

**10.15.23 – Pentecost 20**  
**“The Divine Risk of Faith”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Jeremiah 1:4-14, 17-19 (TLB- The Living Bible)**

<sup>4</sup> The Lord said to me, <sup>5</sup> “I knew you before you were formed within your mother’s womb; before you were born I sanctified you and appointed you as my spokesman to the world.”

<sup>6</sup> “O Lord God,” I said, “I can’t do that! I’m far too young! I’m only a youth!”

<sup>7</sup> “Don’t say that,” he replied, “for you will go wherever I send you and speak whatever I tell you to. <sup>8</sup> And don’t be afraid of the people, for I, the Lord, will be with you and see you through.”

<sup>9</sup> Then he touched my mouth and said, “See, I have put my words in your mouth! <sup>10</sup> Today your work begins, to warn the nations and the kingdoms of the world. In accord with my words spoken through your mouth I will tear down some and destroy them, and plant others, nurture them, and make them strong and great.”

<sup>11</sup> Then the Lord said to me, “Look, Jeremiah! What do you see?”

And I replied, “I see a whip made from the branch of an almond tree.”

<sup>12</sup> And the Lord replied, “That’s right, and it means that I will surely carry out my threats of punishment.”

<sup>13</sup> Then the Lord asked me, “What do you see now?”

And I replied, “I see a pot of boiling water, tipping southward, spilling over Judah.”

<sup>14</sup> “Yes,” he said, “for terror from the north will boil out upon all the people of this land.

<sup>17</sup> Get up and dress and go out and tell them whatever I tell you to say. Don’t be afraid of them, or else I will make a fool of you in front of them. <sup>18</sup> For see, today I have made you impervious to their attacks. They cannot harm you. You are strong like a fortified city that cannot be captured, like an iron pillar and heavy gates of brass. All the kings of Judah, its officers, priests, and people will not be able to prevail against you. <sup>19</sup> They will try, but they will fail. For I am with you,” says the Lord. “I will deliver you.”

**Leader: These Promises Are from God! All: Thanks be to God!**

**2 Peter 3:1-13 (TLB)**

<sup>1-2</sup> This is my second letter to you, dear brothers, and in both of them I have tried to remind you—if you will let me—about facts you already know: facts you learned from the holy prophets and from us apostles who brought you the words of our Lord and Savior.

<sup>3</sup> First, I want to remind you that in the last days there will come scoffers who will do every wrong they can think of and laugh at the truth. <sup>4</sup> This will be their line of argument: “So Jesus promised to come back, did he? Then where is he? He’ll never come! Why, as far back as anyone can remember, everything has remained exactly as it was since the first day of creation.”

<sup>5-6</sup> They deliberately forget this fact: that God did destroy the world with a mighty flood long after he had made the heavens by the word of his command and had used the waters to form the earth and surround it. <sup>7</sup> And God has commanded that the earth and the heavens be stored away for a great bonfire at the judgment day, when all ungodly men will perish.

<sup>8</sup> But don't forget this, dear friends, that a day or a thousand years from now is like tomorrow to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> He isn't really being slow about his promised return, even though it sometimes seems that way. But he is waiting, for the good reason that he is not willing that any should perish, and he is giving more time for sinners to repent. <sup>10</sup> The day of the Lord is surely coming, as unexpectedly as a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the heavenly bodies will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be burned up.

<sup>11</sup> And so since everything around us is going to melt away, what holy, godly lives we should be living! <sup>12</sup> You should look forward to that day and hurry it along—the day when God will set the heavens on fire, and the heavenly bodies will melt and disappear in flames. <sup>13</sup> But we are looking forward to God's promise of new heavens and a new earth afterwards, where there will be only goodness.

**Leader: These Words of Assurance Are from God.** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Dear Lord, Help us to understand our callings, spiritual walks, and the divine risk of faith as we minister to others. Help us to make sense of the violence in Israel we see on recent news, knowing that your thoughts are higher than ours, and you are a merciful God. We thank you for this chance to study your prophecy and instruction. Guide us to appropriate risk for the Gospel and stir us to a holy discontent that prompts us to serve you and invite others on this journey called faith. Fill us with your divine power as we recommit our faith, hearing your Words and your voice as you speak through this servant. Amen.

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Along with the Divine Presence and Divine Selection that we explored in the Scriptures in recent weeks comes a “Divine Risk of Faith.” Now that word is not something we Christians like to hear much about – risk. There are many definitions of risk, depending on which field of study. In general, risk is measuring the amount of danger or peril a particular action or event will bring to a situation, such as “risk management” or “risk assessment.” Insurance companies predict and manage these two metrics. For example: car, boat, or motorcycle

insurance measures your driving record, age, vision, experience, credit record, type of vehicle, age of vehicle, number, and cost of losses over recent years, your location, the potential of dangers or damages, and much more to determine the rate of uncertainty surrounding the item you are insuring. This analysis decides your premium. How would one measure **faith risk** or uncertainty, when it is intangible? Simply put, we cannot.

Our church is technically a corporation that uses business practices to function, so yes, we have insurance and liability protection. But we are primarily a group of people with certain Christian and Baptist beliefs, who organized to worship God together in community, and to serve others through ministries that aid individuals and groups while transforming lives physically, spiritually, socially, and sometimes economically.

Even our daily personal lives are filled with a certain level of uncertainty and risk, yet because of our faith in God, Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, we push on to serve however we can. Church life is also filled with uncertainty and risk because we are fallible human beings and an organization made up of same. That fact is why I chose this year's theme of "Divine Experiments;" no one person or leader has all the answers to re-building or growing a thriving congregation. We realize post-pandemic that church will never be the same as we've known before, but if we can continue to boldly minister to others, understanding that old methodologies and pedagogies will not work exactly the same way with this generation of non-believers, we can thrive again as we try new

activities and adapt to some new methods. I admit that this year posed a few challenges to completing the number of experiments I had hoped for, yet there were quite a few and there will continue to be more as we go into fall, Advent, and the next year.

So far, our risks have been gentle and safe as intended. The whole Bible is really full of risk stories, of leaders challenging authority, rebellion, disobedience, repentance, and then God's saving grace, forgiveness, love, and mercy. We have our own life examples too, and Christ shared some practical coping instruction through many parables we have studied. I encourage you to keep reading your Bible with our theme in mind.

Today's risk of faith is too heavy a topic for one sermon, but let's start with Jeremiah's calling to be God's prophet. Jeremiah was descended from the priestly line of Aaron but was not a priest. He received God's word prophetically through two visions in his sleep; the resulting poetry and strong faith in the middle of eye-witnessed relocation, murder, and destruction of his homeland made him one of the greatest prophets of his day. His writings are not chronological, so that is why I am skipping around a bit. God called him in 627 BC, even before he was conceived. He was set apart for this ministry. As you heard in the passage, Jeremiah had some self-doubt, not unlike Moses, Abraham, Sarah, Thomas, or others who received God's call to action. Jeremiah, however, was only in his late teens or early twenties, so most people at that age are questioning their futures, but he actually complained to God about it! "I am only a child!" God reminded him that it was not his experience or lack of it, but his heart and willingness to obey God's

authority that mattered, much like the shepherd boy David who became king. Jeremiah then accepted the call to become God's messenger to the people.

The first vision of an almond tree branch (also called "the awake tree") told him that God would be watching all he said and did on his behalf. The second vision of a boiling pot was a warning of risk and impending disaster; yes, he would be in danger brought on by the destructive evil, pagan worshipping Babylonians and aggressors. Sound a little like today? The main point of encouragement for us is that God told him to "Get Ready! Take up the challenge and stand tall like a pillar and a bronze wall" because he would not be alone in it. He should not be afraid. God would speak through his words and his mouth. He was divinely called, selected, protected, and would be divinely equipped. As will we in our experiments!

We are finishing up 2 Peter's letter to the scattered believers, so remember that he was addressing the problem with false teachers and their destructive ideas generated from greed, evil, envy, desire, and arrogance. He assured the believers that these false ones would be paid back by the Lord and would perish. The righteous will survive even if the earth is destroyed much like it was in the flood. In the last days, scoffers and judgment will come, but we don't know when, because to the Lord, one day is like 1000 years and 1000 years are like a day. Christians in Peter's time thought it would happen before they died, so were disappointed. Peter states clearly that Christ's return will happen and that any delay is temporary and not eternal. He **is** coming again, so we too must be ready, living holy and Godly lives in expectation of his return.

This applies to our church too, not just individuals. All we do in this church must be with conviction and a sense of urgency. Are we willing to risk everything for God's work in this world and community? How should we measure the risk and reward of our faith and activities, or is it God's to measure? And what holds you back from participating in these experiments? What keeps you from inviting a friend to join the fun of a pop-up event? Are we too small? Are we too traditional? Are your friends only believers who already go to a church? Are you bashful? So what!

One real risk of faith is being judged harshly by others, and I do get that. People's expressions change when they find out I'm a minister. We are seeing harsh judgments in the news coverage now. Everyone was behind Israel at the beginning of the war until they saw the real cost and real risk of belief. We must have compassion of course, and I cannot discuss the politics of war from the pulpit; but I can remind us that all faiths face risk of humanity's judgment as well as God's. Habakkuk waited patiently (and probably fearfully) on the Lord in the midst of war atrocities. Joshua witnessed shameful behaviors of the Israelites with Moses in the wilderness, so he reminds them how God freed them from Egyptian bondage and brought Abraham into a new promised land. Where is their vision or gratitude? Where is ours? I paraphrase Joshua 24:15: "As for me, as for each of us and this church, we will serve the Lord." Let us carry on the work of our faith and ministry, embracing the risk, confident in God's strength and direction. Amen? Amen! //

**Please pray with me.** Lord and Savior, we reach out to you in worry and sadness for our world. Help us to balance risk with safety; make us bold to share the Gospel with others. Help us to study deeply the

Scriptures, and to pray, and encourage one another. We thank you for this community and your calling on our lives. Help us to share your love with others who need it now more than ever before. In your Son Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen.**