

02.01.26 ~ 4th Sunday after the Epiphany

“Words to Remember”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words to Remember

Jeremiah 17:5-8 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 655

Wisdom from the Lord

⁵ This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans,
who rely on human strength
and turn their hearts away from the Lord.

⁶ They are like stunted shrubs in the desert,
with no hope for the future.

They will live in the barren wilderness,
in an uninhabited salty land.

⁷ “But blessed are those who trust in the Lord
and have made the Lord their hope and confidence.

⁸ They are like trees planted along a riverbank,
with roots that reach deep into the water.

Such trees are not bothered by the heat
or worried by long months of drought.

Their leaves stay green,
and they never stop producing fruit.

Leader: These Are Prophetic Words to Remember.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Colossians 2:1-10 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 1027

¹ I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other believers who have never met me personally. ² I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God’s mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. ³ In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

⁴ I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments. ⁵ For though I am far away from you, my heart is with you. And I rejoice that you are living as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong.

Freedom from Rules and New Life in Christ

⁶ And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. ⁷ Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

⁸ Don’t let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. ⁹ For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. ¹⁰ So

you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

Leader: These Are Paul's Words of Instruction.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Steadfast Lord, we come before you on this bitter cold day because we need you and we crave the fellowship of one another after a week of ice and snow isolation. Thank you for our congregation's safety and well-being. Today we seek your wise words of remembrance from Scripture and words of communion. Help us to colorfully imagine the roots images both Jeremiah and Paul describe. Prepare and strengthen us for ministry to and with others. As we build and renew the foundations of our faith, open our minds and hearts to drink in the deep waters of your love and wisdom. May our spiritual roots be defined, nourished, and strengthened by your word and our deep relationship with you, so that we choose to be planted near streams of water and not in a barren desert. Please speak through this message and messenger as we bring our theme into understanding! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I am so glad to be in the house of the Lord today, even though we are small, it's windy, very cold, and snow is only 120 miles away from us. Not only did I miss you last Sunday, but today, February 1st was my official start date at United Baptist Church as Senior Minister 7 years ago. It is also the morning when we lost our beloved former organist of 56 years, Betty Hicks. That was my first call that day as your pastor, one I will never forget. And true to form for January and February, we are grieving the loss of two more members and a friend this week as we have already shared. Celebrations and loss are part of living, so it is appropriate that we review why and how we cope with life's challenges. Both Scriptures for today help to do that, so let us look at the context first of Jeremiah.

The people of Israel had been exiled to Babylon and, as instructed by God, had intermarried, built houses, and planted gardens there. Some, however, had gone too far by worshipping the popular cultural idols of

the region and rejecting Yahweh. Others were just not happy, so Jeremiah 16 (the chapter before ours for today) reminds the people that God will restore them from their Babylonian experiences back to their homeland, Israel, both physically and spiritually, if they listen to his warnings. Judah, the Southern kingdom, had also turned to false gods, so the prophet strongly encourages his hearers and today's readers that they (we) have a choice to worship the one true God, Yahweh, or the idols and pagan gods of their culture.

Belief in the one true God assures them they will flourish like a tree planted by water, but the pagan worshiper would wither and become parched like a desert bush. Those who trust in and rely on humankind rather than God's will become as barren and fruitless as the land around the Dead Sea. The phrase "uninhabited salty land" implies the same conditions as the Dead Sea; the salt and its brine kill all fish and plants so that nothing can live in the sea or around it. No fishing! Imagine the desolation around such a place and then consider how that would translate into a spiritual life of similar emptiness.

Jeremiah is confronting the people with their sin; and even before the Messiah has come to earth, the prophet warns the people that the consequences of such sinful idol worship are devastating. We have that same choice too. Do we choose sin and our own desires over a chance to drink from the deep waters of life, be satisfied, and so nourished that even a drought won't hurt our roots? The metaphors of rich, deep green leaves and heavy fruit on the tree are images of life and abundance, both physically and spiritually. If one is obedient to God, our lives will reflect his love, nourishment, and growth. A righteous person will not fear

difficulties, illness, or weather and will remain evergreen and be fruitful. These metaphors of sharp contrast between desert shrub and lush rain forest growth help us begin the new year of spiritual development. Qualities the green tree or rich life embodies are beauty, joy, life, stability, resilience, and strength. This year, are there any areas in which you need to grow or develop? Just think about it.

We as a church don't want to be like Judah only trusting in the flesh and human actions. As we study our theme, *Roots and Branches*, we must pray and spend more time in deep relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Our core root is not what we or others planted, some business strategic plan, or what is in the frozen soil for our future, but our rootstock or taproot is in the Creator God and the sacrifice of his son Jesus. The only way we grow a strong trunk and robust branches is by trusting in God's plan for our church congregation and Mission Center as it is now (not what it was in the past!) and how God sees it for the future. The Sabbath, our worship, and studies, we must keep holy and significant to our connection, even if snow keeps us apart occasionally. We renew the strength of our faith each week after numerous distractions, life challenges, and decisions; it is necessary to meet together to sustain ourselves and to be open to others who need Jesus. Sundays are deep waters to refresh our thirst and grow green leaves and lush fruit.

The apostle Paul, while in prison, learned of the challenges to the Colossian church about a strange teaching, so that is the context of our second passage for today. Due to the time constraints of teaching two weeks in one, we may have to summarize it briefly and dissect it next Sunday properly, so we'll have time for communion this morning.

Essentially, Paul's letter develops and proclaims the sovereignty of Jesus Christ against the false teachings of philosophy, astrology, and asceticism (extremist self-discipline and self-denial). They were mixing all the different viewpoints with Jesus and God to get a syncretistic (or synthesized) new religion. Sounds a lot like today's world, so I encourage you to re-read this small book in the Bible; it is relatable. Like the barren tree in the desert, there is no deep water in these teachings, no living water like there is in Christ. Paul also reminds them they proclaimed Christ as Lord and Savior so why would they go back on that decision? Much can be said about that for our society too. The world's influence, marketing, and peer pressure are so influential that it is sometimes too hard to refuse!

We'll talk more about this passage next Sunday but let us note that Paul also says that the root of our lives, both spiritually and physically, upon which our faith is built is Jesus. Let us not forget that principle above all other principles of idolatry, distraction, or spiritual fads.

We need each other to hold ourselves accountable in this way. When we share our lives with one another, we affirm God's creative power and agape love. We saw it some this past week as neighbors checked on neighbors and people helped each other shovel out the snow-crete! Christ was present in most circumstances, including the community shelters, the abundance of donated and purchased food for our food mission the Saturday before the storm, and the phone calls we all made to check on one another. Christ was embodied in the community! This is the lesson in our world of political discord and isolation. We are all in need when crisis happens. Thank you for your rootedness in a triune God who

shows up in times like these. We'll see you next week to hear more about Paul's letter and advice to the Colossians. Amen! ||

Please pray with me now: Dear Lord, we thank you for your son, Jesus, and his presence in our lives. Help us to digest these words and remember them when we face our own storms, disappointments, or challenges. Make us spiritually rich this season as we explore more deeply the roots and branches of our faith and practices. Continue to keep us safe this week and please fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence. May the words we remember be yours, consistent, and rooted in you. Bless us as we go on our way in the holy name of Jesus, Amen.