

Forging a New Covenant Amid Institutional Collapse

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Commencement Address

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First, I want to express my deep gratitude for the invitation to address this year's graduating class, their friends and family, their fellow students, my faculty and staff colleagues, and the trustees and friends of United Seminary. This is a great honor and I thank you for it.

You may feel differently about that invitation after I'm done. Speakers on occasions such as this can either give a graduation address or commencement address. Graduation addresses celebrate the hard work, persistence and high achievement of the graduates. Commencement addresses, on the other hand, focus on the world within which the graduates will commence using their education for the good of the world. Now this is a great graduating class, full of talent, hard work and great promise. A graduation address would feel pretty good with the material this class gives a speaker to work with. However, those who invited me must have known the risk in that invitation, namely, that I would be likely not to go there, but would instead opt for a commencement address. In today's world and today's church that probably won't be a feel good speech at all. Indeed, at least one colleague found my title a little scary. . . . So don't say you weren't duly warned.

My reference to "institutional collapse" is not meant as hyperbole. I submit that in the church, and in U.S. society as well as in global society, we are faced with the actual or threatened collapse of institutions with long and effective histories of service. Indeed, in some regions it is even worse - we are faced with the potential collapse of ecosystems. Church and world are in the grip of global forces of irreversible change. While much will be recognizable in society and church of the future - after all, human beings are still human beings, there is much that will not be it has been before. Institutions that we know and cherish, that define our world, and within which we know how to operate, will cease to exist. We will be forced to find new ways or organizing our life together. . . . This is the world into which you and I depart today. This is the world and church within which we will take up our new ministries.

Welcome to the world of the book of Jeremiah and of the prophet we meet in it. As I review the responses of the book and prophet Jeremiah to the overwhelming changes faced by God's people in their time, I invite you to reflect on how we might respond to the different, yet no less overwhelming changes facing church and society in our time.

The book of Jeremiah was composed after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and the palace and Temple - the "House of God" - found there. They deported, tortured and imprisoned the last king of the house of David, and deported most of those who ran the government and economy of the country. Thus in a single stroke, the people of Judah had lost all three national institutions that defined their world and defined them as a people in that world: the Davidic king, the Jerusalem temple and the city of Jerusalem itself.

These three institutions had structured the religious, political, economic and social life of the kingdom of Judah for nearly 400 years by the time they were destroyed. Participation in the worship of the Temple was the way people knew themselves to be connected to God. Acceptance of the law and judgments of the Davidic king was the way that people knew their

lives were lived in accord with God's desires. Orientation to, and identification with Jerusalem - the city of God and the Davidic king - was the way people knew who they were in the world.

For the Judaeans who remained after the Babylonians left - these institutions that they knew and cherished, that defined their world, and within which they knew how to operate, were gone. How were they to know themselves as connected to God, as living in accord with God's desires, as a distinct community of belonging in the world? They were forced to find new ways or organizing their life together else they would disappear as a people.

They turned to the speeches and life of a profoundly crabby and off-the-wall prophet from before the destruction - this guy named Jeremiah, who had seen what no one had wanted to believe - that a tidal wave of change was about to sweep over them one way or another, and that the institutions that had served for 400 years were no longer sufficient to give life. In some ways the situation of Judah in Jeremiah's time is closer to ours in that the institutions of temple, king and city still stood, but the horizon was filled with overwhelming change that meant those institutions had to change significantly if they were to continue to serve their purpose.

The book that got assembled out of Jeremiah's speeches and stories about him is an extended reflection on how to sustain or not sustain a thriving community of faith and belonging in the face of overwhelming change. Some insisted on maintaining against all odds the institutions that had enabled the life of the community for 400 years. They accused those who would accommodate to the coming changes of compromising the purity of the faith, and of lacking sufficient trust in God's miracle-working power to defend God's people and their sacred institutions against all threats. To these voices Jeremiah and his book say, "There will be no miracles, and God is in charge of and behind the changes that you see as a threat to the purity of the faith." Others said, "Back when we were thriving, we did things differently; if we just return to the old ways, we'll thrive again." To those Jeremiah and the book reply, "There is no going back. Those were different times. What worked then will not work in these new conditions." Still others said, "If these sacred institutions have collapsed, it's over; it's ended. We'll go somewhere else." To these the reply is, "Those institutions are gone. Good riddance. God is not done, and God's project goes on, and can be seen at work in the forces that brought those institutions down. Moreover, those were not the only institutions that give cohesion and direction to the community of God's people. We are not bereft; we are not in chaos."

These approaches that the book rejects all have one thing in common. They assume that the future will be like the past. They think either that we can guarantee the future by defending the past against every threat or by returning to it, or that if the past is finally cut off and destroyed, then there is no future. They try to hold back a sea of change by building a dike against it, and when it fails are overwhelmed.

The book and its prophet operate from a different assumption, namely, that the future will in some significant ways be UNlike the past while remaining coherent with it, and indeed having its roots in the past. Instead of building a dike against the sea of change, they surf its waves. So they have a clear perspective on how to thrive in the face of major and irreversible change. One aspect of that is the idea that we should not confuse institutions with the relationships they are supposed to embody and sustain. You hear this in the passage from chapter 7 where Jeremiah criticizes the audience's trust in the Temple of God as trusting in "deceptive words." His point is not that the Temple is problematic per se, but that focusing on the institution that regularizes and makes visible the relationship between God and the people actually misdirects attention, which ought to be focused on the relationship itself, not

the institution that regularizes it. Instead of focusing on the Temple and assuming that all is well between them and God because the Temple functions correctly, Jeremiah urges the people to focus on their relationship to God and their relationships with each other that are the consequence and expression of being in right relation with God. If the substance of those relationships is not right, then the functionality of the institution of the Temple is meaningless. If the substance of those relationships is right, the absence of the Temple is not important.

Although Jeremiah criticizes the audience's reliance on the institution of the Temple, he is not advocating abandoning the tradition of the faith community. Indeed, his critique is steeped in the tradition as the echoes of the Ten Commandments remind us. The speech advocates a return to the core of the tradition, to what it actually means in everyday life, making possible a reappropriation in new forms, new language, new institutions, rather than a mindless repetition and replication of words and forms that have acquired the appearance of sanctity with the passage of time.

Those core relationships with God and other people still need to be regularized and supported by institutions, but their thriving is not tied to a particular set of institutions. Indeed, there exist already alternative institutions - less visible, not yet as widespread or comprehensive - that are capable of regularizing and sustaining the relationships that bind God and community together. The seeds of the renewal are already present in the life of the community. The task is to find and summon them, and to nurture and grow them. Indeed, in the book of Jeremiah there are several passages that call forward institutions that regularize and support the life of the community on the scale of the family, the village, the district, and invite these to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the national institutions associated with Jerusalem.

These new institutions share some critical characteristics that give them a greater capacity to endure and adapt in the face of overwhelming and irreversible change. This is hinted at in the new covenant passage from chapter 31 in that line, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know GOD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." The verb translated "teach" here refers specifically to the responsibility for religious instruction that resided with the priests in the Temple. To say that this is no longer necessary because all - from the greatest to the least - will know God, points to the character of the new institutions that will embody and regularize the relations between God and people and among the people of God. They involve a broader array of people than the centralized institutions they replace. So they distribute knowledge, authority and responsibility among many, rather than concentrating it in the hands of a small elite. Their structures are more horizontal than hierarchical. They operate more on the trust and commitment of all participants rather than on the command and control of those at the top. Such institutions are better equipped to adapt and renew themselves in the context of change because they are more in contact with the changing reality in which the institution moves than centralized hierarchical institutions. Such institutions have shown their efficacy in contemporary events, but they are more the exception than the rule.

The community that will focus on right relations with God and right relation with each other and the world, and that will forge new institutions to embody and sustain those relationships in a changing world needs to trust two essential perceptions or all that work won't seem worth the effort. It needs to see the collapse of the institutions that have shaped and defined its life for years, decades, maybe even centuries, as opportunity as much as disaster, as beginning as much as end. It also needs to trust that - as the reading from chapter 31 affirms - it is never cut off from God, never outside of God's caring hands, even in the

moments of greatest disaster. Thus it has a future, no matter how difficult the path to that future.

Jeremiah himself had to come to these realizations in the account in chapters 32 and 33. As the Babylonian army encircles Jerusalem in the final siege, God commands Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin Hanamel in order to keep the property in the family, and tells Jeremiah to be sure to get all the proper legal documentation for the sale so that the title is secure in coming generations. Jeremiah turns around and says to God essentially, "What?! Are you crazy?! The disaster you've had me prophesy for decades is finally about to happen. Everything will be destroyed, and you want me to buy a field and observe all the legal niceties as if all this isn't happening??!!" God's quite lengthy reply can be summarized as saying, "Yes, the disaster is real, but it isn't the end. I hold the future, so I hold the disaster and I hold what is beyond the disaster. What is beyond the disaster is life again, the full life of people thriving in right relation with me, and with each other, and with the world."

Taken all together, the perspective of the book of Jeremiah points the way to forging a new covenant community amid threatened or actual institutional collapse. This is both tremendously hopeful and tremendously scary. Because they shape our world and offer us dependable patterns - not to mention minimum salaries, medical and pension plans, guaranteed appointments, and seats of power and prestige, institutions allow us to know what to expect, and thus offer a sense of security. To say that the way forward is to move on to new institutions just emerging or even yet to be born is to call us to leave our secure place within the institutions we know. The book of Jeremiah has no illusions about how scary this is. The portrait of king Zedekiah in the book is of a leader who at some level knows that the day of the national institutions of old is over because his requests to Jeremiah make clear he thinks it will take a miracle to save them. At the same time, he cannot follow Jeremiah's advice to abandon them because it is a leap into the unknown, a leap into fearful vulnerability.

And yet, in the book of Jeremiah - as also today - it is those who take that leap; who do not abandon the tradition, but return to its core of right relationship with God and right relationships among humans; who do not hang onto the old institutions that no longer embody and sustain those relationships in a new era and new conditions, but forge new institutions from the seedbed of the old - these are the ones who survive and thrive. These risk-takers on behalf of the future are the ones who further God's project and join the movement of God's collaborators.

This is work that takes deep knowledge of the tradition, deep thoughtfulness about the contemporary situation, a capacity to find God in unexpected places - even places where orthodox theology says God is definitely NOT, and it takes tremendous imagination and creativity. In our own time of great and irreversible change we need people of this kind of imagination and creativity.

In a society where no one outside the church understands the language inside the church, so the Good News is not heard, we need people who can tell the creation story in the metaphors of quantum astrophysics and evolutionary biology.

In a society where people no longer enter church buildings as a matter of course, and when they do they come as individual consumers of spiritual goods, we need people who can forge new communities of belonging, starting Bible studies for atheists in coffee shops, churches in re-used auto garages, and spiritual communities online.

In churches where we have become dependent on the “expertise” of regional and national staff that is now less and less available, we need to find ways to make space for and bring forward the expertise of those who actually make up the church.

In denominations where we have been trying to work the old institutions harder, better, smarter, or to dress them up with the latest bells and whistles, or to pray for a miracle to save us, we need some leaders who will support real experimentation.

In a world where our human institutions facilitate the fraying of the social safety net so that inequity only grows, and the degrading of our planetary home so that the collapse of ecosystems is a credible possibility, we need people who can imagine and organize new ways of living together on the earth that support the thriving of all creatures.

To borrow language from the closing hymn at yesterday’s Eucharist service, we need leaders who stand at the future’s threshold, grateful for God’s guiding hand, and ask no protected strong-hold, but accept a call to be a pilgrim band, seeking ever for new vision of the gospel for our day, moving forward in God’s mission with faith to show the way.

The church and the world need such leaders. We hope that you graduates will be among them. We hope we have prepared you for the task, and we bless you as you take it up.