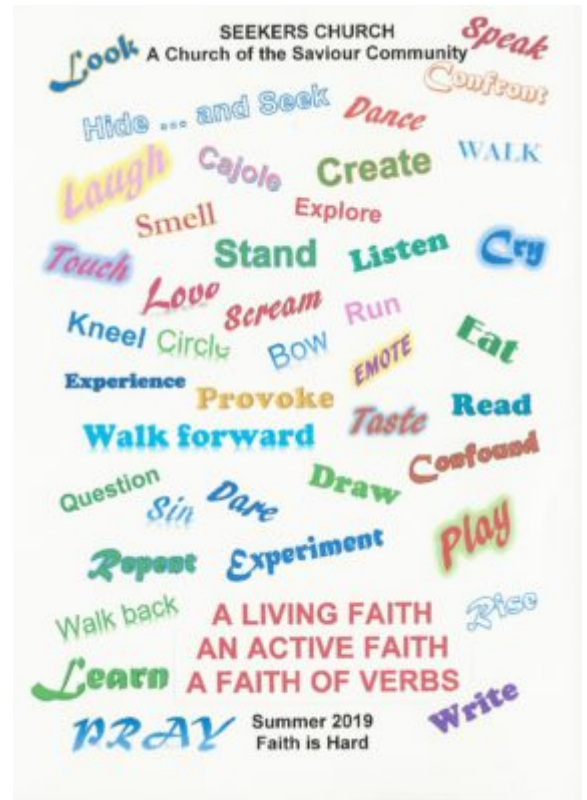


“Salvation in the Midst of Tragedy” by Pat Conover

August 25, 2019



The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

I'm going to talk with y'all this morning about salvation in the midst of tragedy. Let's see what we can learn from the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah began his prophetic challenges in 627 BCE, about 650 years before the prophetic challenges of Jesus. Jeremiah was an educated priest well acquainted with the Torah, with the histories such as the book of Kings, with the Psalms and Proverbs. He knew about the tragedies of the destruction and ravaging of Israel, the ten Northern Tribes, from Hosea and other prophets. It wasn't a stretch for him to worry about the rise of Babylon and the threat posed to Judah, and Jerusalem its capitol city.

Jeremiah's witness was in Jerusalem and began during the reign of Josiah the boy king which began twenty-two years earlier. Josiah was raised in a priestly family. Priests acted as regents while Josiah grew up. The priests "discovered" Deuteronomy, meaning they wrote Deuteronomy, which became the fifth book of the Torah about three hundred years after the writing of Torah began. The priests, including Jeremiah, promoted the Deuteronomic spiritual revolution. Jeremiah, however, was not so interested in the revisions of customs and worship but rather in the injustices that continued in the kingdom. He criticized the powers in Jerusalem, and the people, for not paying enough attention to injustice, and that led to being remembered as a prophet. He also warned about the dangers of rising Babylon. Salvation, for Jeremiah, was to be had by living out the guidance of Torah, particularly the spiritual revolution centered on Deuteronomy.

Is Christianity, is the United States, facing tragedies on the scale of the destruction and ravaging of Israel and Judah? Is our Christian faith, as we explore it and practice it in Seekers, able to unflinchingly face such tragic dangers? Would those of us who survive be able to deepen our faith as we live into and through such a tragedy?

What are the parallels between Hosea, Jeremiah, and Jesus? Hint: about the time that Jesus was born, Sepphoris, about four miles from Nazareth, was destroyed by a Roman Army, with genocide, to crush a minor Jewish rebellion led by a local bandit. About thirty-five years after the death of Jesus, Galileans revolted against Rome. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed and the population killed.

Have you experienced a tragedy? Are you afraid of a potential tragedy?

Do you want to avoid thinking about experienced tragedies, about possible tragedies, because you don't want to feel

upset? How do you avoid feeling powerless, blaming others who cause all the problems, blaming God for allowing tragedies to happen? Can you feel the distress of a child dying in Yemen from a bomb built in the United States.

President Trump is sounding increasingly distressed and looks increasingly out of control. I fear he might start a war, a big war, as a response to the signs that he is losing popularity and support going into the 2020 election.

We can't change the effects of war and injustice in the past, but we can learn from Hosea, Jeremiah, and Jesus. We can face up to bad behavior right now in the name of Christianity in the United States and lift up a Christianity Jesus would be proud of.

Salvation paths in the face of potential and experienced tragedies begin with being thankful for the gifts we have received, holding them lightly, and giving the gifts that are ours to give. We may become greatly weakened and absorbed in grief but salvation news is that we can still be thankful for what is good in our lives and relationships. We can still live into and out of our callings if we understand they are spiritual gifts of God that are not defined by our capacities or resources. We can be in harmony with Spirit's orchestra even if we still trying to learn how to play an oboe.

Judah held out for two centuries after the fall of the Northern tribes and experienced a spiritual revival in the time of Josiah. Better said, Jerusalem held out because it was a well-defended hill fortress on Zion. Jerusalem held out and provided some refuge for the people of Judah when Assyria, Egypt briefly, then Babylon, came by to take crops and animals and whatever was worth carting away.

Babylon came by in 597, eleven years before Jerusalem was conquered, thirty years after Jeremiah began his witness. Jerusalem was besieged and survived, but a lot of Judeans were

marched away into captivity. Babylon besieged Jerusalem again in 587. The gates were destroyed in 586 and the second major deportation happened. Jeremiah may have gone with the people into captivity then. Babylon came by again in 582 and there was no refuge in Jerusalem. They swept up more people in a third major deportation.

The followers of Jeremiah were not crushed by these tragedies. They kept his traditions and writing alive. They were part of the return to decimated Jerusalem and Judah that began about fifty years later in 538 bce when Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon. It was a slow return because they were returning to desolation, returning to people who were remnants of the three deportations, and neighbors who had moved in.

The followers of Jeremiah brought the Deuteronomic spiritual revolution back with them, a revolution that had managed to adapt and thrive under the conditions of captivity. They wrote the first chapter to let us know that they believed the words of Jeremiah were the inspired words of God.

As our Peter pointed out for us many years ago, the painful lessons of living by faith in captivity challenged Jewish triumphalism. I agree with Peter that it should be remembered as guidance for challenging Christian triumphalism today. In current vernacular, it is guidance for challenging the pride of American exceptionalism. Tragedies are an excellent corrective to the sin of pride, to thinking we can get away with whatever we want to do.

A banner for the Deuteronomic spiritual revolution was the Shemah, lively guidance and prayer for Jews to this day. I read from the Sixth Chapter of Deuteronomy, verses 3-9 as found in the Second Edition of the Jewish Study Bible, without the patriarchal language.

Obey, O Israel, willingly and faithfully, that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing

*with milk and honey, as the God of your ancestors speaks to you. **Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

In the great Jesus story of the Samaritan who helped a Jew who had been beaten up on the road to Jericho, he explains to the lawyer seeking salvation that the Shemah must be paired with the commandment to love your neighbors as yourselves, even the neighbors who do not see things the way you see things. Can this guidance help us find our way through tragedies?

One false guidance for dealing with tragedy is apocalyptic thinking. Tragedy experienced or feared prompted Jewish and Christian apocalyptic visions. Should we ask Time and Space to build a bomb shelter under Seekers and stock up with years supply of freeze dried food? These stories keep coming around, despite the long history of never showing up as scheduled but tragedies and fears of tragedies do keep coming around, but without the Rapture.

The core apocalyptic story line goes like this. People do bad things to each other and don't worship God the way they should. God gets mad at them and punishes them with tragedies. God relents and forgives the people because a faithful few kept the faith and God rewards them on Earth and or in Heaven. The story is that things are going terribly and there is no end in sight. The people who are doing the bad things should be punished, violently punished, painfully punished, while the faithful should be rescued and rewarded. Since the faithful are too weak to do the punishing it is up to God, and/or the

agents of God like King Cyrus, to make things right.

As far as I can see, the only good news in apocalyptic stories is that the faithful should keep on being faithful and doing what they can do even in terrible circumstances. A current popular version of apocalyptic stories is that a super hero like Wonder Woman or the Black Panther saves the world from evil and the rest of us who are cheering them on will thrive.

Hosea did not offer apocalypticism. Jeremiah did not offer apocalypticism. Jesus did not offer apocalypticism.

In the time of Jesus, Rome's exploitation of Judah and Israel was getting worse. The Jewish kings and priests were colluding with Rome and letting things get worse. In addition to personal corruption, the priests were given the big temple in Jerusalem that allowed them to feel like they owned Judaism. Jesus saw it for what it was and challenged it with stories like the story of a Samaritan who helped a Jew, a story that included the guidance of the Shemah. After the death of Jesus, the destruction of the Temple, and the genocide of Jewish and Christian leaders, Luke, and other authors of Christian scripture, gave in to apocalypticism. Paul was focused on the Christ of his vision on the Damascus road and had little or nothing to say about Jesus.

In the times of Luke, things were getting worse. Enmity was breaking out between between synagogue Jews and Gentile Christians even though they had cooperated somewhat for decades. Jews were given a pass by Roman Caesars while some Christians were sawed in half and fed to lions. In Rome, Christians were reduced to secret meetings in the catacombs.

Christian Testament apocalypticism shows up not only in Revelation but also in the gospels. In Luke, instead of lifting up the good work of the close followers of Jesus, we get twelve apostles whose job was to be judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the end days, while Jesus would judge the

Gentiles.

When the apocalypse didn't happen on time, Christian leaders began redirecting the time of salvation from soon to come end days to a vague some time. Salvation after death in Heaven for those who remain faithful, while enemies burn forever in Hell, moves apocalypticism out of human time to imagined heavenly time.

I'm angry about injustice and I fear some paths to cataclysmic tragedies. Despite my angers and fears, I am sticking with the guidance of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Jesus. I'm going to keep loving God with all of myself. I'm going to keep on caring about my neighbors, including you my closest neighbors. I'm going to keep on following my callings as I am able and I hope to remain thankful for the good gifts I have been given even though the tragedy of my death is certain and the tragedies that are possible for my children and grandchildren are frightening.

Jesus grew up and lived in Galilee, the ancestral home of the Northern tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. He inherited the stories and guidance of Hosea and Jeremiah and had the courage to do his part in Jerusalem.