August 30, 2026
First Congregational UCC
“Unfailing Waters”; Jeremiah 15:15-21
Rev. Nick Hatch

Let us pray: God, your provision is unfailing in the blessing-burdens that faithful discipleship bears. The words from my mouth and the meditations upon our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer.

Today we are blessed with the opportunity to welcome eighteen new members into our progressive and inclusive community of faith. Like God does with God’s chosen people, we will make a covenant. As a church, we will promise to celebrate, encourage and bear each other’s travails.

Now we always ask what brings people to seek out First Congregational. Over the years, there’s been some common themes that bring people into our covenant community. Here are a few I have heard:

I’m here because when my brother came out, I knew we had to find a new faith community which saw my loved one for the beautiful person they are.

My experiences of the Christian faith haven’t been good. I have some trauma I am working through because of them. I’m hoping it’s different here. I still believe in God, but this is kind of my last try to be part of a faith community.

I want to belong to a church that is both joyful and believes in serving others. I struggle to be hopeful and faith without action leaves me feeling even emptier.

And lastly:

I heard this is the “church of the sheet cake - I wanna know more!”

Well seriously, do you hear in each of these statements, there is both a blessing and burden? Laments and delights all bound into the similar narratives seeking God and being faithful.

Now honestly, we have all had our fair share of blessings and burdens, good days and bad days. We have known moments when life does not pan out like we expect. What makes it harder though is when we strive to be faithful, when we have not intentionally or knowingly done anything wrong, and the burdens still come. In spite of our best intentions and most thoughtful applications of wisdom, plans fail, loved ones disappoint, we are misunderstood, health calamities strike, stress overwhelms, faith communities ostracize their own.

Then come questions. The hard questions. Questions like:

Why God? Why would you allow this?

How God, how do we, survive this mess?

God, if you are so loving, how could you make a world full of such good and evil?

Surely, you have your own questions of faith that you bear today, questions and sufferings, burdensome contradictions which you will not allow to be silenced.

I invite you to open your bulletin to the last page.

(show painting of Jeremiah here)

Here is Michelangelo’s Jeremiah painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. You see Jeremiah sitting on his throne, flanked by maidens dressed in mourning clothing. His sunken head rests heavily in his hands. Beneath it read “Hieremias” a Latin and Greek variant of his prophetic name **Jeremiah**, meaning "Yahweh will exalt" or "the Lord is raised up."

Doubtless he carries the pain of Jerusalem’s impending destruction; a horror he has told but no one is willing to hear. Jeremiah carries with him the weight of being derided by priests and elders, being taken captive, being beaten, and being cast into prison. In serving his God, Jeremiah’s body literally foreshadows the Passion of Christ’s crucifixion.

When you gaze at this portrait, does even a sliver resonate with you? Have your, or a loved one’s shoulders ever slumped from the despairs of this life? Is this you today?

Jeremiah’s writings are ubiquitous; spanning some forty years. His words are personal, unfiltered, they are like reading a beloved’s diary. His struggle is poignant and profound: the distance between Israel’s reality and the goodness of their faithful God - has left him brokenhearted. Jeremiah see’s the violence, idolatry, environmental calamity, devotion to power, dishonesty and spiritual emptiness of God’s people. All contradict the nature of Jeremiah’s beloved Creator, Yahweh’s, whose steadfast work in the Torah was lifeblood for his faith.

Jeremiah’s love for God and for others, precluded turning a blind eye. Jeremiahs intellectual and biblical integrity demanded that the truths of his reality shall not be ignored. This theological consciousness was a Holy

blessing, and at times crushing burden for him. His was a Holy-moral injury, from which his lamentations poured forth like unfailing waters.

I did not sit in the company of merry makers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? - Jeremiah 15:17-18

In Jeremiah's diary we discover his theodicy. A person's theodicy is their exploration of the reality that in spite of God's goodness and omnipotence, evil exists. In Jeremiah's theodicy, his struggles are laid bare. We plainly see his humanity. In his outpouring we absorb his weakness, his fragility, his vulnerability. And consequently, Jeremiah guides us into a very uncomfortable place.

One theologian comments:

Jeremiah's lament reveals that prophetic ministry is both a difficult task and a divine gift - the burden of bearing God's word and the blessing of proclaiming God's redemption. Jeremiah (first) describes the agony of prophetic life and tasks. Jeremiah (then) describes a special bliss in consolation with God. – Stephen B Reid.

Now I want to be clear; Jeremiah was not attempting to identify the root of evil, to minimize the horrific wickedness of this life, nor was he looking to justify the horrendous suffering of creation. In our scripture the prophet Jeremiah was addressing a very particular situation: the blessing-burdens which fill the hearts of compassionate believers who follow the way of God in Jesus Christ.

Specifically, Jeremiah's lament emerged from a broken moment, one where he could not see the end game of Resurrection. In his struggle to cling to hope, his faith falters in the goodness of our Creator. He boldly mused the lie that the pain of blessing-burdens are incurable injuries which cannot be healed.

But the ever-present triune God whispers to us anyway:

"I will deliver you out of the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. For I am with you to save you and deliver you."

My wife Amanda is a public health nurse with the city of Appleton. It is her calling. I asked her the other day what blessing-burdens she carries and she shared this:

I have the blessing that my faith and my work are one, they are the same thing. I am called to help people with less resources, education and often who have had terribly hurtful things happen to them. I have the blessing of caring for new mothers and infants who are important and beautiful. I carry their burdens with me like the fact that many are immigrants and went into hiding out of fear of being deported and aren't receiving the kind of prenatal support they need, or the fact that they lack basic needs when we all have so very much. I have these blessing-burdens because of my faith, and they are very important to me. – Amanda Hatch

I wonder what blessing-burden you might bring to the table, head in hands, like the great prophet Jeremiah?

Do we feel called to remain devoted to our Suffering Servant in both good times and bad?

Will you journey to the uncomfortable places which your fellow prophets and saints invite you?

Under our Congregation's cross, I hope you will answer yes to these invitations. Like Jeremiah and the saints that have labored before us, First Congregational's prophetic ministry is both a difficult task and a divine gift, it's the burden of bearing God's word and the blessing of proclaiming God's redemption. It's the agony of prophetic life and tasks and a holy special bliss in consolation with God in Jesus Christ.

So, bring your earnest questions. Bring your compassionate insights. Come on your good days and bad days. Offer your true selves: for we welcome truth, diversity, inclusion, scientific insight, intellectual and biblical integrity, and all the divine multiplicities of calling associated with our still speaking God.

Friends, hear the Good News: "Yahweh will exalt, the Lord is raised up." Jesus cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

And if your theodicy is rather depleted and in need of a boost, I hear it's only two weeks until our next sheet cake.

Glory to God in the highest.

Amen.