

“Living on the Edge”
 Jeremiah 4:19-28, 26:13-19a
 1 Timothy 1:12-17
 Rev. David Hutchinson
 Sunday, September 15, 2019

When I say the phrase: “Living on the Edge” - -

- - does anything come to mind for you?

There are a number of ways I can think of - - that would qualify.

Geographically - - economically - - emotionally... on the edge...

Most of these are - - basically - - bad.

Or difficult - - or challenging...

But this morning - - Jeremiah suggests to me a way - - that - - it could be a good thing - - to live on the edge - - for a while. / There may be a way for life - - on the edge - - to move us closer to the center of God’s heart...

At least that’s my hypothesis - - as I read the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.

But before we get to - - if it is good or bad - - let’s just take a minute.

Let’s think about life on the edge for a bit.

Life on the edge...

What is it like?

In a chapter of her book called “Where I Am” - - Kathleen Norris describes life in a small town in South Dakota. / She writes, “Where I am - - is America’s outback. The grasslands. Where I am - - is a town of 1,600 people that is by far the LARGEST town in northwestern South Dakota”.

“Where I am” - - she writes - - “is a marginal place”.

A marginal place.

A marginal place that is at the very CENTER - - of North America.

It is roughly 1500 miles from the Atlantic AND the Pacific Oceans.

It is in the center - - between the Gulf of Mexico and the Arctic.

It is a land of EXTREMES:

It holds the absolute temperature range record for the Western hemisphere.

Set in 1936 – when the temperature registered 60 degrees below zero...

AND... 121 above in the SAME year - - and in the SAME TOWN!

According to her - - the most important thing in a small desert town - - is caring.

The caring of people around you - - is all there is.

And can SAVE you from - - literally - - death.

Survival.

So what is at the CENTER of OUR lives?

And what is it like to live - - on the edge?

These are my questions - - as I look at the reading for today - - from Jeremiah.

There is more than ONE kind of - - living on the edge...

There is living on the edge of your SANITY.

A life filled with stress and chaos...

There is pushing the limits to the EDGE.

A snowboarder on a cliff - - taking drugs - - pushing the limits...

There is a parent feeling trapped by a child...

A child feeling trapped by a parent...

There is being trapped by - - a job - - or a calendar out of control...

AND then - - there is living on the edge of society...

Living on the edge of society is about the margins of POWER.

Living on the edge - - and in poverty.

Unable to make ends meet.

All of these can be an enormous challenge.

AND probably - - at least SOME of us - - have experienced one or two of them.

Well - - with these examples in mind - - let's turn to the scripture readings.

1 Timothy is a memory.

Timothy remembers Paul's conversion.

It looks back to that time when Paul saw a light on the road to Damascus.

Paul's conversion changed his life completely. / He went from persecuting the followers of Jesus - - to BEING a follower of the WAY. / These are the words of Paul as they are recorded in this letter:

“Even though - - formerly I blasphemed and persecuted - - I received mercy. / I received mercy FOR THIS reason - - SO THAT - - in me, Jesus Christ might show his PATIENCE - - for those who - - TURN their LIVES over to him.”

A man named Robert Mulholland Jr. has written about this.

He wrote:

“Paul was the kind of religious fanatic - - with which - - the world has been abundantly cursed. / His heart burned for God. / Heresy had arisen and HE would STAMP it OUT. / Surely - - he thought - - surely HE was at the CENTER of God's will.”

He thought he was NOT like those heretics who abandoned God to follow Jesus.

He believed he was at the CENTER of God's will.

But as he approached the city he heard God's voice in a NEW way:

“Saul - - why do you PERSECUTE me!?”

Saul came face to face with the fact: he was NOT at the CENTER of God's will.

God - - was at the MARGINS!

God was with those detested heretic - - followers of Jesus!

God was - - living on the EDGE!

And this moment - - RE-CENTERED - - Paul's life.

His understanding of God - - changed.

Living on the edge - - became - - a WAY - - TO GOD - - NOT away from God.

And maybe like Paul - - we can learn - - that we have to get out of God's way.

Live on the edge for a while, and wait.

Let God be the center.

Saul was persecuting OTHERS - - and God wanted Paul to look at himself first.

Jeremiah wanted a similar thing for the people of Israel.

In the reading from the Old Testament this morning - - Jeremiah describes Israel DESTROYED. / It is a prophecy of the coming exile: armies capturing people.

BUT - - it has NOT happened YET!

It's like watching the weather channel last week.

There really WAS a hurricane coming.

But no one knew WHERE.

And it hadn't destroyed Florida - - YET.

But it WOULD hit SOMEWHERE.

If a prophet says: the future looks BLEAK - - what do you do?

Do you prepare?

Or do you ignore?

People in the Bahamas could tell you an answer.

Warnings - - are to get us to PREPARE.

But - - they are NOT - - foregone conclusions.

No one knows HOW MANY people will die - - nor where.

But NOT paying attention - - and not preparing - - doesn't save lives.

Oh sure - - you might escape this time.

But the point is - - storms happen.

And then they happen - - again.

And the hope is - - in hearing the warnings - - and preparing.

Jeremiah's bleak picture of the future - - holds out a GLIMMER of HOPE.

Jeremiah says: the future looks bleak - - BUT - -

The future looks bleak - - but it is bleaker still if we ignore GOD!

Israel will NOT be completely destroyed.

There is a chance for the future.

Jeremiah's DOOMSDAY prophecy - - is also - - a HOPE.

In chapter 26 Jeremiah describes a time when people LISTENED to God.

There was a time - - when people tried to change.

And Jeremiah hopes to inspire people - - to keep trying.

Keep trying - - to change - - for the better.

WHICH happens - - when we realize that God - - IS on the edge with us.

Living on the edge - - happens. / But God is there with us.

That is the hope in the prophet Jeremiah:

Jeremiah has been called, “Prophet of DOOM, prophet of HOPE”

In Jeremiah - - DOOM and HOPE go together.

Doom - - is Jeremiah’s TRUTH telling - - wake up call.

And what we learn is that not listening to the truth - - doesn’t make it false.

Sometimes life is a little - - on the edge.

But God is there.

In a chapter called, “The Dark Side of Hope” a priest and poet named Dennis Billy calls our attention to a shop named, “The Truth Shop”.

“I could hardly believe my eyes:

The name of the shop was, “The TRUTH Shop”

The saleswoman was very polite:

‘What type of truth do you wish to purchase, partial, or whole?’

‘The whole truth, of course. No deceptions for me, no defense, no rationalizations.’ I wanted my truth plain and unadulterated.

She waved me to the other side of the store.

A salesman there pointed out the PRICE tag.

‘The price is very high, sir.’ he said.

‘What is it?’ I asked, determined to get the whole truth.

No matter what it cost.

The price is, ‘Your security sir’, he answered.

And so I had a heavy heart.

I still wanted my safety. / And my unquestioned beliefs.

Maybe - - when we read the Old Testament prophets - - the EDGE we live on is the edge of truth. / What we learn is that - - safety has a cost.

And part of the problem is that life is not always safe and easy.

And that's the truth.

But if we live on that edge - - the edge of truth - - God will be with us.

It's amazing what you can find - - on the edge of life.

Sometimes - - life itself.