

“No Fear”

Jeremiah 17:1-8

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

April 19, 2009

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

There are those out there who have been thumbing through their Bibles with increased desperation recently. They are looking for a faithful response to our current economic crisis. People are turning to God because even the most erudite experts are dumbfounded by the arcane details of this recession. I have been thumbing, too. So far as I can tell, there's nothing in the Bible about hedge funds or Ponzi schemes or subprime lending.

The Bible doesn't mention these things, but this doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say to us about them. The Bible does not address the specifics of this modern day mess, but the Bible has plenty to say about money, priorities, greed, and idolatry. And not just the Hebrew Bible. Jesus mentioned money more than any other subject except for the kingdom of God.

Over the next four weeks we will look at money matters and what God's word might have to say to us about peace during these tumultuous economic times.

Though we have been living in what has been called “The Age of Anxiety” for most our lives, now there is even more anxiety floating around than usual. Since late last year we have seen our savings dwindle, our homes devalued, our retirement funds decimated, our friends and relatives unemployed. College students will be lucky to get any kind of paying job this summer; teenagers can forget it. Retirees who depend upon long held investments to pay their bills are biting their fingernails and watching the NASDAQ with fear and dread. Young adults are moving in with parents; aging parents are moving in with children; people are losing their homes. And there are many worse scenarios than these out there.

Most of us are anxious about what has happened and fearful of what has yet to happen. In our anxiety, we look for someone to blame, and there are plenty of obvious scapegoats out there. It is

impossible to avoid news of the excesses of big business, the blundering of economic regulators, the screw ups of political advisors. We can blame the banks, the government, the wealthy, the CEOs. We can do this, but it does us no good. It just makes us more bitter. It makes us bitter, and it also keeps us from looking to ourselves.

The problem is much deeper and more pervasive than the contributions of these high profile scapegoats. The problem is a theological one. The problem has to do with our intimate relationship with money, our dependence on money, and our distance from God. As Margaret Atwood says in her recent book "Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth", we are involved in more than just an economic crisis. We are experiencing the results of an erosion of values.

The shock that is felt when a major part of a lifetime's saving vanishes, seemingly overnight, does not come only from the prospect of a diminished standard of living. It comes also from the collapse of the narrative according to which we have lived our lives¹. Our narrative has, sadly, been a narrative of growing dependence upon ourselves. And then we have the sickening realization that we have been counting on a straw house, easily blown away by the perfect storm of economic collapse.

Atwood's analysis smacks strongly of the thoughts of a theological giant and spiritual leader, biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman.

Brueggeman reminds us---our current state of angst is rooted not just in the realities of reduced circumstances, our anxiety is rooted in a false sense of self-sufficiency.²

We are to some extent the products of our culture, and our culture has overwhelmed us. We are also the product of our nature, and our nature is always in need of redemption.

When we place our trust in ourselves, in our autonomy or our economy, in the rapid growth of stocks or real estate or bonuses, we lose our true inheritance, which is God. When we see other people primarily as competitors or commodities, we are truly destitute. And

¹ From John Gray's review of Atwood's book in the New York Review, April 9, 2009, p. 47.

² Walter Brueggemann, "From Anxiety and Greed to Milk and Honey", Sojourners, February 2009, pp. 20-21

we are full of fear. We are like the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)

We have been fools. Who among us did not take some secret delight in the rapid growth of our 401Ks or the rising value of our homes? Who among us would not have been a little tempted by the get-rich-quick schemes of recent years? Did not our hearts quicken at the thought of what we might be able to do, how we might be able to live, if things continued on this upward climb? What could we have possibly been thinking when we began to believe plastic is convertible currency and there's nothing wrong with buying a half million dollar house when you only make \$45,000 a year?

Anxiety is the only possible outcome in this culture of self-sufficiency, taking care of #1, padding our nest eggs, and getting ahead. Anxiety consumes us, because in such a world there can never be enough. We never have enough put away, our homes are never big enough, we are never satisfied. The gap between what we have and enough is never filled. It is a bottomless pit into which we have poured ourselves.

The biblical answer to this never-ending cycle of acquisitiveness and anxiety is to step off the merry-go-round. Jeremiah's prophetic answer is to disconnect from trusting in man (insert: money, things, our self-sufficiency) and to connect with God. Jeremiah uses the images of drought and desert vs. water and abundance to represent our reliance on self vs. our reliance on God. Easier said than done, of course, because this is counter-cultural. Easier said than done, because even God knows we have to eat.

Those of you who grew up during the Depression will find this easier than those of us who have known only the years of this false prosperity. You have lessons to teach us; we have lessons to learn. Most of us are feeling the pinch and having to downsize; but there are those for whom the current economy is disastrous. There is a big difference between losing discretionary spending money and losing a livelihood. There is a huge difference between deciding to take public transportation to save money and not even being able to afford to buy a bus token.

I think for the most part I am preaching to the choir here, because so many of you have been so careful and have lived well below your means for many years. So many of you have continued to be faithful and generous and giving even now. I know many of you have been taking care of others behind the scenes. But I have also

heard your worries and your whispering. Some of you have been afraid to admit you are afraid. But fear not.

We can move toward the biblical ideal step by step, one day at a time, one thing at a time. We can put our trust in God, embrace a simpler lifestyle and future, count our blessings, diminished though they are. Most of us can adjust, if we will just let go. We are lucky. We have a faith family we can depend upon. We have our faith. . .we have God. We will uphold one another and encourage one another.

As we step off the economic roller coaster, we will find ourselves less worried; we will feel less fear. We will be freed to hold all things lightly and to give to those whose lives are truly devastated. We will have less, but enjoy it more. We can live more simply, so others can simply live.

We are in a time a drought, there is no doubt. We don't know how, or when, this drought will end. There is much to be done and more storms to weather. With God's help, each one of us must re-orient ourselves and reset our priorities. Over the coming months, we as a church need to look for ways to reach out and respond to the needs of people who are truly struggling. We do have a choice. We can cling to the collapsing currency of self-sufficiency, or we can bank on the One who outlasts all calamity. Amen.

Filename: No Fear.docx
Directory: C:\Documents and Settings\Richard\Local
Settings\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\MJ52IH0L
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\Richard\Application
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot
Title:
Subject:
Author: George Holden
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 4/15/2009 7:46 PM
Change Number: 11
Last Saved On: 4/25/2009 7:44 AM
Last Saved By: Holden
Total Editing Time: 204 Minutes
Last Printed On: 5/1/2009 10:17 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 4
Number of Words: 1,174 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 6,693 (approx.)