

A Doctor says: Do you want the bad news or the good news first? Patient: OK, well, give me the good news first. Doctor: You have 24-Hours to live. Patient: How is that good news?? So what’s the bad news?? Doctor: I’ve been trying to call you since yesterday.

So you know I’m going with the bad news first this morning. The earth is like a World War I no man’s land or like Hiroshima on August 7, 1945. The world is *formless and void*, says Jeremiah. Is it a dream? Well, partially. It’s Jeremiah’s prophetic vision of *the world falling apart*. For him that disintegration would come soon. He was one of the prophets who continually warned the southern kingdom of Judah that if the people didn’t treat one another with justice and their lives remained far from God, they would be destroyed.

He was right. History tells us that destruction came at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC. In his prophetic vision he says, “*I looked at the earth, and it was formless and [void]*” (v. 23). In English it sounds exactly like the opening verses of Genesis: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and [void]*” (v. 2).

Jeremiah goes on to describe the de-creation of the world, “*I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger*” (vss. 24-26). In Genesis creation continues: “*And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.*” Genesis pictures God creating the world out of a mess. God’s first creative act was to bring order out of chaos, something more substantial where before there was only liquid.

In Jeremiah’s prophecy, creation sinks back into disorder. Genesis 1 is reversed: humans, animals, vegetation vanish. The dry land itself totters. The skies no longer give light and the chaos that waited in eternity for God’s original, creative touch returns. This is Jeremiah’s frightening way of saying that everything that used to be stable, familiar or loving; everything that was productive, predicable or promising; everything that was comfortable, abundant or hopeful, is gone. Jeremiah sees it before it happens. He gazes upon universal disorder—the silence of all human coming and going, not even a bird left to chirp. It’s over. Only nothingness and void remain. Remember, this is what Jeremiah sees. We hear about it from him, but he sees it.

Jeremiah tells us, along with the citizens of Judah shortly before 587 BC, that our world is very unstable. In fact, Will and Ariel Durant wrote in *The Lessons of History*, “to the geologic eye all the surface of the earth is a fluid form, and mankind moves upon it as insecurely as Peter walking on the [water] to Christ,” (pp. 14-15).

Moving from the physical world to the social, we realize that civilization is merely a thin veneer overlaying cruelty and savagery, and such cruelty and savagery bursts out often enough, whether in the lunacy of wars or in fired workers showing up to shoot their former bosses. We are only one generation separated from barbarity. And if you don’t believe that, you’ve never raised children. 😊

Our personal sanity is also held by a thread. Think about how something out of the ordinary can ruin your whole day, week, or month. Witness how our lives are thrown into disorder by disaster, such as a hurricane. It’s not just that hurricanes can do unspeakable physical damage, but they remind us of how fragile our entire existence is. Just beyond the edge of our ordered lives, chaos threatens; such as when a friend betrays us, an infant is born with little chance of surviving, flood waters rise, we hurt someone we

love, our house burns down, a loved one dies, a tornado sweeps away all that we own, an assassin strikes, we lose our job, we have a serious car accident, our spouse files divorce papers, or we get mugged.

We aren't secure people living in a stable world; yet in our routines and habits we try to act like and convince ourselves we can hold back the chaos. In those times when we're healthy and balanced, we project our small feeling of well-being upon the physical world and pretend that all is well. It's our way of coping with uncertainty. To some degree we must resist the tides of chaos that threaten to drown us. The universe assigns each of us the large task of bringing enough order into our lives that we can continue living. But we often overdo our efforts to push back the borders of chaos, and we deny what we're doing.

We even attempt to bring order out of death and deny its tragedy. Why not bury the dead in graves scattered in a pattern that mirrors the randomness of life and death? Instead we place graves in neat straight rows—we try putting a little order into the chaos of death.

Jeremiah squares off against the people in sixth century BC Judah and forces on them his vision of their predicament, which would most assuredly end in a catastrophe. He was right. The Babylonians destroyed their country, tore down Jerusalem's walls, and ruined their temple. So Jeremiah's prophecy was true.

Jeremiah won't let any of us today believe that the world or the systems of the world in which we live are here eternally. No matter how hard we try, Jeremiah won't let us fool ourselves as individuals or societies that we're invincible or immortal. Humans have always used some kind of government or some kind of religion to surround ourselves with security. By the way, sports have very much become a religion in the U.S., observable not only on Super Bowl Sunday but also revealed in the shock and rage at athletes taking Performance Enhancing Drugs. Even the high priests of athletics fall into sin. Is nothing sacred any more?

It isn't pleasant to gaze at Jeremiah's vision of chaos returning—an earth that is *formless and void*. It isn't reassuring to consider how fragile our lives are, nor do we gain much strength from the present age in which we live. Individuals become more frail as the society or nation in which they live becomes more insecure, and that seems to be our situation today. To compensate for unattached, insecure feelings, more and more people turn to fringe groups among our society: right-wing or left-wing extremists, secret societies, cults that offer adherents all the answers if they'll blindly obey.

No matter what tricks we use to try to preserve our ordered social world—and our social world is as real as the physical one—nothing in this world can give us absolute certainty, nothing can guarantee our security. We shall, all of us, die, and this body of ours will decompose. I *did* say, the bad news is first.

Jeremiah gazes in horror at a nation totally despoiled, and we ask what we can in our fragile world gain from his experience and his message. The good news lodged in his message is the fact that he cares about what he has to say. He not only sees a vision, but he feels the pain that goes along with it. He's upset, distraught, and tortured by what awaits God's people—his people.

Jeremiah doesn't enjoy having to say what he says. It's his land, his temple, his religion. Most of the citizens of Judah despise him, yet he considers them his brothers and sisters. Although the people's evil behavior brings him pain, it still breaks his heart to tell the truth about them and about God. He dies a dozen deaths when they're finally destroyed.

It's no picnic being God's prophet! And yet all that he feels for his people is only a fraction of the sorrow God feels for them. God releases them to take the consequences of their actions; yet with the same concern that parents allow their children to make their own decisions and learn from the consequences.

So when Jesus arrives 600 years later he tells the truth, and God is part of his feelings also, just as much as a part of his words. Jesus experiences all the disorder of our individual lives and our societies. He's torn apart by our sin and suffers for our wrongdoing. Jesus' heart is broken as he tells us the good news.

When he dies, the sun stops shining. His body is dragged from the cross and dumped in a tomb. The world dips back toward chaos, everything important comes loose and begins to lean toward destruction like a skyscraper about to topple in an earthquake. His students are reduced to mumbling in confusion and hiding from the authorities. They experience the worst of chaos. They spend their time fearfully locked in a room together.

In their confusion and pain they wonder: Is there anything stable in this world? Then Jesus enters their locked room, meets them on Sunday evening like the sun that shone on creation's first day. Out of the mess, out of the chaos and confusion of Jesus' death—murdered by the world's top government and leaders of its best religion, by a seemingly democratic decision because the majority cries out, "Crucify him"—he doesn't stay dead. Jesus steps among them, risen, walking and talking, telling them of a new creation and guaranteeing that this world belongs to God. *We* belong to God.

One thing we can always trust is that God loves us, enough to suffer for us, enough to die for us. The risen Jesus arrives every Sunday in this room, no matter the chaos of our lives, our society, or our world, to promise that God is solid when all else is shaky. God is stable though the mountains tremble. *The world's falling apart!* Isn't it about time we put our trust in God?? With God, life continues. Destruction isn't the final act. Death isn't the last word.

The last word belongs to God, and God has spoken the last word in the good news of Jesus who offers us his amazing grace.

Are you ready for some more good news? Jim Denison shared this story a few days ago: A man walked into a Costco store in Florida and bought one hundred generators. They cost him \$450 each. Why would one person need one hundred generators? He wouldn't, but people in the Bahamas would. He sent them all there by boat, but that's where the story ends. He didn't want to be named. He only asked that people focus on helping those affected by Hurricane Dorian.

Meanwhile, a six-year-old boy in South Carolina was saving up for a trip to Disney World when Hurricane Dorian struck the U.S. He decided to use his money to feed evacuees instead. While the storm has dissipated, its effects will be felt for years, as will the goodwill of those who have chosen to serve people in need. Extending our faith to hurting people, may not change the world, but it changes *their* world.

We can't be naïve. Those of us gathered here today recognize that *the world's falling apart*. But we must put our trust in God and in the power of his love, propelled by his amazing grace.

We also recognize that our church is so much more than a place we come to socialize. It isn't just a building located at 1760 Pine Hollow Road.

Our church is a community—a family of faith. It's a place where imperfect people, no matter how different we may be, come together around one shared absolute truth: Jesus loves each one of us—and he loves us without end.

Thank you for coming this morning to "Back to Church" Sunday as we recognize that even though "*the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark*" (v. 28)...God loves us—each one of us.

Never forget that. Amen.