

## Sermon: Anticipating the Past; Remembering the Future

Jeremiah 31:1-9

(God has been with the people in the past and loves them with everlasting love.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler  
Redlands First United Methodist Church  
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When you think of your past, which of these moods apply?

- Gratitude
- Resentment
- Regret
- Curiosity, fascination
- Joy

When you think of the future, which of these attitudes apply?

- Hopefulness
- Worry
- Enthusiasm
- Fear
- Freedom, fun, purpose
- Restrictions and loneliness

When we moved to Redlands, I found myself thinking we were foolish to keep such things as this—an old fashioned stapler. I guess I thought we were attached to some things of the past. I might have said something like, “I don’t know why we need to keep this” to our daughter, who responded, “Is that a stapler? It’s so ‘Old School.’” Her response helped me to revalue this little object. My reaction to her response helped me to make some shifts in my relationship with my own past, present, and even future.

Each of us here on this Memorial Day week-end relates to our future and our past in this present moment. However, HOW we relate probably varies.

The purpose of this sermon is to consider now how we relate to our past and future and to change our relationship with our past or future if that would be healthier.

Since 1868 our country has been commemorating, remembering, those who have died war—first the Civil War; it has expanded to be any war or military action.

Obviously a theme for this time is “Remember.” When I meditated upon what would be useful for us today, I first thought of the paradox that if we truly “remember” the past, then we are led to remember the future. War and military conflicts are *not* something we want to repeat—they are “out of the ordinary”—that’s why we commemorate them.

If we today remember the future with intensity, then we may work harder than usual to interact with others, to trust others, to listen empathically with others, learn conflict resolution, and do whatever is necessary to be prepared to help those with memories on *future* Memorial Days not to have any more that died in war to remember.

Remember the past. However, out of respect for those in the past, what we need to do above all is to remember the future.

As I discussed this idea, things got more complicated. I realized that time past and future interweave in such a fashion that we do in fact not only *remember the future*, but also *we anticipate the past*, we put it together so that it takes on different meanings

Each of us is constantly integrating our personal pasts, as well as our collective pasts as a congregation, nation or world. We keep giving meaning to our past in our present, and that meaning shifts.

We might, for example anticipate that although *now* we experience some regret about our past, we can in *the future* be able to experience our own past not just with regret, but also with large doses of joy.

Or, looking the other direction, we might be worrying about the future today. Yet, as we remember to consider *how* we relate to the future, we might decide to let our relationship to the future to be transformed, so that when we think of it we experience wonderment—even joyous anticipation, instead of worry.

This passage from the prophet Jeremiah is an oracle that announces that Israel and Judah, two big families within Judaism, will be restored. Though they are in exile in the present, the oracle shows God speaking directly to the people and offering them a future that is grounded in grace, love, and faithfulness.

The present is wilderness. The future is one of restored hope.

Why? Because God loves people with everlasting love. The Hebrew word for that love is HESED, which means extreme faithfulness. This love of God for humans is extreme, gracious, to be accepted and so dependable that it can even be taken for granted.

Look at what the prophet Jeremiah is trying to do. Here he's trying to change the people's relationship with their future, toward knowing they are always loved by God. He's saying to the people—**anticipate your past in a different way; remember the future through the lens of a God who loves us with everlasting love.** Rebuilding, replanting is in the future...let your present, your now be affected by this fact. Be hopeful in relation to the future; not only that, be joyous in the present—dance and sing.

That prophet sounds like plenty of people today, especially financial planners, who remind us that there are ups and downs; they insist there will be upward movement in the future.

How we relate to the past and present occupies a lot of interior space—a lot of counseling sessions are filled with either getting over something or worrying about something.<sup>1</sup>

The lyrics of Bob Dillon's songs are not especially straightforward, but there's a refrain in his song entitled, "My Back Pages" that is provocative. He talks of life being "black and white" in the past, and of "good and bad" being defined. But says, after each verse, "Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now..."

The prophet does not just want the people to be hopeful in relation to the future; he suggests that they be joyous in the present—that they dance and sing.

Sometimes, surprisingly, we need permission to be joyous in the present—we somehow feel we must still be remorseful or grieving or resentful or guilty about the past. Or, we feel we must surely be stressed by an upcoming assignment, worried about an event a year from now, or distressed about a completely unknown possibility in the future. If we aren't stressed, worried, or distressed we wonder what is wrong with us.

To be joyous in the present is a real gift, one Jeremiah wanted to give.

Judaism and Christianity make big deals of time—both history and future. Not all religions or philosophies do that. Buddhism in general and Zen Buddhism in particular focus on the present: “Be Here Now.” Be fully present in the present.

Jesus himself was big on the present. His visions were of the Kingdom coming now, nearby; it was “at hand.” He told people to identify with the beautiful lilies, who didn’t seem to worry much about stuff...

Actually, though Jeremiah was super-aware of past and present, the effect of what he was asking his people to do would have been trust in the present.

The last time John and I were relaxing in the desert, I finished reading a book our daughter gave John. She knew nothing about the book when she bought it, but since it was a novel about pianos set in France, she thought her dad, who enjoys some French, enjoys reading, and enjoys music, might like it.

This novel includes many paragraphs with details about pianos. Amidst all that the characters relate to each, both anticipating and remembering—past and future.

One of the main characters, a piano repairer, “liked watching from close up as accomplished artists played his pianos; it was always a revelation to see how they addressed the keyboard . . . ‘You know, I can now tell what their approach will be just by watching them sit down on the bench and look at the keyboard. Before they play a single note, they reveal a lot.’” (242)

How about us?

As we sit down to play “next week,” or “next semester,” or to approach the “next decade of our lives,” what do we reveal? *How does our approach to the future in the present reflect what our future will be?*

The main character, who was getting back to playing the piano after many years, tried some exercises that were recommended by his teacher. He learned to notice his hands as they approached the keyboard. He realized that he—like many beginning pianists—had a habit of having a “kind of strained anticipation.” He tried to approach the piano, instead with a relaxed optimism.

Do we have an approach to our future with restrained anticipation? Or, do we approach it with relaxed optimism?

Perhaps, just perhaps we can live now the life we want in the future. If so, then why wait? Perhaps in the present we’re living kind of protest to the past. If so, maybe there’s a way to deal with the past so we can be released to have a better future.

Each of us has received from our parents, grandparents, or other caregivers what we now might label *blessings* and what we probably experience to be *wounds*. The hope is that the ratio of blessings to wounds is huge, that wounds can be healed, and that even more blessings can be realized.

I am very aware of both the past and future in the present, here in Redlands. In the *Daily Facts* there is always a section on what occurred 100 years ago, and while it’s interesting, I admit I frequently have a negative relation to that, feeling that the past and its traditions and ways are holding back the future. Then, I listen to young adults who come to Karen and me and invite us to usher in *more* of the future now—in our worship, in our gatherings. When this occurs, I realize that I’m the one being perceived as in the “past.”

We have antique stores and old buildings next door to brand new coffee shops and dance studios. I have this week realized that this is part of what can be so healthy about

our town—the in-your-face-ness of all generations living joyously in the now, with jasmine fragrance in the background!

It dawns on me that we are, whether in families or in a congregation, all together in something of a relay race, except that there are hundreds of batons. We're all moving forward into the future, and gradually those of us who have been around longer hand off batons to those running a bit faster. Those who receive the batons need those who have been holding on to it—their heritage—to have a family, a town, a church. And, those who are handing off the baton need those who have their hands out, ready to grab hold of the baton, the future. Those of us with batons want to know that the whole joyous race goes on, with those who have new ideas and fresh legs.

Sometimes, in families and even in churches, the younger generations expect the older ones not to want to let go of our batons. But, it's been my experience that lots of generations that have been around a while are absolutely joyous that newer generations want to carry on. I think each generation loves the other, but each has a tiny bit of doubt whether the other generations truly appreciate them.

We do not care about our relation of past to present or present to future unless we think there's something worthy of carrying forward. So it's a compliment when younger persons say, "Here, I'll take over," but also, "How did you do this?"

I made a transition just this past week. I finally made a hair appointment at a salon on State Street. John and I have been driving back to O.C. every four weeks. I even shed a few tears. This is a pretty silly thing to tell you, but I do because what it means to me is that I'm leaving attachments to Orange County. Of course I can go back, but I don't have to. The fact that I am sad shows how much I liked it there—in the past. The fact that I'm moving all those professional relationships to here tells me I experience joy, here, now.

It's similar with the future. I'm proud of Rex and Jenell Britt. They have just moved into Plymouth Village. It's a little sooner than they had fully expected, but they have made this transition, anticipating a joyous future. They left their gorgeous house of the present trusting the future. This move would have made Jeremiah and Jesus happy.

Jeremiah told his people that God would help them rebuild and replant. In this very place, this church, some built, some planted, and later after a fire, some rebuilt, and later, some remodeled... We have plenty of past to anticipate gratefully here and plenty of future to remember is coming up. Let us rejoice; bring up the tambourines!

Jesus' ministry was extremely brief in historical years. I got to thinking recently that he himself was like a baton... accepting the trust of Jeremiah in the everlasting lovingness of God while looking to the future with dreams of peace, of cooperation, of healings of all kinds—then encouraging the people to live that future now.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah is being very hopeful, encouraging his people. This is not your typical Jeremiah. In fact, I learned a new word this week. Have you ever heard of the word, "jeremiahed"? That word, jeremiahed, means "critical protest." Usually Jeremiah didn't like what the Kings were doing, so he condemned their actions; in other words, he was always complaining. He was *not* one to see the world through rose-colored glasses. He saw things the way they were—whether bleak or hopeful. That makes this prophetic oracle all the more significant