

The Trinity Pulpit

September 26, 2010

What Do I Do In Uncertain Times?

"A Certain Uncertainty" Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15

Dr. Jeff Roberts

We live in a time of uncertainty. This week, in the area of economics, the following was announced through the media:

First, the recession was officially over. Second, companies were sitting on trillions of dollars afraid of starting new projects, investment and hiring new employees. At the same time, unemployment was nearing double digits. In addition, it seems that September will be the best September for the stock market in 70 years. We take all of this news in stride. However, if you are one of the unemployed persons then the economy is uncertain. If you are one of those companies and you are making decisions, then the future is still gray. If there is a word for our current economic state, it is uncertainty.

Politically, there is uncertainty. We are approaching an election and it seems its outcome is also uncertain. The Tea Party movement has left both established political parties with questions, doubts and fears. As you pastor, it is not my role to discuss your political view, however it is my job to identify those events in our world that are leading to our constant feeling of angst and anxiety. Long time news reporter, Tom Brokaw, recently said in an interview, "that in all of his years of following politics, this year's election had more plates in the air than any other, and where they were going to land is still uncertain."

Personally, we might be passing through uncertainty. You can announce the recession is over, but if I am struggling finan-

cially then my economy is uncertain. There are other areas of uncertainty, such as our family life, our marriages, our children, schools, sometimes church and just the events of everyday life. All of these things can leave us with a great sense of angst.

Yet, even though we feel that things are uncertain, surely we would not dare say that we are living in the most uncertain times in history. Would we dare say such words to those of the 1770's in our nation who were wondering if they would be a nation, or if their revolution would fail? Would we dare utter words of our uncertainty to those of the 1860's who watched almost every man in their community march off to war against their own country man and did not return from the Civil War? Would we dare say this is the most uncertain time to those who lived through the Great Depression? Would we dare say we have never faced anything like this before to those who shipped off to Europe and the Pacific during World War II? Have we forgotten the turbulent 1960's with Viet Nam, cities on fire, assassinations and a generation in revolt against all that was the norm? Have we forgotten the feelings of the months following 9/11 and the uncertainty of war which we are still fighting? I mention all of this, to remind us that every generation faces moments of uncertainty. In essence, life is uncertain. The question is not will there be uncertainty, but how will we respond in the times of uncertainty?

That was also the question facing Jeremiah in the later days of his nation's occupation. Babylon had Jerusalem under siege. God tells Jeremiah that the King of Judah is going to be taken into exile. In other words, the government was going

Here is the steps again...hear from God and then become obedient, even when the moment is still uncertain. We call that faith. Phillip Yancey writes, "Faith is trusting in advance what will only makes sense in reverse."

We also must be patient in times of uncertainty. As we have already discovered, every generation has their moments of uncertainty. Jeremiah reminds us that to follow God we must learn patience. Jeremiah's promise and proclamation is that "one day" land will be bought and sold in Judah. One day? That is so frustrating. When? One day.

However, "One Day" is the way of the Lord. Abraham you are going to be the father of many nations. When is that going to happen? One day. Moses I am going to use you to lead the people out of bondage. When? One day. When will this Babylonian Exile be over? One day. When will the Messiah come? One day. When Jesus ascends he says I will send you a comforter, one of power the Holy Spirit. When? You go and wait. When Lord will you return? One day. When will this all come to pass? One day.

When Peter writes of Jesus coming he writes "God is not slow in the way we understand of being slow. Instead, He is patient with us by not wanting anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9) Peter reminds us that God's "one day" always has a purpose.

When will you resolve my problems? One day. When will this grief pass? One day. When will I have contentment? One day. When will my child ever learn? One day. When will this all finally make some sense? One day.

One day... it sounds like an empty promise, but it is actually the great promise. You see, one day keeps us coming back. One day, keeps the relationship alive. One day, keeps us from treating God like a dispenser of goodies and requires us to instead have a relationship that is day to

day and growing. One day is not an empty promise, but instead the greatest promise of all. We must learn patience in our moments of uncertainty.

Rick Husband always wanted to be an astronaut and in 1994 he began his training with NASA. His first flight was in 1999 as the pilot of the Space Shuttle Discovery. He loved it. In particular, he loved being able to see the beauty of God's creation from a different perspective. His next flight would be Columbia in 2003. The crew had a routine takeoff and mission. Everything seemed to be normal when the horrible unexpected occurred. In its final descent, Columbia broke apart over Fort Worth Texas only a few hundred miles from where Rick Husband grew up. The entire crew of seven was lost. A few days later, Rick Husband's widow Evelyn was being interviewed by Katie Couric. Evelyn spoke about the crew's families and the strength they were gaining from each other. She spoke about her desire for the space exploration to continue, and then she turned her attention to her faith and her husband, Rick's faith. She said that Rick often gave people autographed pictures and on the picture he would always write his favorite Bible verse. It was Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight." Evelyn said, "That verse has been a blessing to me in this time of Rick's death." Then she said, "I don't understand any of this, but I trust the Lord and that has been a tremendous comfort."³

I don't understand any of this... uncertainty. But I trust the Lord...certainty. Jeremiah could not have said it better.

¹N.T. Wright Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006) p.181.

²Wright, p.183.

³John Maxwell, Today Matters (New York: Warner Books, 2004) pp. 212-213.



to fall. In addition, Babylon would soon be the government of Judah, as well as control the land and the economy of Judah. In every way we have mentioned today, Jeremiah was faced with uncertainty.

Politically, there was nothing but uncertainty. Judah was not in control of their future, which was the only thing for certain. Economically, there was uncertainty. Who would own land? How would the economy work? Who would have control of resources? Religiously, there was uncertainty. This was God's nation and God's people. Should not God have protected God's people in this moment? How is your faith and theology challenged when it seems that God's people are suffering as much, if not more than others? There is personal uncertainty for the prophet. He does not know if he will remain in Judah or go to Babylon or be put to death. Who knows? There is uncertainty.

In this moment, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and tells him to buy the field of his cousin Hanamel. This might seem like an odd story in this scenario. In the moment of great uncertainty, we have a land transaction. God tells Jeremiah to buy a field that belonged to his uncle and Jeremiah does so. He goes through all of the steps of paying for the field, recording a deed and then storing the deed in clay jars, which are buried and preserved. When asked why he is doing this, Jeremiah replies that land will one day be bought and sold again in Judah.

What is this story about? It is about a man who heard the word of God and acted in a moment of uncertainty. Jeremiah buys this field, not because he thinks it is a good investment. In fact, it was just the opposite. This is not an economic decision, this is a faith issue. Jeremiah, the same one who has been preaching doom and judgment, buys this field as a way of reminding his people, God's people, that even in a moment of uncertainty, there must be hope and we must act as people of faith. Jeremiah's last comment in this passage is the key. Once again, land will be bought and sold in Judah. Things are bleak, things are dark, things are uncertain, but there is a moment of uncertainty there is something certain. That something is God. In a changing world, God is unchanged in his love, power and ability. This is not the end, Jeremiah is saying buy this field. This is only a moment in

time, but not the last word. Jeremiah's actions remind us that moments of uncertainty call upon God's people to act in faith.

What are we to do in our moments of uncertainty? First, we must listen to the word of God above all other voices. Jeremiah writes, "The word of the Lord came to me." The reason for his action was not his own reflection, the advice of others or the cultural norm. It was the word of the Lord. It was God's word and instructions to him that convinced him that day to buy that field. It is interesting that he repeats that phrase again when Hanamel comes to him with the proposition to purchase the field. First, God reveals that this is going to happen and then when it happens, he recognizes it as the work of God in his life. In verse 6 it reads, "The word of the Lord came to me". In verse 8 it reads "Just as the Lord said..." Verse 8 continues, "...I knew that this was the word of the Lord". This is the process of God's word to Jeremiah in this time of uncertainty.

I want us to understand this process for a moment. Jeremiah says first, the Lord spoke to him about this transaction. So, in Jeremiah's mind there is this word from God. He has yet to see it come to fruition and reality, but in his mind there is this word that the field should be bought. Then, the next step of the process, Hanamel comes and offers the field. Because Jeremiah has first listened for God's voice and word, he is able to recognize God's work when he encounters Hanamel. Then the third step in the process, he becomes convinced that this was God at work and he becomes obedient and buys the field. Three steps... being open to hearing a word from God, recognizing God at work and then becoming convinced that God is at work, so that it changes our actions.

That is the process we need in moments of uncertainty. We begin with trusting God's word above all other voices and words. Whose voice are we going to trust in our moment of uncertainty? We can trust the voice of Wall Street or the voice of a political party. We can trust Fox News or CNN. We can trust Glenn Beck or Anderson Cooper. We can choose to trust many voices, but there is only one voice that will last and remain, and that is the word from the Lord.

Where do we hear the word of the Lord today? We hear it clearly in God's word, the Bible. It is the Bible, where we can go daily, to hear the word of the Lord

to us. What does the Bible say about itself? In 2 Timothy Paul writes "all scriptures is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work." All of those terms tell us that the Bible has a purpose. It is not simply about a pretty word or a word to argue about, or a word to give us a "nice thought" for the day. The purpose of the Bible is for us hear God's word and by hearing this word, we might be transformed daily so we might be thoroughly equipped.

N.T. Wright comments about the Bible in his book, *Simply Christian*. He mentions that scripture is one of those points where heaven and earth overlap and interlock. Like all such places, this is mysterious. It doesn't mean we can see at once what is going on. Indeed, it guarantees that we can't. But it does enable us to say some things that need to be said, and that are otherwise difficult.¹

Wright also states the Bible is not like an accurate description of how a car is made. It's more like the mechanic who helps you fix it, the garage attendant who refuels it, and the guide who tells you how to get where you are going.²

What is Wright's point? He is saying the Bible is where we come in times of uncertainty. There we find a word from God. It might not be the word that puts everything in perspective once and for all, but what we do is we keep coming back. We keep coming back to God's word for one more word. When we do, then something happens to us. We begin to recognize God's word at work in our lives. That is what happened to Jeremiah. He heard God's word, but this was not the first time. Jeremiah was used to opening his life up to the word of God. So when he heard it this time, he recognized it. Then when the event of his life occurred, he knew this was God's will for him because he recognized it alongside God's word.

This is how it works and we cannot short cut the process. We come to the Bible and there we read God's word. There we listen for God's voice. As we do this as a spiritual discipline, we

begin to recognize God at work in our lives. We begin to connect the events of life and the word of God that is equipping us to live. In doing so, we begin to trust the word of God over the other voices that surround us and then our choices become more certain in a time of uncertainty. The first step we must take in a time of uncertainty is to find guidance in the certainty of God's word.

The second step we must take is to be faithful in our actions. Jeremiah recognized God's activity in his life and in the moment of uncertainty he acted with certainty. This purchase of the field required several steps at which he could have chosen to reverse his decision, but in each one he was faithful. I counted five to six steps he had to take to finish this transaction, while he was obedient in each one. Each one created an opportunity to rethink his action of following God's word, but he chose to be faithful in each step. We are reminded that faith is not just an intellectual exercise, but requires action. Faith without works is dead, says James.

Moments of uncertainty require that you and I intentionally rethink priorities and act accordingly. In Jeremiah's instance, once he heard the word from the Lord, his priority became to act in obedience to purchase and record the deed for the field as a visual of hope. In moments of uncertainty, it seems to me what is required of the Christian is to act out our faith. We must give attention to our actions. Although work is uncertain, the company is uncertain. As a Christian, we continue to give our best effort as we work unto the Lord. When our marriage is going through uncertainty, we renew our vows in our hearts of for better or for worse. We then begin to act in faithfulness toward our spouse. When our finances are uncertain we act with faith. We don't rob God of his tithe just because our income changes. Instead, we remain faithful in our giving knowing that God's word describes a blessing for the generous person, while the one who cheerfully gives to God what already God claims as his own. In our actions towards others, we should not let the stress of uncertainty cause us to act out against them. In moments of uncertainty, when the temptation is self preservation, we instead should continue to act selflessly toward others.