



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**
Presbyterian (USA)

If I Understand the Text

SCRIPTURE:
Nehemiah 7:73b-
8:10, Mark 16:1-8

September 17, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The time has come. I didn't see it coming—not like this. Maybe you didn't either. But I believe it is right. God has blessed me to serve the greatest church I could imagine. We have been through some things. Do you remember when we wanted to build the Meneily Center? Some folks were not pleased with us but you stood tall and remained gracious and did what was right. Remember when the organ was falling apart? Every week Dr. Bickers would have to come in and discern which stops were reliable. But you were generous and we have welcomed a world-class organ. And I do love to hear you sing.

We have baptized a lot of babies together—many of whom have not been babies for a long time. There have been a lot of good and strong marriages who got their start right here in this chancel. And I look around this room and remember how many times we have gathered here to trust one more time that Christ is the resurrection and the life. For just shy of 20 years you have been a gift to me. It astonishes me that you trusted me to follow Dr. Bohl, who had the impossible task of following Dr. Bob, who had a ministry like none other. You have been the most profound blessing in my life.

I remember when Carol and I were driving to Kansas City. The kids were asleep in the back of the van and we were following the taillights in front of us on I-70. She asked, "How long do you think we will be at Village?" It was a good question. I said, "Well, I've never lived outside the South and these midwestern folks may think I'm too much of a hayride to last long. Maybe we will make five years. Let's see if we can make five years."

Nothing in me thought it would be 20 years. But at that time, I had no idea how much I would love you, and how much I would learn from you, and how you would teach me things about God that I had yet

to discover. So, thank you. I could just stop there and say, "thank you," but I'm still a preacher, so we talk even when we have run out of things to say. And I have a few more things to say.

It will not surprise you that what I wish to say before we go, I have already said to you. As Rev. Jenny McDevitt said in her last sermon in this pulpit: Tom says it over and over and over again. No need to break a pattern. So, here we go.

My grandparents never parted from one another without saying, "Have I told you today?" It's shorthand for, "Have I told you today that I love you?" The response was always the same: "Not too many times." They said that every time they parted. When it's the last thing you say for awhile, you want to say what matters.

In the last conversation Jesus had with his disciples he said, "This is my body broken for you. Every time you eat..." It's almost as if you can hear him asking, "Have I told you today?" When you have all the time in the world you can talk about anything or nothing at all. But when time is short, you want to say things that matter.

I have told you before that a pattern in my parenting was to take our kids in their thirteenth year on a trip. My friend, Brant Tidwell, taught me to do that. Sarah wanted to go to New York City to see some shows. We went to Branson and saw some shows. Nathan and I went to St. Louis and watched some baseball and played a round of golf. He got his first par on that trip. On the drive home we talked. It was a conversation we still call, "The Four Things." It's four things that I wanted them to remember. Often when we leave one another, even still, we say, "Remember the four things." What they are doesn't matter. If you are curious, I have preached on them and can get you that sermon. But I say this because before I leave, I want to leave you with four things.

We believe, help our unbelief.
 Do the good that is yours to do.
 Live toward God's promised day.
 But first: If I understand the text.

I first uttered that phrase in a sermon when I was still in seminary. My preaching professor, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, said, "Tom, don't say that. It makes it sound like you haven't done your homework... 'if I understand the text.' Your people need to have confidence in you. They need to trust you know what you are talking about. Don't say that."

Well, I can't help it. When it comes to interpreting the words of scripture, any confidence you may or may not have in me is not because my interpretations are right; I can't promise to be right. I just strive to be honest.

Nehemiah says, "They stood in the square before the water gate of the city wall and the Priest Ezra read the law of Moses, the Torah. He read from early morning as the sun rose and the birds chirped, through the rising heat until mid-day.... And as he read the people wept. And they found themselves again."

This happened after the Babylonian exiles returned to Israel but they were still searching for home. They had to discover anew what it meant to be God's people. Previously they thought it was to have the land, the nation of Israel, but Judaism would never again be defined by statehood. Some believed they were God's people because of the temple, but for a while the temple had been destroyed. Some said it was to be racially pure; they built walls and kept the foreigner out. They sent packing those who had married spouses who weren't Jewish. But here, outside the water gate, they realized that it was not land or sacrifice or ethnicity but the word of God that made them who they were. To be the people of God, we base our lives on the word of God.

Ezra read the book and the people wept. They were moved as they recognized not simply that God exists, but that God chooses to speak. Ezra read the text well, but as Rodger's former colleague Kathleen O'Connor from Columbia Seminary says, "The Bible is not self-explanatory."¹ No, these words, like all

words actually, need to be interpreted. O'Connor points to the Levites. They were there in the crowd explaining what was read. They interpreted the scripture to the people. As James Newsome says, "In this passage, we witness the birth of the sermon."² So, blame the Levites. They were the first preachers. Their names were Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Mahim Akkub... It's the only time we ever hear of them, these preachers. It's not the preacher but the word that matters.

So, like Kelita and Azariah and Peliah and the other Levites, I feel called to take these ancient words that were written in a different time and a different culture to a different people and endeavor to interpret them that together we might hear the whisper of God. When anyone speaks of God, unless you happen to be God, some humility is in order. So, I say, I may understand it, or I may miss it, but I will try to be honest about what I hear. "If I understand the text."

It has been my experience that the understanding of this word evolves as the world evolves. Because these ancient words point us to Jesus, the living word is alive and evolving.

In Jon Meacham's book on Thomas Jefferson, he states, "Jefferson believed in the future... His own lifetime was testament to the possibility of political and intellectual progress. The past, he thought, should hold no magical, unexamined claim over the present. Some men look at Constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them, like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched."

Jefferson continues, "They ascribe to the men of preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well: I belonged to it, and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. It was very like the present, but without the experience of the present: and 40 years of experience in government is worth a century of book-reading: and this they would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead. (to do otherwise)... We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the

1 Kathleen O'Connor, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*. (2009) p. 267.

2 James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: Year C* (1994) p. 114.

regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”³ If I understand Jefferson’s text, he was citing the dynamism that exists between the wisdom of the word and the ever-changing world.

My experience is that as we look back at these words written thousands of years ago, they paradoxically point us ahead to a day we have yet to know, but a day toward which we are always living.

In the gospel of Mark the last word that the angel gives Jesus’ followers is this: “He is going ahead of you.” One way to read the entire Gospel of Mark, and the way I read it, is from the very beginning to the end, the followers of Jesus are desperately trying to keep up with Jesus. He is always going ahead of us, and as soon as we think we have caught up—as soon as we think we have finally found what it means to be faithful—Jesus leaves the room and we have some catching up to do.

Last Sunday I told you about participating in Robert’s memorial service. It was 1992 and Robert was a gay pastor. The Church had no room for him. But my friend Lewis summoned six pastors to stand up for Robert. When I finished preaching in the Gathering

last week, Rev. Alice Whitson stood up to call for the offering. And she said, “I am blessed to be living now. For in 1992, the church had no room for Robert and wouldn’t have had room for me. I was born in 1995 and this year I was ordained at Village Church.” The walk of faith is often slow and it is often sloppy, but Christ has gone ahead of us and Christ is pulling us along.

Village Family: Keep listening for the whisper of God in these ancient words. The mystery of these words is that by the Spirit of God, they do not ever take us back to some prior holy time. No, these words from our past are always, always calling us forward—at least when we understand them they do, which is why we also say, “The grass withers and the flowers fade...”. The times change, culture evolves, our perspectives grow but the word of our God stands forever. And that living word is looking over his resurrected shoulder and pleading with us, “Come on.”

“Come on. You can catch up, I know you can. There is a day I want you to see, and I am just dying to lead you there.”

3 Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (2012) p. 467-468.