

Last week, Claire delivered her final sermon for St. Peter's in the style of the letters St. Paul wrote to the earliest churches.

Now, and I told this to Claire too, Claire preached a *specific* part of Paul's typical letter. Two parts, really: she preached the parts that usually come at the beginning and the end. The beginning, when Paul reminds the people – and Claire reminded us – that we are lovingly created in the image of God; redeemed through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; and accompanied by the Holy Spirit. In other words, God is awesome! And the end, when they emphasize that, whatever we are facing, we are siblings in Christ and with love and through God's grace, we can persevere. In other words, you are awesome! These are, in short, the pump up parts. And the right tone for a farewell sermon.

The middle part of the letter, however, is different. The middle part of the letter has to do with the specifics of the “whatever we are facing” stuff. The part that says, “I've heard about all that going on...And...it's time to get to work.” The middle part of the letter is...the part we are living now. The sermon that comes after the farewell Sunday sermon.

St. Peter's is a congregation that actually kind of loves this middle part of the letter. While we have an amazing capacity to live with questions and doubts...oh, do we love to solve a problem! And we're good at it too!

I'm going to say something, and I don't really know how you will respond. But here goes: Where we are in the life of St. Peter's is not a problem to fix. It is a season to live. A season of transition and liminal space and uncertainty. One that is here, not because we have failed or not tried hard enough, but because there is a season for everything. A season all of us have experienced at some point. So we know that, even if we wanted to “fix” it, we can't. A season functions in time, not in goodwill nor in willpower, though it is our decision as to how we live into and through this season.

The reality is this: The last year -- two and half years, really -- have brought seismic shifts for St. Peter's: the effects of COVID-19, discovering allegations of historical abuse by a former Music Director 20 years ago, the termination of Dr. Roland, and now Rev. Claire's call to a new congregation. Our sense of certainty is understandably shaken. In a way we perhaps didn't have to before, we need God's guidance and we need to know how to trust in God above all else.

Also the reality: As a faith community, there are questions we have needed (and wanted!) to ask that have been moved to the backburner for various reasons. With everything that has happened in the last year, we cannot put off those questions any longer. And, even more, I don't think we want to. And while there has been great difficulty, there has also been growth and joy. New faces, new ministries, continued faithfulness.

St. Julian of Norwich said, "The mingling of both well-being and distress in us is so astonishing that we can hardly tell which state we or our neighbor are in. That's how astonishing it is!" She also said in life we live with "a wondrous mixture of well and woe".

In this life of well and woe, it can be tempting to focus only on one, as if it is all there is. Either everything is ruined or everything is perfect. It's easier that way.

But that's not real life. And, even more, St. Julian says it is this mingling, this mixture, that makes life astonishing and wonderful.

Astonishing and wonderful. That sounds like some Gospel stuff right there.

At the heart of our disorientation, I believe there is a knowing that this is a historic moment for St. Peter's. A Kairos moment. When we are called to ask, "Who do we want to be? Who is God calling us to be?" With God's help, we have the opportunity to figure out what that looks like, together.

In our Old Testament reading, God tells the prophet Jeremiah to buy some land in his hometown. To invest in the land as a way of investing in his people. Jeremiah's people are in exile – displaced and disillusioned – and the land he buys has been utterly destroyed by war.

Like all of our texts today, this text is exploring the relationship between money and justice. Asking us how we use our resources, and what that reveals about our relationship with God and our neighbors.

But the question I hear at the heart of this story is this: When something big happens, how do you decide what to do next? How do you trust God, like really trust God, when the stakes feel so high?

Did anyone else notice just how much detail is jammed into these verses in Jeremiah? We get a play-by-play of this land buying transaction. Whenever the Bible goes into this level of detail, slow down. Pay attention. Ask why.

Each step in this passage follows the practice of family land buying outlined in the Law. With this step-by-step structure, the writer is going to great lengths to remind people of God's teachings and, even more, to show that, even when things are unsettled or God's people are scattered, they can still follow God's teachings.

This structure also creates a rhythm of intention. Think about a time when you marked each step or movement of a process – it kept you present and discerning, fully aware of what you were doing. That's the Eucharistic Prayer for me. While there are numerous written Eucharistic Prayers we use, they all follow the same movements. When I pay attention to these movements, I stay connected to what is happening. When I get distracted or lost, I reconnect through the steps. To myself. And to God.

Jeremiah is trying to follow God during a time of change and uncertainty. Focused on doing the next right thing. And pausing each time. To Listen? Pray? Lament? Praise? Probably all of this and more.

With each step Jeremiah takes to purchase the land, the scene kind of swells. More steps, but also more witnesses, more people caught up in what God is doing. Once everyone has been brought in, then Jeremiah proclaims God's plan for this land: "For this is what YHWH Omnipotent, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will once again be purchased in this land."

I often come to the Bible and this pulpit listening for how God is calling us to live. But I've made a personal commitment to, with each text and sermon, also intentionally listen for what these sacred stories tell us about who God is. It's not an either/or: either how to live or who is God. I know this. But I also know my ears are more naturally tuned to that first part, so I'm adjusting the settings so I can hear this second part too.

When you think about this season – about your hopes and worries, about the well-being and distress, to kick it back to good St. Julian – what does all of it reveal about your image of God and who God is?

Our God is the One who draws near to us, even and especially in the midst of uncertainty and change. Hovering over creation. Born to us in the incarnation. Using rainbows and land deeds and bread and wine as signs of God's resolve to transform and heal. Even more central than these parts of God is that God is the One who loves us with abandon. "Because you are bound to me in love, therefore will I deliver you," says the Psalmist.

I don't think God made Jeremiah's cousin decide to sell this land to Jeremiah. The passage begins by God saying, pay attention when this happens and pay attention to how I am present in it. And so Jeremiah does. God chooses to act through and show up in this land purchase, but it was not orchestrated by God and definitely not the only way God had been showing up to and trying to connect with God's people during exile. The same is true for us. God did not cause this season of transition. God is just doing what God has always done, which is trying to meet us in it and love us through it.

So, people of St. Peter's, what will we do in this season? Like Jeremiah, I hope we can say, "I knew that this was the word of YHWH." And take each next step with intention and connection. Love and forgiveness. Creativity. Justice. Grace. Each of you, beloveds of God, is a gift to this place. Bring your full selves to this process and to this community, well and woe. Not only because that is what it will take for us to live into this liminal space, but because that is what the Church was always supposed to be. Let's live in this middle part of the letter, together. Until we, too, have shown the story of God's love in the world, sealed and planted it, as Jeremiah did with the deed to his land, so that it may be preserved for life after this season and for those who come through these doors long after us.

May it be so. Amen.