

While worship, worship preparation and sermon preparation constitute about a fifty percent time commitment for a pastor, one of the additional charges of being a *pastor* as opposed to being simply a preacher, is to provide pastoral care to those who need or request it. This year, between two congregations, I have dealt with four joint replacements, an open heart surgery, and a partial amputation follow-up and cancer surgery follow up among hospital visits, as well as four of what were essentially death bed situations, regular rehabilitation facility visits, and home visits, as well as some in-office counseling.

. . . oh, and phone conversations, not only with some who are resident here, but with several of the Florence winter visitors.

Though some of those to whom I have provided such care are on our prayer list, by its very nature, large parts of pastoral care need to be confidential. Nonetheless, I can say for sure that one almost constant aspect of pastoral care is — a prayer, a prayer, usually at the end of the session.

In worship, we offer prayers of confession and illumination and dedication of the offering, and, though the words are mine, we pray for God to work on behalf of those whose names we raise, much as I pray with individuals to whom through me you provide pastoral care.

But maybe this praying is a waste of our time; maybe God is done?

[Raise some names and ask whether they prayed during their recent troubles]

Ah, so, maybe we do not believe God is done!

Let me switch gears only subtly for a moment. Has God said all that God has to say? I remember a bumper sticker, “The King James Version — God’s Final Word,” and for those of you who have been Presbyterian for some time, I remember when the blue

hymnals in our pews first came out. I was still a real person at the time, but I remember fellow parishioners who were unhappy because they thought the red hymnal was, well, God's final word.

But churches, including this one, hear music that we have not heard in church before. George Oberdorf, who led the Florence choir for three years, introduced all kinds of new music in introits and offertories, some of it alarmingly twenty-first century lively, and most found it, at a minimum, "invigorating."

But we should not have used such music if God is done. If God has spoken God's final words.

But how can we be sure God is done, and when did God speak those final words?

If you were a contemporary of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, from whom we have been reading, would God's final words have been that the Babylonians would conquer Judah and Jerusalem? Or were God's final words that the Babylonians would ultimately lose control of Judah so that, as we read two weeks ago, property could again be bought and sold?

Were God's final words when God said through Jeremiah — and much earlier through the first of the Isaiah's — that the people were being punished for the sins of the nation, or were God's final words when God gave, or so Jeremiah understood, the words in today's lesson:

In those days, they shall no longer say, "Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted." <sup>30</sup> But every one shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted.<sup>1</sup>

Those words are decidedly different from being punished for the sins of a nation, as what God through Jeremiah and other prophets is said to have declared and from what

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:29-30 (JPS)

we can find in Exodus and elsewhere about punishment through the sixth generation. But wait, in that same passage we also read:

No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, "Heed the LORD"; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me -- declares the LORD. *For I will forgive their iniquities, And remember their sins no more.*<sup>2</sup>

Which was it, punishment or forgiveness? Whichever, it was different from the words that God had spoken through the first of the three prophets we collectively call, "Isaiah." *God's words had changed!* The situation for the people of God in their understanding of God's word would have changed — at least if they were listening. Apparently, God's final words are not easily fixed at a point in time!

And speaking of Isaiah, might not God's final words have been those spoken through the second of those prophets:

For He has said:

"It is too little that you should be My servant in that I raise up the tribes of Jacob And restore the survivors of Israel: I will also make you a light of nations, That my salvation may reach the ends of the earth."<sup>3</sup>

*That was a revolutionary pronouncement; it was real change! God was not done!* God was declaring that God was not just the god of the Jews, but the god of all nations, of all people. Maybe those were God's final words?

But then, what about Jesus? According to the writer of the Gospel of John, Jesus *is* "The Word of God." Jesus is the "Word of God," yet we embrace as holy Scripture words written decades after Jesus' death and say that *they* are "The Word of God."

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid* v.34

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 49:6 (JPS)

By the way, I need to add that in our Epistle lesson, “Scripture” refers to what we call the “Old Testament”; the New Testament did not yet exist.

What gives? Has God’s speaking ended with Jesus’ resurrection? With the establishment of the canon of the New Testament? Is it possible that God has nothing left to say to us today? *Is God done?*

Is God done? I ask not only those of you with whom I might have done pastoral care, but those of you who had other personal issues this year: “Did you pray?” “And if you prayed, did you think God heard and did you want God to react?” But if God is done, God would not react, would he — or she?

And so, quite frankly and not off topic but not my topic, why should we think that this church as we know it is God’s final word for us? The Temple built by Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians. The second Temple, built after the exile, was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans. God’s words quite clearly are not dependent on something built by human hands.

I treasure the relations I have with winter visitors, and they can often consume more of my winter pastoral care time than do those of you who are here year round. In Florence, I think of many visits to Gary Ellsworth when Valley Fever, not recognized by his home doctors, nearly killed him, and even before him, during my first winter here, to Nancy Bohlander. For those of you who do not know Nancy, she and her husband Clancy live in Nebraska, and it is the Disciples of Christ Church there to which they belong. In Florence, Clancy sings in the choir and Nancy often does the children’s sermon for me, at which she is a true gift of God. But I actually first met Nancy and Clancy in the Intensive Care Unit at Mountain Vista Hospital seven years ago. As a reaction to her flu shot, Nancy had experienced Guillain-Barre Syndrome; she could not even breathe on her own, and spent months in rehabilitation once she was out of the hospital.

Nancy called me a few months ago to tell me some bad news: she has experienced a recurrence of breast cancer she had two or three decades back; I do not remember exactly when she had said. I spoke with Nancy this week — I had not reached her the week before, but I'll return to that. Nancy, for one, will not buy the idea that God is done, including with her, and not because she expects a cure — she has been told and I think accepts that this is not a possibility, — not because she expects a cure, but because she feels God's presence with her.

There is no substitute for her own words, so here they are:

Hello, John.

Thanks for your phone call. I'm still hanging in, but my first treatment med wasn't effective, so we are in the process of choosing the next treatment option.

We are having a giant refresher course in living in the moment.. And God is providing wondrous moments! Once again we are surrounded and uplifted in prayer.

We still have hopes of coming to Az. This season, but it will be a much shorter visit than usual. At this time we aren't sure when. Middle Nov. Would be the very earliest.

For Nancy, clearly, God is *not* done; he is an active, calming, and reassuring presence in her and Clancy's lives and in their life together.

And what about in your lives? When we pray, do you believe someone hears? And equally importantly, when you pray, are you listening between your words for a movement of the Holy Spirit? For God's words to you?

I, for one, do not believe God has said God's final words. I pray that when God speaks, I can hear and listen.

And what about us as a church? I want to turn to Nancy's e-mail to me again. After asking about my shoulder, she writes:

Read your letter about the church. These are challenging times for the church @ large. There are so many huge changes , and major issues in all churches right now. It's hard for some of us older ones to move out of our comfort zones. But, in order for the church to not just survive, but also thrive, we need to. I'm praying that we will all be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Greetings to Patricia

Nancy B

I do not tell the Holy Spirit what to say to anyone, and I know each of us might hear that Spirit differently, but I believe that God as the Holy Spirit does speak to each of us if we will only listen. The challenge for me — and everyone — is not to presume that the Holy Spirit has the same ideas that we do.

God is not done. God was not done in the lives of the exiles in Babylon — as that second writer of Isaiah also tells, Cyrus of Persia was coming to set them free. God is not done in Nancy Bohlander's life; God is not done in *any* of our lives.

God is not done, which means that as the prophets found and proclaimed, with God there is constant newness and change. Let us always be open to that newness and change in our lives, and let us not presume that the way things have been in the past in any aspect of our lives is the way they were meant to be always, otherwise, the Jews would still be in Babylon.

No; God was not done with the Jews, and God is not done with any of us, individually, or as Christ's Church.

Amen.