

The Time Is Coming

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-33

'The time is coming' is a line that could reflect promise. The time is coming when the mortgage will be paid off. The time is coming when the kids will be out on their own. The time is coming when I'm going to get that big raise or that big promotion. The time is coming when I can retire and enjoy things. The time is coming when I'll be married and have kids. The time is coming when I'll have grand-kids.

'The time is coming' is also a line that has a certain foreboding. The time is coming when your father will get home. The time is coming when that term paper is due. The time is coming when I'm going to have surgery. The time is coming when I can't drive any longer. The time is coming when the party is over. The time is coming when I'm going to get laid off. The time is coming when I have to get my income taxes filed. And it is coming.

The phrase expresses a belief that something is going to happen in the future, whatever it may be and whenever it may actually come. One way or another, there is an expectation that things are going to change.

When we hear this in scripture, we should pay attention to the context. Chances are that things haven't been changing. Things may be dark and oppressive for God's people, but God's prophets announce that the time is coming, and they mean that God's time is coming. This is when God will set things aright which could go either way, depending on what your situation is.

For the people being addressed by the prophet Jeremiah in today's reading, this is good news. Starting back at the beginning of chapter 30 – our reading is near the end of chapter 31 – Jeremiah begins to detail the things that God will do for God's people when the time comes. This section is referred to as the Book of Comfort. It's a message of hope that also acknowledges the pain and suffering to be endured by God's people in their Babylonian captivity. The message declares that there will be healing and restoration for a faithful remnant.

In our selection, Jeremiah is reciting the words of the Lord as they came to him. *The time is coming ... when I will make a new covenant with [my people]*. When he utters these words, "a new covenant," some Christians start to lose their minds and think that Jeremiah is prophesying about Jesus. Not in the slightest, of course, but you may not be able to dissuade some Christians about this.

Jeremiah continues with God's words, *It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers...This is the covenant I will make with [my people] after that time...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.*

Putting the law in their minds makes sense. In the mind, people can know what the Law of God expects of them, and they will understand what to do. But then we hear that the Law of God will be written on their hearts. This idea of writing it on their hearts may seem a bit peculiar. We need to put the idea into context.

Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to God's people before, during, and after the Babylonian conquest. This huge tragedy is being played out before Jeremiah. He is witness to the looting and destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, to the ghastly experience of a savage conquering army crushing the people of God in war, and to thousands of God's people being marched off to enslavement in Babylon. The proud nation, the chosen people of God, has been brutally condemned. This God of their covenant would seem to have either abandoned his people, or subjected them to a cruel punishment. In any case, Jeremiah is trying to make sense of this for the people of God.

This notion of writing the Law of God on their hearts and minds admits that the lessons that are best learned are ones that are painfully experienced. The heart in this context should be seen as the expressive center of pain and pleasure, of love and hate, of passion and passivity, of devotion and contempt. Jeremiah knows that the heart of the people of God has been broken by this national catastrophe. What lesson will they carry in their hearts, those who depart to Babylon as well as those who remain in the ruins of Judea? Will their hearts be permanently turned in contempt for God? For certain, their hearts will be changed. Jeremiah perceives that there is a lesson here.

Jeremiah had never minced any words in expressing his condemnation of the sinful behavior of Israel from king to priest, from wealthy to peasant. The people were well aware of Jeremiah's controversial and confrontational prophecies. How would Jeremiah show this people the way back to faithfulness now, after this calamity?

Jeremiah prophesies God's new covenant. It is not a new Law, not another Ten Commandments. It will be the same covenant but in a new form, one learned and embraced from the terrible experience of destruction, defeat, and deportation. It will be written on their hearts, taught to their hearts, held dearly in their hearts. Yes, they may understand in their minds, but the true learning happens with the heart, and in this case amid heartbreak.

The time of this writing denies any easy acceptance of what God is declaring here through Jeremiah. It's unimaginable in many ways for God's people, and its purpose *per se* surely seems remote and irrelevant to many. Yet Jeremiah points forward: *the time is coming*. Jeremiah pulls the range of vision for God's people toward where God is headed, toward God's promise on the horizon, giving shape to what will come. To see the time that's coming requires eyes of practiced, disciplined faithfulness.

It is, of course, a word of hope for us in the Lenten season. As we confront our own sinfulness, our weakness, the futile and flawed nature of our practice of faithfulness, we might imagine that there is no hope, no healing, no restoration. Like God's people of the ancient past, God's people of the present are no less sinful, idolatrous, and worthy of condemnation. Jeremiah encourages us to admit who and

what we are, and the painful realization that we have exiled ourselves from our God. Jeremiah's word of hope is for us, too, for our healing and restoration for the time is coming for us as well.

As we come to the reading from the gospel of John, in context, Jesus had already made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The time is Passover and Jews from among the Greeks are about and visiting in the city. Some have come by and ask to see Jesus.

Given this simple request by these Greek Jews, you may wonder about Jesus' response. Jesus goes off on what would seem to be a totally *alternate* track, apparently *ignoring* the simple petition of these Greek Jews altogether.

Jesus begins saying that *the time has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified; the seed must die and then many seeds will come afterward. The one who loves this life will lose it while the one who hates this life will find true life in Christ eternally. And on he goes.

Apparently the Greek Jews who simply wanted to see Jesus never get an answer; indeed we never hear from them again as they disappear amid an extended Jesus monologue for which the gospel of John is notorious. It would seem that the writer of the gospel lost all track of what was going on and forgot about the Greek Jews.

Actually, it seems the arrival of the Greeks seeking Jesus is a trigger. Thus Jesus says, *The time has come....*

Of course, Jesus seems fully aware and **sees this time** as he talks about death and life in several ways.

Jesus also says in vs. 27: *Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour.* We hear the heart again at the center of things, just as in Jeremiah. Jesus knows the prophecies. Jesus knows the plan. The sacred hour has come, and his heart is troubled, beset, as the threshold of his journey to the cross and to God's resurrection is imminent. Indeed, this (non-)encounter with the Greeks occurs in the Gospel of John between the stories of Palm Sunday and the washing of the disciples' feet.

Recognizing the time is what comes to people of faith. Some claim certain events lead to particular conclusions, like when the second coming will occur, etc. Their very certainty exposes them as frauds. Even Jesus may know that the hour has arrived when the forces of darkness and sin seek to destroy him, but he isn't making predictions. As a man of faith whose vision is trained on the purposes and promises of God, Jesus can see events moving together and the shape of the hour and the time becomes clear to him.

We may understand when events in our lives reach a certain crossroads or come upon a particular threshold that things are going to change. The birth of a child, the graduation of a child, the death of a spouse, the end of a job, the end of a career in retirement, and a whole host of other big events, and likely a variety of smaller personal

ones that only you would recognize within your life. What the hour exactly portends may be shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. It may be the verge of something that seems disastrous, a perspective that was clear to Jesus, or it may be the cusp of something wonderful, the fulfillment of a lifelong goal or ambition. It may be both, as Jesus expressed how his heart was troubled, but also unwilling to plea for a different path.

For Jesus, he recognizes that the “ruler of this world,” the power of hatred, indifference, greed, oppression, judgment, pain, scarcity, and violence, will be driven out. The power of death-dealing will be made powerless, and the time will have come when God’s people find themselves both restored and empowered to bring about Jesus’ new way of peace, compassion, justice, freedom, abundance, love, sharing, and grace. It’s a powerful vision that leads him to face his imminent arrest, condemnation, and crucifixion. The time is coming; it’s coming both for crucifixion **and** for resurrection.

The pathway of faith leads to the cross, a symbol of both crucifixion and resurrection, of both death and life. We admit in this, agreeing with Jesus in his talk about the kernel of wheat, that often something must come to an end or die in order for something else to begin and have life. May we recognize the hour, seeing the time, and be able to sweep away the distractions and behold what is sacred and true. In so doing, we allow for an ending while also making room for a new beginning as God’s brings a new day and a new hour into our lives.