

Dig Deeper, Reach Out
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Please don't let the sermon title "Dig Deeper and Reach Out" scare you. This is not a stewardship sermon, at least the kind that encourages you to dig deeper into your pockets. But Christ does challenge you and me to dig deeper into our souls until we reach that place where Jesus lives so he can have an even greater impact on our lives.

Who hasn't made any new year resolutions? We resolve to change ourselves so we can be new and improved. Simultaneously, who hasn't broken their new year resolutions because despite our best efforts we fail to improve ourselves?

The truth is you can't improve yourself by yourself any more than you can save yourself by yourself. You need outside help. You need Jesus, because without God's help and the Holy Spirit's guidance, you soon find yourself all over the map.

A man went to his doctor complaining about terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches and dizzy spells. The doctor examined him and said, "I have bad news. You only have six months to live."

The doomed man made a resolution. From now on he would live his way and thoroughly enjoy himself. He quit his job, bought a shiny red sports car and a closet full of new suits and shoes.

He then went to buy himself a dozen tailored shirts. He went to the most exclusive shop. The tailor measured him and said, "Neck, size 16."

"Wait a minute," the man interrupted. "I always wear a size 14 neck and that is what I want."

"I'd be glad to do it for you sir," the tailor replied, "but I should warn you that with a size 14 neck you're going to have terrible neck pains, throbbing headaches and recurring dizzy spells."

You know what they say about the doctor who treats himself. "He has a fool for his patient." Well when you and I try to diagnose and treat ourselves, we're only fooling ourselves. Again you need outside help the Good Physician, who alone can help you look deep into your soul so you can see for yourself your basic problem.

You see there's something very wrong at the heart of our humanity that perverts our priorities, distorts our vision and twists us up. What is it? The Bible calls it sin the inherent condition keeping you separated from God and from being the real you. And as long as you try to improve your broken self, all you're going to end up with is a new and improved broken self.

It's like buying an old broken down used car. You take out the dents, give it a new paint job, maybe even get new hub caps. But if you don't go inside the car, under the hood and get a new engine, all you have as an old broken down car with a new paint job and new hub caps.

So maybe instead of making any self-improvement resolutions we should make a Christ-centered resolution. Here it is. It's a prayer: "Lord help me realize that my life, and the world around me is entirely and utterly dependent on your sacred presence. Without you I am nothing, but with you I have the power to be a child of God."

Unfortunately, even the best of us don't feel entirely dependent on God. Instead most of us feel delightfully independent.

We have our jobs, our homes and our families. We have our health and our religion. If you get sick, we have Johns Hopkins Hospital within driving distance and if you get depressed or feel lonely, you can always go to church.

But then when you have the pins knocked out from under you, and all of your security systems are short circuited, that's when you realize you have nowhere else to go but to God.

This was certainly true of the Jews, held captive in Babylon after Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians about 750 years before the birth of Christ.

Before the invasion Judah was a prosperous nation, a military power to be reckoned with.

But then the Babylonians defeated Judah as quickly and decisively as the Germans defeated France in 1940. It was the Babylonian policy to uproot conquered peoples and exile them far from their native land to weaken their resolve and sense of national identity.

And so the population of Jerusalem was exiled to far away Babylon, their conqueror's capital city. And there, stripped of their homes, possessions and national pride they soon realized they were utterly dependent on God as they mourned the destruction of Jerusalem. Psalm 137 is a hymn of lament that comes from the exile period.

"By the rivers of Babylon

*there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.”*

But as they worked through their shock and sadness enough of these forsaken exiles began to pray the same God-centered resolution I encouraged all of you to make, “Lord, help me realize that my life and the world around me is entirely and utterly dependent on your sacred presence. Without you I am nothing, but with you I have the power to be a child of God.”

When you come to that realization, you come to a turning point. You realize your strength comes from God, not what you have, but only from God. Your world may fall apart, you may lose your good health, but when you live in the present moment and strive to be aware of God living and moving in and around you, and you obey your hunger and thirst for God, that’s when your life begins to turn around and you start becoming the real you. It’s then that you’re able to receive the good news of salvation as you hear God’s promise for a better day.

*Listen to God’s pledge to his exiled people through the prophet Jeremiah:
For thus says the Lord,*

“Sing aloud with gladness...

Proclaim, give praise and say

‘Save O Lord your people

*See I am going to bring them from the land
of the north*

among them the blind and the lame...

*a great company, they shall return
here.*

With weeping they shall come

And I will lead them back...’

Here the word of the Lord

*“He who scattered Israel will gather him
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”*

It was eighty long years before this promise was kept. But this promise kept the people of Israel as they learned again the lesson learned by their Hebrew ancestors as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they were led back to the Promised Land

Now, here comes the hard part. What on earth does all this which happened 2,700 years ago have to do with us today?

Simply this. Once again God is calling each of us as individuals and as members of this particular faith community, to be faithful to Him. Despite all our attempts to improve ourselves, make ourselves safe and happy we are still powerless. We live in a dangerous world. Only God can save us.

When Jesus began his ministry, he started in his home town. Luke tells us Jesus went to his synagogue and proclaimed:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he chose me to bring
good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim release to the
Captive
and to recover the sight of the blind
to let the oppressed go free
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s
favor.”*

I hope you can find yourself in Jesus’ litany of those he came to save. We are all poor in spirit, held captive by sin. What’s more we’re all blind to the sin and oppression all around us.

That’s why we need Jesus. So, make that Christ-centered resolution. Dig deep in your soul and get connected to Christ, and then take what you find and reach out to others with the same Good News that has brought life and hope to God’s people in every generation.

After spending two weeks in solitary confinement for playing Mozart over the prison public address system, Andy, in the movie “The Shawshank Redemption,” returns to the dining hall for his first meal with the other inmates. While describing the beauty of the music to his buddies at the table he then goes on to say:

“Remember there are places in the world not made of stone. Something inside that they can’t get to, they can’t touch, that’s yours.”

“What are you talking about?” his best friend asks in bewilderment?

“Hope,” Andy replies.

Do you have hold of this hope? Dig deep and reach out and make this new year count. And remember this. The world, the powers and principalities of this present age, or as Andy simply put it, “they” can’t get to or touch what’s your’s, the presence of grace deep within you. “They” can take away everything you hold dear and near, but Christ, they can’t take him away from you.

So may this be your new resolution. Make Christ your hope.

Let us pray!