

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
Living and Dying Abundantly
January 3, 2021
Jeremiah 31:7-14

Scripture

For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Message

For some people, the year 2020 was in schoolyard parlance, a MASSIVE "Do Over." Others say, "Let's forget THAT ever happened and move on!" But simply wiping from memory "the horrible, terrible, no good, very bad" year is not the best solution. The latter reference is from a book about a little boy named Alexander who has things happen to him that add up to a horrible, terrible, no good, very bad day-including lima beans for dinner- yuck.¹ At the end of the book his mother says, "Some days are like that." Wow way to reassure the kid!

¹ Author Judith Viorst

The Israelites also had a horrible, terrible, no good, very bad time of it. Jeremiah warned five kings of horrible, terrible, no good, very bad things; famine, foreign conquest, plunder, the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple of Solomon, and captivity. He suffered along with them, including being imprisoned by the kings for telling the truth. Talk about horrible, terrible, no good, very bad!

But in both cases, while horrible, terrible, no good, very bad things happened, Alexander and the Israelites not only did bad things but their attitudes contributed to the problems. Now I am not going to say 2020 is God's punishment for worshipping other gods, not caring for others, abusing widows and orphans, or even having very bad, self-centered, selfish, and self-pitying attitudes. That is not my theology! Though how we punish ourselves is a whole other thing... hmm!

Instead, I want to focus on Jeremiah's prophecy- this is truly a message of abundance after a "very bad day"! The weeping remnant survivors will not only be ransomed from captivity; they will have a safe journey home, sing and experience goodness; grain, wine, oil, flocks and herds. Life will be like a watered garden, they shall never languish again. The young women dance, young men and the old are merry. Mourning and death turns into joy and life. Jeremiah reminds them God is always present. After exile – abundance! After 2020 many can appreciate that!

But our meeting experienced 2020 different than most. Instead of being in "crisis management" for 9 months we were in "creation management" -finding new

ways to be a meeting, worship and serve. In addition, we have even received a leading to contemplate what it means to be A Place of Abundance in 2021!

Today I invite you to begin the journey considering living and dying with abundance. Most of you are probably with me in the living with abundance part but the dying part ... is a bigger stretch. But my query is “Is it really possible to live abundantly unless we are willing to die abundantly?”

As Christians our tradition of the Risen Christ tells us physical death is not the final word- resurrection comes and love always wins. We know when we die we will be transformed into what God has planned for us in New Life. Paul also assured us in Romans that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. But don't we also have to let go of and stop doing things that hold us down and keep us from living abundantly?

This is traditionally a time for resolutions- new things we will do in 2021 to make it and us better than 2020- we might not have to search hard to find them! But before we make a list or start new things, it might be good to stop and put down old things first. How many resolutions are still on your list from last year or for the lockdown time? I made a list of things I was going to do- you know for the “little while” we were in lockdown- 9 months later I still have my list. The top five things are done but the rest are things I will never get to and they bog me down.

They represent not just things from 2020, but whole loads of baggage I carry from life. Whatever it is- a memory, an attitude, a sense of limitation, a hurt, a regret, an item that clutters home or mind. I think you know what I mean. But we can't just literally or metaphorically "throw them in the trash, shove them to the back of the closet, move them around in the garage, or ship them off to a friend." We have to look at them. Consider what they mean, what they meant, why they came into our lives and remained. Milk them for all they are worth- take all the good and the hard learning too. Then set them down, let them go, let them die.

In order to live fully and abundantly we have to be able to be free to embrace each moment. We cannot live life to our full potential when we're dragging around things that weigh us down. Unless we free ourselves up to follow where Spirit leads we limit our legacy, our learning, we fail to change and facilitate changes in others, and we miss the gifts of understanding and relationship.

Quakers have a term for it- we call it laying it down. If we do not learn to lay things down; our arms are too full, our brains crowded, our hearts are too broken, our calendars, projects or programs are too burdening and we cannot pick up anything new. If we do not learn to grieve and let go, we do not heal. To learn to live in the cycle of beginning, middle and ending is abundantly dying and living.

When I do grief counseling I remind people that when we get too busy doing things we do not make room for grieving and healthy memories cannot surface.

One man insisted the image of his wife dying was so strong nothing else could get through. But as I made him sit and talk he had to slow down and he remembered. Not 24 hours before she died they sat on the couch, she looked deep into his eyes and told him, "I love you more than I can ever express, more than you will ever know." He told me in 20 years together she had never said that. Once he laid down the memory of her death he was able to gather in an exquisitely beautiful memory that will help him and their son live the abundant life she would want for them.

Life changes, and life changes continually- sometimes it seems faster and faster. We often not only resist change that is out of our control but spend energy resenting it. An example is we are all standing at a train station. We have a choice, get on the train or refuse and stay on the platform. Before 2020 both choices were valid, but the reality is if we weren't on we got left behind. Now I realize not only is there not another train coming, but with apologies to our train lovers, the tracks are being torn up and teleportation is not coming to our community. Resenting change and holding on wastes energy and resources we need today and the future.

Dying abundantly is all around us. Scientists now speculate there was not just one Big Bang to create the universe. Instead Life is continually dying, absorbing, exploding, and generating new life in multiverses. Closer to home, trees go through a life cycle. They sprout abundant green life on their limbs. When daylight shrinks and the cold comes the life begins dying in abundant beautiful

colors. The life falls and covers the ground, abundantly insulating the roots and protecting the tree. Left where they fall, life decays becoming part of the abundantly fertile soil. The tree continually grows- and using its past life nurtures itself into new growth. We are called to do the same- to learn to live and die abundantly. Mining all our memories for good moments and mistakes for learning- and letting them go so they become fuel, fodder, and nutrients for growth and life.

On Christmas a woman went to care for a friend's dog and her car broke down on the freeway. Roadside service jumped her car, got it off the freeway and helped after it broke down again. A friend gave her the number of a mechanic who said he could help-on Tuesday. Another friend gave her a ride home. Before 2020 her whole Christmas would have been ruined; but she has learned living and dying abundantly. She knows in each terrible, horrible, no good, very bad thing there are love, support, helping hands- and a grateful attitude to get her through.

That is one description of our meeting- love, support, helping hands and grateful attitudes. Parker Palmer calls a community in which we are welcomed, can hear our own souls, and journey toward healing and wholeness a "circle of trust." It is where we help each other learn from our mistakes, get courage to explore new things, figure out what works, learn to lay things down, and grow together- living and dying abundantly. It's a place where "some days are like that" is balanced with "and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD."

How are you living and dying abundantly? Where do you need support?

How can we help each other, and how can we help our meeting to be living and dying abundantly?