pass.

Which those of the powers and principalities nearly never want to hear. Because their interests are in the status quo, in making sure *this* never comes to pass but always stays present, a guarantor of their continued power and privilege.

But everything plays out. Everything runs a course. The sustaining shalom of God's vision and goal is near impossible to get to play out in the world, a dynamic self-sustaining, all creation as balanced on the head of a pin. Worth trying, yes, of course! But God's sustaining shalom is (I can only guess) fully realized in God's eternal reign, that eternal day beyond all time.

It is, however, to be the model for how we live now as well, only ever to approach in the living of our days, truly never to arrive as we go about our business of living and living together, that law of God written on our hearts only partially until true fullness comes, when we can't help but to know God and abide in God for God will be the all-in-all.

The promise given to the people through Jeremiah, that there is coming a day when no longer must people teach one another or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for all shall know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest; that there is coming a time when the Lord shall have put his law within the people, having written it on their hearts: this is the promise of having the weight of discernment lifted, the likelihood of error blotted out.

Because the fact is, it's difficult to discern God's will for how we live. I mean, the broad strokes are simple enough. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk with humbly with God. But the "how" of it, turns out, is difficult indeed. What does justice look like, given these constraints of time and resources, geography and interpersonal dynamics, human difference and human equality and human freedom and responsibility? What does kindness look like, when interests conflict and much that holds appeal turns out not to be possible, or when what's desired conflicts with what's necessary? Because you can't get always get what you want. Nor *should* you.

There's a tribe in the Amazon where children are always carried well past the age when in our culture we'd have them crawl. Mothers will carry their babies well into their first year, when, finally, they're ready to walk.

Apparently, when they're put down, they cry a lot because walking hurts. Barefooted, or barely-shod, their feet aren't tough yet as they'll need to be for the floor of the jungle. It's a rough few days, weeks, babies crying at the pain.

But it's necessary pain.

Is this a kindness, or an unkindness?

The people were enduring a time of distress, real heartbreak. Babylon had come. The city had been destroyed. The worthy people had been taken into exile, war booty. The unworthy ones had been left behind like so much rubble. And Jeremiah was in prison because he'd said all this would happen, and the king and his more favored advisors hadn't wanted to hear it. Whatever. Jeremiah kept saying it because to do otherwise, he claimed, would be like shutting up a fire in his bones.

Because all of this was easily foreseen. The ways of the people Israel and Judah had gotten off balance. They'd become immodest and uncaring. Their mutual aid society had become proud and chasing after the glittering things of this world, the typical thirsting for power and prestige of the worldly sort—like putting a ballroom where a bunch of offices should be for serving civic wellbeing. Their values had come unmoored from where they'd been meant to be held fast, in the modesties of care and concern and self-giving love, tethered to the Lord, their center point, their sun.

But the days were surely coming when room for doubt would lessen, when the need for discernment would lighten and the causes for needing forgiveness would be foreclosed upon. The ways of the Lord would be irresistible, so sweet and so within reach while also good, very good.

Meantime, though, the people would have to turn to the Lord, turn to that light, *intend* to catch its rays. They'd have to turn, seek, ask and ask again. In this would be their strength. In this would be their resilience for the trials that shall surely come in the living of their days, in the living of our days.

I talked with a teacher the other day. A friend I don't see nearly often enough, she teaches at the middle school level. I asked her how the year was going and she said there's a strange trend she's noticed but can't quite put her finger on. Students are asking not to have to do certain assignments. Households are asking to be gotten out of certain requirements. And they're not

requirements that are new or onerous. These are the same sorts of things she's been assigning for years, homework sheets, reading the rest of the chapter, that sort of thing. It's as if laying upon the students *any* expectation is to put them at risk, *any* application of stress is an existential threat. That the students should stretch themselves, challenge themselves: this puts them in grave danger. Their mental health is a primary concern, but what's thought of as threatening to mental health has become a wide net cast. And what mental health even feels like: it's less resilience and more the total absence of discomfort, to say nothing of struggle and the possibility of failure.

And she's surprised to hear herself think in these terms. She's not a hard person. She's not someone who thinks humiliation is a good learning tool. I once had a teacher who apparently did. In graduate school, I faced the roulette threat of having my required one-page summary of the hundreds-of-pages-of-reading chosen at random and read out loud to the entire class. He even explained: "There's nothing like the threat of humiliation in front of your peers to make you do your best work." A class of about 100 students, half were doctoral candidates and half were probably heading into the ministry. Guess which ones stood a better chance of reading a ton of obscure stuff and then cooking it all down to its tightest essentials in a week's time, all under the threat of public humiliation?

I went to the professor's office hours and asked him if there were any way to approach this slightly differently? I wanted to read. I hoped to understand. I'd write to make the likelihood of understanding greater. But I was paralyzed at the idea that I might be humiliated. My turn to explain: "That's not the way to get me to do my best work." He said, "Well, I'm not going your hand through this."

Not the answer I was hoping for, but okay at least in that I now imagined his holding my hand would involve claws or a hook or something.

My friend who teaches middle school isn't about that. And yet her students come to her not infrequently hoping to get out of it, whatever "it" is, afraid they can't handle it, afraid it will be their undoing.

It won't. We're resilient in a way that will at some point be important. We're tough in a way that life will, at some point, impose upon us to be.

We're at that point.

Or we're at least near to it. There's so much of the future that is darkly unknown. If the pain of life in the latter half of the 20th century was the feeling that it was a conveyor belt, delivering people to some level of unsurprising security ("Do this: you get that. Do this: you get

that.”), then the pain of it now is that none of the old formulas seem to apply. The sustaining of the post-war global order and all its ramifications down to the most local evidence of it—mowed lawns and sobriety until cocktail hour—has broken down. Autumn comes later. Puberty comes earlier. And “learning to code” promised a secure future for less than a decade.

We are perhaps all that widow in need of justice, in need of mercy.

Prayer is funny thing to find promising—but only because we’ve left off in reading what Jesus promises prayer results in. We’ve heard him say that we should seek, and we shall find; we should ask, and it shall be given. But we’ve left off the final part, “...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” See, what prayer “results” in is the presence of the Holy Spirit. What prayer “results” is the attention of God upon us, the countenance of God upon us. That we are not alone. That we are not left to our own devices or to the whims of the most aggressively powerful among us. That we are to rely not only on our wiles and cunning or a cynical capacity to outwit one another, but on the wisdom and love of God, our eternal Creator who has known us from the origin through to the end: this is what we waken to when we repose in prayer—a strange weight and heft of soul that gird us against the winds of the day, cruel vagaries that could otherwise knock us to and fro.

We come to God, seeking him in the breath of the wind, in the breath of one another, in the conspiring of the church, that is the con-spring, the breathing-together, of this gathered body, to ask, “Are you awake now? What about now?” that we might be let out—out of hopelessness, out of despair, out of the hard limitations of history and the creation made cruel by those with power who dole out with withhold.

That we might be let out, free for hope, free for abounding joy.

What about now?

Thanks be to God.