

Look for the Ancient Paths
Pastor Morgan Murray
West Valley Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 6:16-20 NRSV

16 This is what the LORD says:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.
But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’
17 I appointed watchmen over you and said,
‘Listen to the sound of the trumpet!’
But you said, ‘We will not listen.’
18 Therefore hear, O nations;
observe, O witnesses,
what will happen to them.
19 Hear, O earth:
I am bringing disaster on this people,
the fruit of their schemes,
because they have not listened to my words
and have rejected my law.
20 What do I care about incense from Sheba
or sweet calamus from a distant land?
Your burnt offerings are not acceptable;
your sacrifices do not please me.”

Title: Look for the Ancient Paths

All our scripture lessons for this Advent are all about looking:

- The prophet Jeremiah urges us to stand at the crossroads and look. Which road will we take?
- John the Baptist urges he readers to start looking for the coming Messiah. Will they recognize him?
- When Jesus arrives on the scene, John then declares: Behold the Lamb of God! Can we recognize Jesus for who he really is?
- When Jesus says, “Look at the fig tree...” he wants us to notice the signs of the times. Are we paying attention?

As I was preparing this sermon series, I remembered something I hadn't thought about in a very long time. I recalled being in the first grade, excited to learn how to read. Mrs. Henderson wrote our very first reading word on the chalkboard: LOOK. She then added two chalk pupils to the oh's, and turned them into eyes! So intuitive! So memorable!

It has been a VERY LONG time since I reminisced about the first grade. In fact, I'm not sure if I ever have before as an adult. Why is it that I find myself getting wistful about my elementary education? It's just another sign that I am getting to "that age," I guess.

But I know that I'm not alone in this. I wonder if you saw that Best Buy is selling a Fisher-Price toy telephone that you can use to make real phone calls?



It works by connecting to your cell phone via blue tooth. Sixty bucks. Seriously.

Did you know that when the word *nostalgia* was introduced, it was not as a feeling but as a medical diagnosis? It was coined by a 17th-century medical student to describe the anxieties displayed by Swiss mercenaries who longed to leave the French and Italian lowlands and return to the mountains of home. For those afflicted with it, it would take such a toll that they couldn't fight anymore. Symptoms included fainting, high fever, indigestion, stomach pain, and even death. Nostalgia was translated into English as homesickness since the term itself was a combination of the Greek words for *homecoming* and *pain* or *ache*.

Today, we understand nostalgia not so much as a longing to go back to a familiar *place* but to a more reliable *time*. It is a coping mechanism, a response to rapid changes and an uncertain future. Researchers have noted that, within our culture, we have experienced waves of nostalgia following major crises like 9/11, the Great Recession, and of course COVID-19. If we think of nostalgia the way it was originally conceived in 1688, we can see that one epidemic has begotten another. Focusing on the memories of the past – especially heavily edited memories that leave us feeling that the past was so much simpler, happier, preferable to the present – can leave us feeling stuck.

Corporations like it this way. They have learned that people will spend money on things that help them keep feeling nostalgic. The Fisher Price phone is Exhibit A.

Politicians like it this way. They make nostalgia a key part of their campaigns. They know people will vote for someone who promises to help them relive America's glory days.

So as I reminisce about sitting at a small wooden desk with the smell of chalkdust in the air, learning the word “look” with its googly-eyes while remaining blissfully ignorant of things like inflation or mask mandates or rising sea levels, I think about God’s command, given through the prophet Jeremiah:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

Is God inviting us to be nostalgic for the good old days? Are ancient paths, goods ways, and rest for our souls just metaphors for a return to happier times? Or is something else going on here?

One thing we know for sure: Jeremiah was not one for sentimentality. If he ever owned a pair of rose-colored glasses, they were lost or broken long ago. Jeremiah, like us, lived during tumultuous times. As Eugene Peterson puts it:

Jeremiah’s troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong *did* go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of all of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing. He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt. Every muscle in his body was stretched to the limit by fatigue; every thought in his mind was subjected to questioning; every feeling in his heart was put through fires of ridicule. He experienced it all agonizingly and wrote it all magnificently.

If ever there was a person who would might have been tempted to succumb to nostalgia, it would be Jeremiah. But he would have none of it. The present challenges were too great and the need for a God-inspired perspective was too urgent. Jeremiah isn’t inviting his hearers to look back to happier times. He is calling them to take stock of how they got where they are. He makes no bones about the fact that the people have neglected God and God’s ways. They had guides, but refused to follow in their footsteps. They had watchmen, but refused to heed their warnings. The inevitable outcome is disaster.

At a preaching symposium earlier this year, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was interviewed about his recent book, *Preaching Jeremiah: Announcing God’s Restorative Passion*. Brueggemann noted that “Ours, like the time of Jeremiah, is a time of violence, it’s a time of loss, it’s a time of bewilderment, it’s a time of fear...” and yet “the book of Jeremiah gives voice to all of that, and before it finishes, it also manages to give voice to hope.” He also commented on the role that nostalgia is playing in some of the angst that people are feeling today.

[R]emembering a world that really never existed is what is fueling the resentment and the violence that now is besetting our society in which there is a wish for an old... world that was wonderful for a few people and not for very many others. The first task of Jeremiah is to say, “Whether you treasured that world or not ... it is gone and it is not coming back...”

Brueggemann was also asked about the role of imagination in prophetic preaching like Jeremiah's. He was prompted to explain what imagination is from a Christian sense.

"I take it to be the capacity to host a world that is other than the one that is in front of us," he said. "The one in front of us is scientific, conditioned by enlightenment, rationality and all of that."

However, "that's not a faithful way to perceive the world," he said. "A faithful way to perceive the world is through promise and covenant, and all those ingredients of gospel faith... [I]t requires great will and great intentionality and great resolve to continue to dwell in and bear witness to [such] a world that contradicts... the rest of our life."

What we need now is a faithful way to look at the world. Dr. Brueggemann is reminding us that we have baptized imaginations, and we need to use them! He is reminding us that the spiritual journey is not about *what* we see, but *how* we see. Jeremiah's ancient paths are the ones that lead us to trust God more, trust our own schemes less, and enable us to live in covenant love with God and neighbor.

Advent is a good time for getting back to basics. Pray daily. Confess quickly. Forgive even more quickly. Do good deeds. These are expressions of simple practices that are easy to forget. The ancient paths are not complicated. That doesn't mean they are easy. It does indeed take effort and intentionality to live according to promise and covenant instead of getting lulled back to sleep wishing for better times that weren't really as good as we remember them to be.

Advent is a good time to look at old things with new eyes. This can be difficult during Christmas time because the things we love to look at - the tree, the lights, the creche – are all so familiar and so weighed down with sentiment. But God is doing a new thing. For all people. Through his Son. Can we perceive it? Will we join God in it?

Jeremiah said stand, look, ask for the good way, and then walk it. His people said, "We will not."

Will we?

Let us pray.