

A Moment of Clarity

A sermon taken from Jeremiah 6: 16, and preached on January 23, 2011 at
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter.

I want to reflect on a verse in the Bible that has become one of my favorites. It is printed in your bulletin, and comes from the Prophet Jeremiah: **Thus says the Lord, stand at the crossroads and look. And ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.**

Like many verses in the Bible it is filled with practical wisdom. It is, first, a word from the Lord, and as in all communication, there is one who speaks and one who listens, and so it is important that we listen. **Thus says the Lord.** God is speaking to a time and a place, and Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of God recorded this. The temple is destroyed, he is in an adversarial relationship with the King, and he moves to Egypt, where he lives out his days in exile. God wants to speak, but the people will not listen, they ridicule the word of God, they are greedy, they do not speak or act truthfully, and they cover over all of this with a veneer that says "all is well". To compound all of this, they have become so comfortable in their evil that they no longer blush about it. Jeremiah is speaking to a culture in ruins, to a demoralized people. He senses that some of the adversity has come from their enemies, but he also knows that some they have brought on themselves.

It is a challenging time and place. Now, 586 before Christ is not the same world as 2011 AD, or maybe it is? And so God spoke and God continues to speak. We are not left without a word, without guidance. **Thus says the Lord, stand at the crossroads.** What are the crossroads? The crossroads are those moments and places of decision. It was early Thursday morning, I am an early morning person but this was really early, and I was driving one of our daughters to catch Amtrak, she was headed for Washington D.C. and had a ticket. We were on time, but did not have a great deal of cushion. So we are headed north on 277 and I remembered that the Amtrak exit is not marked. We came upon an exit, and I wondered, "is this it?" No, we will take the next one, we did and drove a mile maybe, took the exit and then realized, "*this is not the right place.*" Now I know, a guy keeps driving, right? But it did not look familiar, so we turned around. It is early in the morning, it is dark, it is cold, and not much is open, not many people are moving around.

Soon we come upon a stop light and a couple of guys are standing there. Can you tell us how to get to Amtrak from here? They told us to turn around, make an immediate left, and then another immediate left and we would be there. We

thanked them and followed their instructions, and soon, we were there, in time to catch the train.

We were at a crossroads, wondering which way to turn. We were at a place and a moment of decision. To stand at the crossroads is to survey all of the possible options, and it can be bewildering. Barry Swartz teaches psychology at Swarthmore College in Philadelphia and he has written a wonderful book entitled *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. He argues that the increasing numbers of choices, options do not make us more content; in fact, they can be overwhelming. From shampoo to cheese, from the right college to the right retirement community, from where to live to how many children, abundance of choices actually makes us less happy and more stressed.

Every day we all stand at a crossroads. Of course this goes beyond consumer behavior, employment and family to other matters: the moral decisions we make, what we value, our ethical and spiritual lives.

Stand at the crossroads and look, or, as the rabbis said, consider. This is an invitation to see what is going on all around us. If we have ears to hear what the Lord is saying to us, our eyes are open to see what is happening in our lives and in our world. **Stand at the crossroads and look:**

Life is passing you by and in the meantime you wonder: How are you spending your time? Where is it going? What is concerning you, worrying you? What are you missing? What direction has your life taken the last year, two years? Is it the road you want to be on? Or do you seem lost, like we were on Thursday morning? Look around. Consider. The seeing and reflecting may lead us to ask the question: am I going in the right direction? Is this what I want from life? We can rely on our own counsel, or the guidance of friends. And if faith is a part of our lives, we can imagine that God is speaking to us.

Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths. What is the ancient path? Well, it is not the next thing, not always the relevant thing, the newest gadget or program or guru. For a Christian, there is a well traveled ancient path. It began three thousand years ago, as God called Abraham and Sarah and then Moses. The path led the people from slavery to freedom. Last Sunday I talked about Martin Luther King, Jr. When he stood at a crossroads and looked around, at Montgomery and Selma, he discovered the ancient path, the very one that Moses had walked before him. The path led God's people to remarkable heights of success---the kingdoms of David and Solomon, the building of the temple, and utter valleys of despair----exile to Assyrian and Babylon, and the destruction of the temple.

Through it all God gave us prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, to steer us back toward that path. They were like the men we met early in the morning, last week, who helped us on the way to where we needed to be, who realized we were lost. Finally the ancient path was identified by John the Baptist in the wilderness, and Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. Eugene Peterson has commented that the way is the most frequently avoided metaphor among Christians of our time. The way means "to do it the way Jesus did it, by becoming absolutely needy and dependent on the Father". The ancient path is summarized in a well known proverb: **Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths (Proverbs 3. 5-6).**

Pilgrims have walked this ancient path for the last thirty centuries. There are patterns of living related to the Sabbath and rest that are three thousand years old. There are patterns of hospitality given to us by the Benedictines that are 1600 years old. There are patterns of spiritual discernment given to us by the Jesuits that are 500 years old. There are patterns of holy living given to us by the early Methodists that are 250 years old. There are patterns of conversion of the heart given to us by the revival preachers that are 150 years old. There are patterns of reform of the nation given to us by the social gospel that are 100 years old. All of this forms the ancient path. It is all a part of hearing the gospel invitation of Jesus, who said, and says, "Follow me".

When you are looking around, when you are getting ready to take the next step, **look for, consider the ancient path, where the good way lies.** This path has always been the way of happiness and blessing, it has always been the way that God has been closest to his people, it has always been the practical way of being in his will. It can be a hard road, and a narrow road, Jesus said, but God is with us.

Ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it. In other words, Christianity is a journey and not only a destination, a process and not only a status. The ancient path is the good way, it is the way that leads to life. The Sabbath, if we practice it, is for our healing. Spiritual Discernment, if we practice it, is for our guidance. Holiness, if we practice it, is for our maturing and well-being.

To walk in it is to stay with it. It is, in the words again of Eugene Peterson, "*a long obedience in the same direction.*" To walk somewhere is to have the intention to make one choice and not another, to arrive in one place and not another. The ancient path, the good way, rules out lots of other paths, and some of these are mentioned in today's scripture from Jeremiah.

To walk in this way is to find **rest for our souls**. If our ears are open, if our eyes are open, most of us confess a desire for this: rest for our souls. Our work becomes harder. We experience health challenges. There is tension within families. Often, making it through the schedule of a day can seem complex. And then there is the culture around us: infrastructures in need of repair, services that are constricting, angry and strident opinions and some of all of this spills over into violence. The financial markets remain turbulent, and unemployment is high.

All of this does something to the spirit, to the soul. This is not about nostalgia, about wishing life was like it was *back in the day*. We are standing at the crossroads, and we will go in one direction or another, and it will be the future. Paradoxically, the best way to walk into the future is to take the ancient path. About eleven years ago, on the eve of Y2K many were connecting the Book of Revelation with the end of the millennium. A magazine asked different Christian leaders to write letters to the churches of the present day, along the lines of the letters to the churches in Revelation. Eugene Peterson was asked to write a letter to the Suburban Church of North America. After some critique of the church, which most letters included, Peterson concluded with this guidance, written from the Voice of God to his people:

"Here's what I want you to do. I want you to start off the new millennium by purging your imagination of your suburban assumptions. I want you to do it by spending the next couple of years reading carefully and repeatedly the 16 Hebrew Prophets, Isaiah to Malachi (Jeremiah would be in this group). I have used these prophets over and over again through the centuries to separate my people from the cultures in which they lived. They are one of my standard ways of putting my people back on the path of simple faith and obedience and worship in defiance of all that the world admires and rewards. My Spirit continues to use these prophets to train my people in discerning the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of the gospel. He wants to use them with you.

The letter ends with a simple passage, which captures, for me, what rest for our souls might look like. *"To the church that not only believes what I say, but follows me in the way that I do it, I'll give a simple, uncluttered life that is hospitable to the wanderers and misguided, the hurried and harried men and women of this world. I want to give them a taste of Sabbath and heaven. Are you listening? Really listening?"*

Source: Eugene Peterson, "Letter to the Suburban Church of North America", *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1999.