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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Jeremiah 31:27-40

21 March 2021

### Deep Growth

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! And good morning to all of you who are worshipping with us from your homes at a later time. We worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming day when normalcy returns. The days are surely coming, says the Lord. Let us pray! God of growth and evolution and journeying faith, we welcome you here into our hearts, minds, and bodies, asking that you continue to transform us into who you created us to be in your good world, your universe. Give us your spirit and renewed energy to follow after you and listen well for your voice and direction in these strange and unnerving times. Plant your word and your way deep in our hearts and minds. Empower us to share how we have grown and been changed. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Deep relationship accompanied by deep commitment and deep wisdom can lead to deep healing, which is what we explored together last week in the book of Numbers. We walked with the Israelites in the wilderness as they struggled to find healing in the midst of great anguish and suffering under the power of the serpent. But God made a way, calling the people to face their fears and their own arrogance, offering a pathway to life and hope on God's terms, not the people's own misguided and short-sighted worldviews. Only when they looked at the symbol of their deepest terror, the true cause of their physical suffering were they able to find healing, which then began a process of growth and maturation that continued as they followed God as cloud and fire into the promised land.

This morning, then, we explore how deep growth, or what could be called maturation, evolution, or learning, is a deep and true piece of our lives. We are entering the spring season tomorrow, March 22. We know that deep growth is an integral part of a rural community's life as we come to each new spring, hopeful for another good crop season. Our livestock farming brothers and sisters started a similar process many months ago, of which the fruit has already started coming in the form of calves and lambs during this early spring season. In faith and commitment when the weather and soil temperature are right, we will place the seed in the soil, confident that the tiniest or most insignificant part of the process has the potential all on its own to grow into food for ourselves, for our animals, for our children, and for the world. We look to God in this spring season, asking for blessing on the acts of faith that we practice every year at this time, calling on God for deep growth. We know also that a plant that grows deep into the soil has a better chance of yielding an abundant harvest just as a community that lives deeply and extends roots deep into its past can offer the same abundant harvest of hope and joy and wisdom and confidence for the future.

What we do not always want to admit though, is that deep growth requires transformation, often resulting from the interactions of our previous four concepts: relationship, commitment, wisdom, and healing. The seed that is set two inches into the soil does not come out looking like it did when it was planted. No! It changes into something beautiful, into the potential that had been harbored inside of it. Deep growth is what God calls us to each and every day, a transformation that draws out the potential in each of us, watered and nurtured by the Holy Spirit and nourished by the life of Jesus and the testimony of our neighbors. God is not finished with any one of us. God has not given up on any one of us, no matter how you might feel about yourself or how you might want to hide that true self from God. God knows us deeply and truly

and longs for us to grow into the potential, with which he created us. The growth may be difficult, requiring more than what we think we are capable of, but God's calling is clear.

Suzanne Koerner is writing my biography for the newsletter. Our conversations have left me with a mess of emotions, sometimes wondering if revisiting my memories, especially the most life-altering ones, is worth it or if I just need to put the past behind me. What I have found though, is how God has inspired and challenged me to consider alternative ways of thinking and evolving ways of understanding, which have all led to renewed longing to know God more. I am not the same that I was yesterday, nor am I the same as I was 5, 10, or 15 years ago. I have grown in ways that I never would have expected. I am different than I was. Thank God.

Have you spent much time thinking about or reflecting on how you have changed over the years, how you might think or believe or act differently than you did twenty, thirty, forty, or eighty years ago? How has God spoken to you, inspired you, challenged you? How has God drawn out your created potential? How have God and other people planted seeds in the fertile soil of your being that have grown into life, hope, peace, and love? How have you found yourself watering those seeds, allowing them to sprout and form in you, bearing fruit that you may not have expected when it first started to grow? Or maybe on the other hand, how have you allowed your neighbors or friends or our culture to plant seeds of hate or greed or jealousy or envy or materialism or prejudice or judgment? Have you seen or felt more of these kinds of fruit in this season than you have the fruit of God's Spirit, the fruit that comes to maturity hopefully in the community of people that we call the church? What fruits are you noticing?

Our text this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah. A long, long time has passed since our last story in the wilderness. If you remember, the younger generation of Israelites was on their way to enter the promised land. They are on the brink of God's promises and bringing to

an end their difficult wilderness journey. Over the next several hundred years, Israel will conquer the promised land, govern with judges and prophets initially, and then turn to kings to unite the twelve tribes for security and sustainability. But with the kings, there comes taxation, conscription, forced labor, and power-mongering. In our story this morning, the people again are on the brink of something life-altering and catastrophic, of which Jeremiah has been warning them. The people of the southern kingdom, Judah, are on the brink of forceful removal from the promised land by the Babylonian Empire.

If you remember one of my sermons from Isaiah before this Lenten season, you might remember that after King Solomon, the Israelite kingdom splits in two with the northern ten tribes naming their king and placing the government in Samaria, while the southern kingdom of Judah maintains its location at Jerusalem. 100 years earlier in 722 BCE before Jeremiah enters the scene, the Assyrian Empire took the northern kingdom into exile, so all that is left is Judah, who escaped the clutches of the Assyrians because the empire fell apart under the weight of rebellion by the Babylonians and the Scythians. 100 years later around the mid-620s BCE, Babylon has filled the void where the Assyrian empire had been and begins its rampage across the Middle East. The priest Jeremiah sees it all coming. This priest who becomes prophet serves the people of Israel at a little village, 4 miles north of Jerusalem called Anathoth, so he is not a part of the elite priestly cult in the temple in Jerusalem. While the priests and prophets in Jerusalem are telling the people there that all is well and God has continued to preserve Zion, another religious name for Jerusalem, the city of God, Jeremiah becomes more and more aware over his 40 years in prophetic ministry that the religious elite in Jerusalem are deeply mistaken. Zionism has taken hold of the powerful in Jerusalem. They are convinced that God is backing

them and won't allow them to fail. But Jeremiah, outside of Jerusalem's fortified walls, is listening and watching as the Babylonian empire makes its way to Judah.

In the tradition of the prophet and leader Moses, Jeremiah first resists God's call to speak to the covenant people. God does succeed, though, in convincing Jeremiah as God did with Moses, and Jeremiah's ministry extends for 40 years, those painful and disastrous years that chronicle the tedious Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, made complete in 587 BCE. Why does God allow this to happen to his covenant people, the ones that he had promised to be a kingdom forever? The people of Israel have strayed from God's covenant and worshipped other Canaanite deities that they have struggled to give up since the earliest days in the promised land in the books of Joshua and Judges. They have broken their commitment and relationship with the God who called them to this place, and God is going to allow them to be ripped from their inheritance as judgment for their betrayal and adultery. Jeremiah predicts this judgment and watches it happen from a distance over the course of his prophetic years.

In fact, some of Jeremiah's darkest moments occur when he is being ridiculed and alienated by the people of his village and by the Jerusalem elite who find out who he is after he begins prophesying in Jerusalem, calling out the false prophets in the King's court and the corrupted priests in the temple. No one wants to hear Jeremiah's truth-telling, which leads Jeremiah to cry out to God in his suffering, wondering why God won't just release him from this call and allow the people to devolve into their own destruction, but God won't let Jeremiah go, nor will God let his covenant people go. Though the people may spit in his face and worship other gods, though the priests and prophets of Jerusalem may speak wrongly of his will and way to the people, and though his mouthpiece Jeremiah may complain and call God out, God will not relent.

So if you can imagine the setting that I describe above, keep it in mind as we look at our text. The days are surely coming... says the Lord. Note who is speaking to whom in the text. God is speaking to the people of both the northern and southern kingdom. Who is the one promising hope for the future? Not the people, who are still unconvinced that anything is going to happen to the way that they are living now. The Lord, YHWH, makes the promises... I will. The central actor and instigator in this passage is not the adulterous people who have strayed from God's covenant and promises. The central actor is God. Count how many times "the Lord" is mentioned in this text as well as how many times the pronoun "I" is used in place of the Lord. God's promises and actions are not dependent on the people's arrogance, incompetence, ignorance, or sinfulness. God is going to act on behalf of his people, out of his own integrity and commitment, no matter the brokenness and betrayal that the people have exhibited.

In verse 32, like walking beside a little child and leading them by the hand or like staying with an adulterous spouse when the truth is uncovered and the betrayal laid out for all to see, God does not give up on the people even though looming destruction and death are on their doorstep. The days are surely coming... says the Lord. The people will go through this time in exile in Babylon, but God is not going to leave them there to rot. God has plans for the people as they grow through the experience of suffering, as they deal with the consequences of their sin and brokenness. God does not prevent the suffering from happening, but he does promise that he will be there and will one day lead them out of it. God will plant them again as seed in the land of promise where they will sprout and grow, but not until they have made it through the exile and suffering to come. God will plant also the law and relationship, not as a formal agreement, but as the transformation of the core of human existence: the heart. God's steadfast love and commitment will accomplish this, not the people. The days are surely coming... says the Lord.

Are you listening well this morning? The days are surely coming when things will return to normal, and we will no longer be exiled to our homes because of risk of getting sick or passing sickness on to others. The days are surely coming when we will bear fruit in keeping with the last years' experiences, fruit that gets at the core of who we are, what is deep and true about us as God's image-bearers. The days are surely coming when we will eat together in our homes and in our churches, when our tables will be set for more than our immediate families. The days are surely coming when our vocabularies will not be so familiar with phrases like "six feet apart" or "social distancing" or "mandatory masks" or "coronavirus." The days are surely coming when I won't have a mask policy in my office, when I won't have to turn around and go back home because I forgot my mask in the pocket of my coat. The days are surely coming when we will drink coffee together here and take our cups with us to Sunday school to encourage each other in body and spirit. The here, but not yet of this moment. The days are surely coming when we will hug and shake hands and embrace without a second thought as siblings in a family bound by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus. The days are surely coming... when we realize that our Lenten themes define more than our faith but also our very existence: relationship, commitment, wisdom, healing, and growth. The days are surely coming when the people of Hutterthal Mennonite Church will sing and speak and hug and dance and wish and dream and play and work together as they once did and as they continue to do in the peace and love of Jesus.

Let us pray! God of growth and potential, give us hope for the days ahead of us, hope in your promises. Help us walk and live into who you have created us to be. Empower us with your spirit to step out in faith, following your example and repenting of our unwillingness to change and grow. Enable our eyes to see the fruit that our lives are bearing in this community and in our

world and to reflect on whether or not these fruits are those to be harvested in your kingdom. The days are surely coming... In Jesus' name, Amen

Benediction:

Go into this week aware of the times of letting go that have allowed for new life to come, for only when a seed "lets go" does new life arise from it. This change in us happens not once but many times over the course of our lives. Go, aware of the deep growth stirring in you. Go in peace.