Something New Being Born
Jeremiah 31:1-6; John 20:1-18

Do you remember the words at the beginning of Charles Dickens’ novel *The Tale of Two Cities*?
The story took place in Europe during the mid to late eighteenth century, a time of deep disparity and inequality between the rich and the poor. Dickens writes,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

Charles Dickens was not only a novelist but also a social reformer and critic during a time of extreme injustice. But the ability to see hope or despair, light or darkness, is not merely tied to the social conditions in which we live. It can also be a matter of perspective. Even those who are enmeshed in unjust conditions, if they have hope, they can dream of new possibilities and envision new opportunities.

The prophet Jeremiah ministered in a time in the life of ancient Judah when, on the surface, it appeared things were going quite well – at least for the rich and the powerful. Most prophets of the day painted a picture of progress and hope, of things getting better and better. However, Jeremiah denounced these opposing prophets as doing little more than proclaiming “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). Contrary to his opponents, Jeremiah’s massage was a lonely voice crying out against the inequities of the day. Jeremiah foresaw doom for the people unless they acknowledged their community’s injustices and their own greed, unless the people would confess that they had turned their backs on God and on the life of faithfulness and compassion and mercy and grace that God set before them.
The word *jeremiad*, refers to a long, mournful complaint or lamentation, and finds its roots in Jeremiah’s name. Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister, theologian, and writer notes: “There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn’t denounce. He denounced the king and the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital jamborees. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor, and he denounced the poor for deserving no better . . . and right at the very gates of the Temple he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on in there, they ought to have their heads examined.”

However, a most remarkable thing happens. When disaster does indeed come upon the ancient Hebrews - when Jerusalem falls, when the Temple is in ruins and many of the Jerusalemites are carried off into exile in Babylon, Jeremiah once again offers a counter perspective. For the Israelites of old, it was a time of utter despair, a time of darkness and desolation. Living under an alien empire, the people were convinced that God had forgotten them. In their grief and despair, the people believed that God had turned away from them. But along comes Jeremiah, urging the people to make the best of the situation, and in chapters 30 and 31, often referred to as The Book of Consolation, Jeremiah speaks words of hope.

The common thread in the book of Jeremiah is a conviction that our God is a God whose love will not let us go. The prophet, speaking for God, uses words of steadfast love for the grief-stricken exiles, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” (31:3).

Yet, this is hardly a new message. Prior to the exile, even when speaking words of condemnation, Jeremiah was motivated by a passion – a passion that the people embrace God’s loving vision for life, that the people throw off their self-centeredness and their spiritual blindness, and live by the values of compassion and righteousness and faithful living. The prophet’s roaring words stem from his conviction that the God of gracious love and compassion will not rest satisfied until the people take hold of a new way of living.
Jeremiah’s Book of Consolation dares to proclaim that even when life appears to be at its bleakest, God is behind the scenes, working to restore life, inviting us to place our trust anew in God’s goodness. Many view God’s work of creation as a completed work. But over and over again the Scriptures portray a God whose creation, even now, is unfolding; a God, in fact, who promises a new creation. Presbyterian author John Killinger reminds us that God “is still up to the divine elbows in making the world and making the people in the world, and hasn’t even begun to rest from the task.”

Surely that’s the message of Easter resurrection as well, that life need not remain the same, that ours is a God who is in the business of making all things new. As the apostle Paul reminded the Christians at Corinth,

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

Everything has become new. How we experience life and its possibilities, the goals and hopes we embrace for living, our yearning and working for justice and peace and reconciliation - all this is filtered through our experience of resurrection and new life...

And yet, we seldom find it easy to trust that life can take on this radically new quality. It seems far more reasonable to us to view the world as a Good Friday kind of world than as an Easter world. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that, “Good Friday is verifiable, then and now. It is where we live - the land of betrayal, corruption, violence, and death. Easter, on the other hand, is a rumor by comparison. Someone said that someone saw [Jesus], only it didn’t exactly look like him, and before anyone could believe it was him, he was gone. After Easter, Jesus comes and goes like a rainbow on a bright day: now you see him, now you don’t.”
To believe in the Easter message of resurrection and new life requires a leap of faith and an act of courage; it demands a willingness to embrace an entirely new perspective towards life, to trust that God’s creative work is far from complete, that God will indeed have the final word, a life-affirming and life-giving word. Easter demands that we look beneath the surface of things and recognize that God is offering an alternative to Good Friday reality; an alternative to betrayal and injustice; an alternative to fear and corruption; an alternative to violence and evil. And what is that alternative? Resurrection, forgiveness, new beginnings, God’s outrageous love!

These are experiences we must come to embrace as our own. Frequently in life, we can make do with secondhand information, drawing upon the advice of a financial planner, a mechanic’s assessment of our car’s problem, the diagnosis of a doctor, the predictions of a meteorologist. But when it comes to questions of meaning and wholeness in life, good advice from others is seldom enough. Only a firsthand encounter with God will do.

This is the experience of Mary Magdalene, whom John portrays in today’s Gospel lesson as approaching the tomb of Jesus all alone on the first Easter morning. Seeing that the stone was rolled away from the tomb, Mary assumes that someone has taken Jesus’ body. Running to several of the disciples, Mary announces, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” (John 20:2). A little later the grieving Mary Magdalene stands weeping outside the tomb, and she does not recognize Jesus when he asks her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” (v. 15). But when Jesus speaks Mary’s name, it is as if bells ring and Mary’s eyes are fully opened; all of life is transformed. Incredible joy replaces weeping and sorrow, for suddenly Mary knows, deep in her heart, that Jesus is alive, that death does not have the final word. Mary discovers firsthand the great love of our God who is in the business of making all life new.
I came across the story of Joseph Haroutnian, former professor at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, who arrived in this country as an immigrant from Armenia, while still in his teens. Soon after his arrival an acquaintance took him aside and said, “Joe, your accent is a problem, but you can work on that. Your name, though, is something else. Nobody here can pronounce Haroutnian, so it will be a handicap to you in America. Why don’t you change your name to Harwood or Harwell - something like that? Something understandable.” Haroutnian asked the man, “What do those names mean?” The response came, “What do you mean, what do they mean?” “Those names, Harwood and Harwell. What do they mean?” “Well, nothing,” the well-meaning man answered. “They’re just easier to spell and to pronounce.” Joseph then replied, “Back in Armenia, when my grandfather was baptized, they named him Haroutun, which means resurrection. He bore the name of the resurrection, the central event in our faith as Christians. When my father was born, they named him Haroutnian, which means son of resurrection. And I am Joseph Haroutnian; and I will be a son of the resurrection all my days.”

When Mary hears her name, she becomes a daughter of the resurrection. She recognizes that the God who loves us with an everlasting love is doing something new. In his book *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N.T. Wright writes that, “God has added a new act to the unfolding drama of creation and redemption - an act that centers on the resurrection of Jesus. While not in the way the people of Jesus’ day would have anticipated, God nevertheless has acted decisively. It is an act that reminds us that something new is being born, that fear and death no longer have the final word, that we can choose life rather than death, hope in place of despair, forgiveness rather than vengeance, relationships rather than alienation, courage above caution, light in place of darkness. The cross, the agonizingly cruel death Jesus suffered, amazingly becomes a symbol, not of defeat, but of victory and of new life. Something new is being born.”
Some would reduce the Easter story to a debate about what happened to the body of Jesus. But there is so much more to the Easter story. Easter has to do with what happened in Mary’s life, and in your life, and in Joseph Haroutnian’s life, and in my life. United Methodist pastor Robert Raines puts it this way:

“Easter is not magic, but miracle; not chemistry, but mystery. Easter happens to you and me whenever Jesus takes us by surprise, in some moment of awakening, causing doors that were locked tight to swing open. There is a moment of realization, of looking in the eyes and knowing, ‘I am loved, I love you, it is possible, a new future is being born.’”

Something new is being born, something the result of our God’s unending, gracious love. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! And that makes all the difference. Amen!

**Pastoral Prayer**

*O God of mystery, God of gracious love, God of resurrection and new life, we gather with millions around the world to celebrate a message that continues to baffle us. The world is much the same as it was yesterday; hunger and suffering and disease and warfare and brokenness and division continue to abound. And yet we come, believing that something new is being born, that there is good news for our world, that there is joy and hope, for Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!*

*We do not fully understand it, but we want to stand with you and your people, celebrating the promise that love is stronger than hatred, that death and fear do not have the final word, that peace is possible, that joy can fill the hearts of the lonely, the lost, the broken, the hurting, the grieving, the confused, the isolated.*
O God of resurrection, sometimes our hearts tremble as we ponder the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. Take us beyond our fears, we pray. Deepen the faith that is within us, that we might trust in your goodness, that we might sing alleluias, that we might walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the One who opens the way to abundant life. Thanks be to you, O God, for the gift of Christ Jesus our risen Lord.

Loving God, hear us now as we remember those whose grief is strong, families that lost loved ones due to the current pandemic. We remember those who are isolated and alone this day. We thank you for the gift of joy, and pray for those who do not know the joy of your love and the care of a community of faith. We thank you for signs of healing, and pray for those who need your healing care.

O God of peace and compassion, bring your Spirit of peace to our troubled world. Bring your resurrection power to our daily living, that we might be witnesses to your grace and peace and hope.

O God, sometimes we tremble, but even in our trembling, lead us to new life. Form us into makers of justice and peace. Guide us into life abundant and everlasting, through the gift of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Pastor Clay Moyer

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