

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Saturday, May 20 "Baccalaureate"

To our High School Graduates and to everyone with ears to hear.
Congratulations on making it through High School.

I started as Pastor at Our Savior's on October 1, 2019. About 30 days later, I was called to preside at your confirmation. I didn't even know you. I remember laying hands on your heads, wondering if I was pronouncing your names correctly. I prayed for the Holy Spirit stir up in you wisdom and understanding, council and might, the fear of the Lord and joy in his presence. A lot has happened in those three years. Your class got hit hardest by the pandemic. We are still learning about the mental health challenges young people are facing as a result of the pandemic.

Sadly during these last 3 years, I haven't gotten to know you as well as I had hoped. But I am here today to say that you always have a place here in this community of faith. If you want a pastor for a wedding, or baptism, we are here. This church is pulling for you in whatever you choose as your path in life. God has gifted each of you differently to contribute to the common good. When you come home from school or if you continue to live in Neenah come and worship. Check-in. Let us know what we can pray for.

No doubt you heard these questions these past few months, what are your plans next year? Or what are your hopes and dreams for the future?

Well, our scriptures for today address both of these questions as you transition to the next phase of life. And they can help ground you in a God who has a history of journeying with people in transitions... take the exodus story for example.

In Our Jeremiah 29 text, the prophet reminds those in transition that God has plans for you... plans for you for to prosper, and not for your harm, to give you a future with hope... even as you enter into the great unknown... like in the movie Frozen as Elsa and Anna try to navigate life without their parents as they enter into the unknown of becoming adults and learning how to use their gifts for good.

The historical context of Jeremiah 29 is that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and took all the capable people from Jerusalem to Babylon in what was called the Babylonian Exile. He took priests, prophets, leaders, artisans, metal smiths... forcing them out of their homes to be indentured servants in Babylon. They had to leave their families, friends, and homes for a new land. Their center for worship was destroyed. They wondered if God was even with them as they dealt with all this loss and grief.

But then, the prophet Jeremiah had the audacity to preach hope to them in this context. He comes along and tells the exiles not to give up on God or life. Jeremiah told the exiles that God wanted them to build houses, plant gardens, and eat what they produce while in Babylon. To take wives (patriarchy in the Bible), get married, have daughters and sons... to multiply and not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city you live in. And watch out for false prophets.

God told Jeremiah to say, "After 70 years, I will bring you back from where I sent you into exile. You see in the Old Testament, if you experienced hardship, it was because you turned away from God. They viewed the exile as a punishment for their sins against God.

But the part I love about this text is that Jeremiah is telling the exiles to "Bloom where they are planted." To keep on living. Just before this, Jeremiah tells them to not give up even when they don't know what the future holds. God wanted them to pray to God when they are away. God promised to hear their prayers. Jeremiah says, that if you seek God, you will find God. And in the end, you will return from where you were sent into exile.

I am realistic. We have two kids in college. I don't think either of them darkened the door of the church, unless they came home. But they did call and ask for prayers as they struggled with their health, relationships, or classes. Your parents need those phone calls. They miss you and are going through a transition themselves.

The point of this first lesson is God has specific plans for each one of you, whether you go to work now, the military, or to college. And God wants you to ground your identity in God when you are away. There are many things that will compete for your time or loyalty.

There will be false prophets. But remember this story, of a God who journeys with people into foreign lands, and doesn't abandon them when much of their identity is stripped away.

That brings us to our Gospel. In John 17, Jesus, who is about to go to the cross, prays for his disciples and the church out loud. He shares his hopes and dreams for them... which is also a prayer for us. So the first thing to remember is that Jesus prays. Even our God in human flesh found prayer important. The second thing to remember is that Jesus prays for a relationship with you... and that just knowing him is eternal life. And you may think eternal life only happens after we die. In John's Gospel, eternal life is now when you know Jesus. It is also called abundant life. God desires abundant life for all... for all to be fed, clothed, and have shelter. If you ever question your identity or worth, remember your baptism. In baptism, you were named and claimed in Christ forever. Your baptismal identity says that when you fail, or go through rough patch, you are loved and are enough right now.

Jesus talks a lot about Glory in this text... and being glorified. When we think of glory we think of success, looking good all the time, appearing to have it all together. We equate power and prestige with Glory. Well I have news for you. Glory to Jesus in John's Gospel also meant the cross. Jesus true glory can be found in the apparent weakness of the cross. You will fail, you will lose, you will make bad decisions, and you will suffer. You may face consequences for your choices. And yet, the cross says, you are never alone in those things. There is always grace for you and forgiveness for you. God is no stranger to failure. On the cross it looked like Jesus lost... lost to the power structures of the world. But on Easter God had other plans... new life.

Finally, your Christian faith is a marathon, not a sprint. You will encounter all kinds of Christians and not Christians. In this prayer Jesus prays that all Christians may be one as he and the father are one. Jesus desires unity. And yet, we have more differences than you can shake a stick at. I take this as don't judge other Christians or let

others judge you for your faith. Paul says in Romans 8:1, for now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Jesus.

Graduates you are in Christ Jesus. You are baptized and will continue to grow into what it means to be a believer in Jesus. Just know, when you are away... or not... God will go with you, behind you, before you, and within you to give you peace and a future with hope. Amen.