

2021-03-21 A New Day for All

A New Day for All

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Jeff Peterson]

And now, a reading from Jeremiah 31 verses 31 through 34:

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I have some reflections on that beautiful passage from the prophet Jeremiah that Jeff just read for us, but first I wanted to offer just a few reflections on the terrible current events of this past week and the violence that happened in Atlanta. And I'll start by acknowledging that that's a very hard thing to talk about in this context. Typically, at Artisan it's very common for us to, when there's such tragic news, to set aside our plans and to spend that time together on Zoom talking about it – or not on Zoom, in the room – the fact that we're on Zoom, I don't know exactly why, but I want to just own the fact that that makes it seem even more difficult to talk about, perhaps because I'm not always sure who and what age group of people are participating on Zoom or on Facebook.

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And yet, I think it's important for us to do what we can to acknowledge a few things as a church. First of all, to acknowledge this increasingly prevalent anti-Asian racism in our society has always been a problem, but it has grown exponentially over this past year. And I personally need to confess that I have remained silent about that, and I regret it. I also feel like we need to acknowledge the misogyny and sexism in our society, which has been a stain on our world since we started walking upright, and although it would not be accurate to say that I've remained silent about that, I certainly have not said enough.

And I think it's equally important for those of us who exist in the world of the Christian church to acknowledge that the perpetrator of this terrible crime was a child of the church, was in fact a person who was so deeply disturbed by taking to heart the purity culture that he had been taught in his Christian church that had overflowed in him in this way. And so I would say not only is the church in America and not doing enough, and we would include ourselves in that, to combat white supremacy and misogyny and sexism, but in many ways the particular cocktail of evil that appears to have been the motivation for this crime are in fact built into our system. They are part of who we are and what we are.

And in this case, the end result, of course, was the literal loss of life, but there are smaller consequences to these evils that we could notice every day in the lives of millions of people, if we would take the time to do so. And so, we mourn and grieve this senseless loss of life. We repudiate the hatred that was behind the act. And we also need to take a long hard look at what we think about ourselves, how we speak in the church about race and gender and sexuality, and what we teach our children. And we need not only to grieve, in my view, but also to repent and to commit to doing everything in our power to prevent another incident like this from ever happening again. May it be so, by the grace and power of Christ and the love of the Spirit. Thanks be to God.

I don't know about you, but when I read this passage from the prophet Jeremiah this week, and even before this week as I was beginning to think through what would happen in this season of the church, I was immediately drawn to the idea of "a new day." This is the second day of spring in the longest year in human history. [chuckles] This is, in many ways, feeling like time for new beginnings, although we should be very careful not to rush those new beginnings, especially as it concerns public health. But I don't know about you, when I read those words, "the days are surely coming" – even just that phrase was enough for me to go, "Yes, please! Whatever those days are, I want them to be here faster." Even just the word "new" was like, "Yes, please! Anything new at this point."

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I'm sure that many of you felt this same way, and so those words resonate with us, even if we don't kind of understand any of the biblical context, even if we don't know anything about who the prophet Jeremiah was speaking to, or why, or when, or any of that stuff. This is one of the things I love about the Bible, is that it's perfectly legitimate for it to speak to us on that so-called "shallow" level, and then as you dig deeper, you can uncover a richness and depth of meaning that, as far as I've been able to discern, never stops, no matter how much you learn and seek.

And it's in that spirit of digging a little deeper and getting a richer meaning that I want to tell you: if you, like me, are drawn to this idea of a new day – if you are like, "The days are surely coming, they're surely not coming fast enough; please bring them now, O Lord!" – that as we begin to unpack the meaning of this passage, you may find that this new day doesn't exactly look the way you might have sketched it out yourself. This is so common, the reality for people who follow God. We have our ideas of what God ought to do, and then God does something a little different than that, which is – well, we take it on faith, better in the end. But it doesn't look like the way we'd have drawn it up.

So let me go a little deeper into this passage and tell you a few things about this new day that God is promising and you can decide whether you want to be part of it or not. First of all, the *new day* that God says is surely coming here in the prophet Jeremiah is one that unites blocks of people who are estranged from each other and who do not want to be, perhaps, united to each other. I don't know if you caught this in the reading, but it says, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." I don't need to go too deep into the history of the people here, but these were two separate kingdoms that had separated very bitterly when the two sons of Solomon could not agree on who should take the throne. And each kingdom thought that they were the better one, the true one, the holy one, the moral one.

Boy, does that speak to our society now, especially here in America; we are so polarized politically. We have been seeing that trend for decades now – but it seems like it's been a hockey stick exponential increase over the last, say, I don't know, pick a random number, half-decade or so – where people on the right feel they have nothing in common with the people on the left, and it's even worse than that, because both groups think that the other group is entirely immoral. Both groups think that the other group is like some cartoonish supervillain. Right? And I am, believe me, not trying to say that all views are equal and it doesn't matter what your politics are. I think politics affect people's lives very deeply. I just want you to imagine that if the new day that God has promised for us involves uniting groups of people who don't want to be united with each other, that might mean coming to the table with people who you believe are deeply wrong about things that matter greatly.

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Here's the other thing that the new day that God promises does: It displaces or even erases your past religious glory. The Prophet says this is not going to be like the old way, the old covenant, when I took their ancestors by the hand and brought them out of Egypt, right? This is the true glory days of the people of God at the time that this prophet was speaking and writing. So, to say it's not gonna be like that old way, say it's not gonna be like what happened with Moses, the greatest prophet that the people had ever known to that point? I'm not sure that that hits in quite as pleasant a way. I don't know if you have some version of the Exodus in your past religious experience or spiritual life, I don't know if you have a history that you feel quite comfortable with as being the way you understand God, and I'm not sure that if you knew that the new day God was calling you out into would involve letting go of that past in some meaningful fashion, if you'd want to do it after all.

Here's the other problem with God's new day – with this new covenant, with the days that might be surely coming: It takes away certainty and replaces it with a very personal kind of tenderness. We don't like the word *law*, especially as it pertains to religion, but you need to understand for the Israelites, the word *law* was a very good word. You can read something like Psalm 19 or many, many, many other Psalms where the law of the Lord is compared to wonderful, beautiful things, like sweet honey – where the law of the Lord is understood to convey this ineffable truth about God, in the same way that the stars in the sky speak without words about the deep truths of the world.

And the prophet Jeremiah says, guess what, it's not going to be law anymore! It's going to be the law written on your heart. And for me, I don't know about for you, but I think it might be true. This new day where the law is not what it used to be and instead it's written on our hearts might feel very unsettling, because we kind of like certainty; we like it when there's a black and white answer to every question we have. And guess what; in the days that are surely coming, there's a lot of question marks. If you like answers better than questions, I would suggest pursuing something other than the way of Jesus.

And right alongside that means that this new day removes barriers to entry for people, and on first blush, we love that. We love to say we want everybody to be welcome, until we start seeing the people God is welcoming, and then we want to just pump the brakes a little bit. So, in some ways, this new day that surely is coming? Once we realize it's on God's terms and not on our own terms, it might start to feel a little bit less like a fresh start and a little bit more like death. Which brings me to Jesus. (By the way, if I ever preach a sermon that doesn't eventually get to the point of Jesus, you need to remind me what my job is. [chuckles])

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Which brings me to Jesus It is Jesus, I believe, who embodies and represents this new covenant – this new promise that God made to the people so long ago. And in today's Gospel reading, Jesus offers us a powerful, but sort of unsettling, teaching. And I'm going to read to you just two verses from that passage in John, chapter 12. This is John 12, 24 and 25: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” He goes on to say, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

I added that second verse not because I have a clever sermon conclusion that involves it, but because I thought it would be wrong not to include the most confusing thing that Jesus says. I do, however, think that the metaphor of the single grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying so that it produces itself many fold – I think that that metaphor is quite understandable, and quite beautiful. And rather than tacking on an additional sermon to the one I just gave about the prophet Jeremiah's words, and certainly not intending to tack on a sermon to the one that Jesus gives – This is the problem with with preaching the words of Jesus: like, what am I going to say, make it better? All I can do is point to it, basically. – so, instead of trying to tack on additional meaning to what Jesus has already said to us, I think it might be fitting to respond by leading you in a brief prayer exercise using that teaching as a basis, in the hope and expectation and trust and faith that the Spirit will use that moment of prayer, that reflection on these holy words of Jesus, to draw you into the meaning that you need most today.

So, what I'd like you to do is to hold out your hand. And you can imagine a seed in your hand. Jesus says a grain of wheat, but I think any seed would work. If you do this later, you may actually be able to find a real seed or something small like a seed that you could put in your hand; maybe you can do that right now, depending on where you are. And I want you to imagine that grain of wheat, or some kind of seed, and how small it is. I want you to close your hand around it; you can so easily contain that seed, that grain. You can so easily protect it and prevent it from falling out of your hand.

Whatever it is you're holding onto with a closed fist, maybe it represents for you some relationship in your life; maybe it represents for you a job, the one you have or the one you're hoping to get, the one you love or the one you hate; maybe that grain of wheat represents your calling in this life, your sense of identity of who you are; maybe it represents an institutional commitment, including a commitment to a church; maybe you're running around doing errands and you're worried that you're going to drop that seed so you're holding it tight; or maybe

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you're holding on to it like it's a treasure, something very important to you that you would not want to lose.

You know what's coming next, and so I want you to be kind to yourself about how it might make you feel to imagine opening your hand and turning it over, until that seed falls out onto the ground. Whatever it might feel like to let go of whatever that seed is, I want you to hear these words of Jesus again: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That seed falls down and touches the earth, organic matter meeting organic matter, and the thing about seeds is that you never quite know what's going to happen when they hit the ground. Sometimes you don't even know what kind of seed you have; you might think it's one thing and it ends up being another. Sometimes the seed is a grain of wheat and it grows up into something that can nourish and sustain people and reproduce itself for generations to come, and sometimes it falls to the ground and what you thought was good ends up being a weed that grows up and tries to choke out the nourishment in your life. Jesus had some great teachings about that, as well.

But having let go of that seed and let it fall to the earth, I wonder if you could begin to shift your sense of identity away from whatever that seed was. And I'd like you to imagine prayerfully that you are no longer defined by a seed but that you are defined in the earth and the soil itself. See, the resurrection that we seek and believe comes to us, it only comes to us *after and through* the resurrection of Jesus, whose body went down into the earth and then was raised three days later. And it's in that resurrection spirit that we who trust in God, that we who follow Jesus, get to be part of the recreation and remaking of the world.

What if the fruitfulness comes not from the seeds that we carry, which might just be an overly inflated sense of our own importance, but rather from our willingness our submission (if you'll allow me to say that word) to being the soil, where whatever seed Jesus is planting can take root, and be nourished, and grow, and become fruitful? So, once again, an open hand with a seed, a closed fist that tries to protect it, a hand that reopens and turns over and releases control, and a prayerful reimagining of ourselves not as little seeds, but as rich, deep soil, in which the new life of Christ can blossom.

May we all be together a fruitful field of wheat, an expansive orchard. Love and peace and joy be yours, and ours, and through us, by the grace of God, the whole world's. Now and forever. Amen.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).