

Planting Trees You'll Never See Grow

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[0 : 00] Good morning, my name is Anthony. I get to serve as one of the pastors here, and we are in a series on the book and the prophet Jeremiah.!

I'm not going to have anything to do with anything you've ever put your fingerprints on. You are an evil, Satan-filled person.

I absolutely don't know you. I'm glad I helped you move away. You're going to destroy the church as to what it ever was, and I hope you're proud of that. You need to read your scripture, Anthony. You need to learn your history. You think you're the damn smartest person in the world, and you're not. And believe me, bud, if you were standing here, I would be in your face telling you this. You have no idea what we're doing here, but you have single-handedly destroyed the church. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. But God will be your judge. Jesus threw shit in the temple when people were destroying his father's house, too.

And that's what I'm doing. I don't care. I'm not going to be judged by you. I'm done. I'm not going to have a decent conversation with you. I don't know who you are, but you are sick. Now, I wrestled with this for, you know, about five and a half years about whether or not to share this with you.

[1 : 28] But I think it's important that you all hear it, and not just for shock value, and not totally just so you feel bad for me.

But I think it illustrates something that many of you, many of us have experienced, which is the cost of trying to do the right thing.

The man who left that voicemail was someone I coached and mentored and pastored for 10 years. He was on the interview team that hired me at my last church.

He drove the moving truck to help me and my family move here. We had real relationship, years of real relationship. And then white Christian nationalism got its hooks in him.

And so that meant 10 years, a decade of relationship and phone calls and meals and late night conversations about faith and family. And that's where we landed. You're an evil Satan-filled person, he said in a voicemail that he was so brave enough to leave in the middle of the night.

[2 : 38] From someone I had loved, from someone who had helped me carry my furniture. Now I share this because I know many of you have your own version of a voicemail like this.

Maybe not a voicemail, but maybe it was a text or a conversation at Thanksgiving, or a Facebook message from a parent, or an email from a sibling, a friend who just stopped calling, who was concerned for your soul or your salvation.

And all you were trying to do is try to live with integrity. You tried to follow Jesus the best that you knew how. And the people you thought would be beside you turned on you.

And when that happens enough times, you start to ask a very reasonable question. Is any of this worth it? Is any of it worth it?

Is it worth the cost? Is ministry, in a position like mine, worth the pain? Is showing up again and again, Okechi, is it worth showing up in a world that seems to be falling apart?

[3 : 46] Is that a good use of your life? And it's not just a pastor question, it's a human question. It's a question you ask whether you've been organizing for justice for years and policies get worse, or when you've been showing up to your local school board meetings and book bans keep coming, or when you pour yourself into a community or a small group and the community fractures and falls apart.

You invest in people and the people leave. When you plant and you plant and you plant and you never get to eat the fruit. Is any of it worth it?

So I want to reintroduce us to the man we've been studying who asked that same question 2,600 years ago.

Jeremiah, the prophet who failed. Now Jeremiah is important and he's also tragic. He was called by God as a young man, probably about 12 years old, to be a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah.

And his message was simple and consistent for over two decades. Stop worshiping false gods. Stop making alliances with empires that will betray you and stop exploiting the poor.

[5 : 03] Stop pretending that the temple, your religious establishment, is going to magically protect you from the consequences of your injustice. And the tragedy is that nobody listened.

So we're going to read Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 1 through 7. And this is Jeremiah looking back at his career. So you can join me in your Bibles or on your devices.

A couple of the verses will be on the screen. But if you want the whole thing, you can join me in Jeremiah chapter 25. The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, of Judah, that was the first year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to all the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, quote, verse 3, for 23 years, from the 13th year of King Josiah to the son of Ammon of Judah to this day, for 23 years the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently.

I have spoken persistently to you. One translator says, I have spoken early and constantly, but you have not listened. And though the Lord persistently, early and constantly, since you all his servants, the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear.

When they said, Turn now every one of you from your evil way and the wicked doings, when the prophet said, and you can remain in the land that Adonai has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever, do not go after gods to serve and worship them.

[6 : 54] Do not provoke Adonai to anger with the work of your hands. Then Adonai will do you no harm yet. Verse 7, You did not listen to me, says Adonai. And so you have provoked God to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. 23 years Jeremiah preached. 23 years Jeremiah showed up from the age of 12 on to his death.

23 years of preaching the same message. 23 years of being ignored and mocked and imprisoned and threatened with death. And at the end of the 23 years, the verdict is in.

Jeremiah has seen the evidence. You didn't listen. And Jeremiah didn't fail because he wasn't eloquent. He didn't fail because he wasn't faithful. He didn't fail because he wasn't persistent. He was all of those things. He failed because the people refused to hear him. And everything he had warned about and everything about the prophets had warned about before him had come true.

[8 : 02] Babylon came and Jerusalem burned and the temple was taken apart brick by brick and the people were carried off. And the very worst case scenario Jeremiah had been screaming about for a generation happened.

By every measurable standard, Jeremiah's ministry was a failure. And I want to take you to an earlier moment in Jeremiah's ministry that's also devastating.

So Pastor Tanetta introduced us to this in Jeremiah chapter 7, the sermon at the gate or the sermon at the temple. God tells Jeremiah to go and stand at the gate of the temple and preach. And what God tells him to say is bone chilling. So flipping back in Jeremiah to chapter 7, I'm going to reread a portion that we've read a couple weeks ago and then go a little bit further.

So this is Jeremiah 7 verses 1 through 15. So the word that came to Jeremiah came from Adonai. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, proclaim there this word and say, hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

[9 : 12] Thus says Adonai of hosts, the God of Israel, amend your ways and your doings and let me dwell with you in this place. That's God's initial cry to his people.

Let me be with you. Don't trust in that receptive chant. And I love, like you can just hear the tauntingness in this. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, which is this chant that the people would say as a sort of claim of like, we're safe, nothing bad can happen to us.

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the stranger and the orphan and the widow or shed innocent blood, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will be with you.

I will dwell with you in this place in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever. Verse eight, but here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

You will steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely and make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known. And then you come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, we are safe.

[10:34] Only to go on doing these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, now become a den of robbers in your sight?

I too am watching, says Adonai. So this is the new part. We haven't read this part out loud. Verse 12, God continues, go, go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first. So, some background. If you read through Deuteronomy, you will see this recurring theme of the place where the Lord will cause their name to dwell. And from the perspective of the person who's compiling or editing together Deuteronomy, they are thinking about the temple, the temple mount in Jerusalem.

But, there was a place before the temple mount in Jerusalem where God caused their name to dwell, which is this sort of technical priestly language for cultic worship, the place where you could find the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord.

And the first place is in a place called Shiloh. It's a little bit northwest of Jerusalem. And if you read through Samuel and Kings, you'll see that the tabernacle, this sort of nexus of God's divine energy and action, first rests in Shiloh.

[11:53] So, God says, go to that place, go to Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things as the Lord, and when I spoke to you early and constantly, persistently, you did not listen.

When I called you, you did not answer. Therefore, I will do to the house that is called by my name in which you trust, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh, I will cast you out of my sight just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

So, Shiloh, before Jerusalem, had been the place where the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant rested. It was the place where God made his name, his glory, to dwell.

It was the holiest place on earth for the Hebrew people, and it was wiped off the map. The Philistines had come and demolished it sometime in the 11th century BCE.

And so, by Jeremiah's time, if you were to go and stand there as Jeremiah did, it would be nothing but weeds and ruins, a graveyard of a former holy site.

[13:09] So, God then tells Jeremiah, stand at the temple in Jerusalem, the temple that everyone believed was indestructible, protected by God's own presence, and say, go and look at what happened to Shiloh.

You think I can't do the same thing here? If Shiloh can be destroyed, so can Jerusalem. So, Jeremiah's message is, people of God, you go, and you kill, and you murder, and you take from the innocent, and you oppress the stranger, and yet you think your religion, and your churches, and your buildings, and your religiosity will somehow save you despite your evil actions.

Please, Jeremiah says, for the love of God, literally, stop. So, imagine being Jeremiah. Imagine standing in the most sacred space in your entire religious tradition and telling people that God will burn it down, that their certainty in their religion is misplaced, their confidence in the institution is idolatry.

Imagine the voicemails Jeremiah got. Actually, we know what happened. They tried to kill him. The priests and the prophets and the people seized Jeremiah and said, you shall die.

That's Jeremiah 26. The religious establishment turns on him, this little boy from 12 years old called to be a prophet to God. And by the time he's a grown man, 23 years of faithful ministry, they turn on him.

[14:39] His own family plots against him. So, the question I think Jeremiah forces us to ask, forces me to ask, it's the same question that my former friend's voicemail forces me to ask.

It's the same question that many of us are living with right now. If doing the right thing doesn't produce the right results, is it still worth doing?

If preaching justice doesn't produce a just society, should you still keep preaching? If loving people doesn't stop people from hating you, should you still keep loving?

And if showing up doesn't seem to make much of a difference, should you still keep showing up?
Martin Luther King Jr.

named this temptation precisely in a sermon that he gave near the end of his life, the sermon that actually inspired his monument about moving that mountain.

[15 : 47] A life that, by the way, ended in assassination, Martin Luther King said this, he said, we have adopted a sort of pragmatic test for right and wrong. Whatever works is right.

If it works, it's all right. Nothing is wrong but that which does not work. And we've all been forced to internalize this sort of pragmatic test.

We live in a culture that measures everything by outcomes, metrics. How many of you have to keep track of KPIs? Yeah? Look at those hands. Never seen so many hands, Antonio.

Yeah. KPIs and growth charts and quarterly reports. Did it work? Did the numbers go up? Did you win? Is it up and to the right?

And somewhere along the way, we started applying that same logic to our moral lives, to our faith, to our commitments to justice, to worship.

[16 : 44] If it's working, it must be right. If it's not working, well, maybe we should try something else. Or maybe we just got to give up. And Reverend King rejected that.

Listen to what he says next. Notice that he's not speaking from a place of optimism, detached optimism. He's speaking as a man who knows what failure tastes like. To continue the quote, he says, I do not give you this element of faith and superficial optimism.

I do not stand here as a detached spectator. I speak as one who lives every day amidst the threat of death. I speak as one who has been battered often by the jostling winds of adversity.

But, he says, I have faith in the future. He does not have a naive hope. It's a battle-tested hope.

This is hope that has been through the fire and still holds.

And not because of all the evidence that it points in the right direction, but because King believed that the rightness of the cause did not depend on whether the cause was winning.

[17 : 48] The rightness of the cause did not depend on whether the cause was winning. You don't choose what is true based on what is successful. You choose it because it's true and then you keep going.

He ends his sermon with that quote, If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But all means keep moving.

The writer and pastor Eugene Peterson borrowed a phrase from, of all people, Frederick Nietzsche, the nihilist philosopher, and turned it actually into a vision of the spiritual life a long obedience in the same direction.

And Peterson and Nietzsche contrasted this with not a short burst of enthusiasm, New Year's resolutions, how's those going, everybody? Not a sprint of activism that burns out in a year or a quarter.

Not a faith that only holds on when things are going well, but a long, sustained, patient ferment, sometimes agonizing commitment to walking in the same direction.

[18 : 59] Day after day, whether you can see the destination or not. And this is where we have to be really honest about something. A long obedience in the same direction only works if it's tethered to something other than results.

because if my obedience depends on success, it's not really obedience, it's just strategy. If my faithfulness depends on outcomes and KPIs, it's not really faithfulness, it's just investment, hoping for an ROI.

A long obedience in the same direction has to be tied to whether the thing is true and right and good full stop, not whether it's working. Now, I want to say this clearly.

I think many of us, I know myself, I've been shaped by a prosperity gospel, whether I realize it or not, that if I push the right button, click the right wheel, that I can get God on my side and my input is destined to have the best output.

But not even Jesus saw success in his lifetime. Think about it, Jesus, the most complete, most faithful, most perfectly aligned with God human who ever lived and what happened to him?

[20 : 23] Forget the resurrection for a second, okay? What happened to him? He was betrayed by some of his closest friends, abandoned by nearly all of his disciples, denied by his best friend Peter, executed by the state, dead on a Roman cross, a symbol of imperial domination and shame, and by every measurable standard of his day, and honestly, by ours, Jesus was a failure, a failed Messiah.

The people expected a king who overthrew Rome, and instead, they got a crucified stonemason. If Jesus' faithfulness did not produce immediate, visible success, why would I expect mine to? No, yes, obviously, there's resurrection, and the resurrection changes everything. We'll get to that in April, but I want to sit in that space before the resurrection for a moment.

The name of the series is about those Saturday moments, because it's where most of us live most of the time. We live in the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

We live in the space where the faithful thing has been done and the results aren't in yet. Where the right thing has been said and nobody's listening. Where the seed is in the ground and you can't see a damn thing growing.

[21 : 47] And the question is whether we can keep going in that Saturday space. I quoted this poem back in December in our Advent series, but it's too good and you all attend so irregularly for it not to be said again.

Brazilian liberation theologian Ruben Alves wrote a poem that I think captures this better than anything I could say. He says, suffering and hope must live from each other. Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair.

And hope without suffering creates illusions, naivete, and drunkenness. It's not just suffering without hope that's dangerous, which it is.

It produces that resentment and despair. It's also hope without suffering. Ah, joy is my resistance.

Well, if joy is your only resistance, then you're not doing it right, all right?

Hope without suffering is dangerous. Hope that costs you nothing is just naive optimism. It's a bumper sticker. It's a motivational poster in a dentist's office. Real hope, the kind that sustains a 23-year-long ministry or a 50-year-long marriage or a 75-year-long life in this country at this time, the kind that keeps you marching after the dogs and the fire hoses, the kind that keeps you at the table after the voicemail.

[23 : 19] Real hope has scars. The poem continues. So let us plant dates, the plant, the fruit.

Even though we who plant them will never eat them, we must live by the love of what we will never see. It takes a date anywhere between six or eight years that long to produce fruit.

Others take longer. And in the ancient world, when your life expectancy was like 30, planting a date was an act of profound faith. You were planting for the next generation.

Maybe you'll get to see the tree grow tall, but you might not live long enough to taste the fruit. And Alves says, plant them anyway. He continues, such disciplined hope is what has given us prophets and revolutionaries and saints the courage to die for the future that they envision.

They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hopes. That's the prophet Jeremiah. That's Dr. King.

[24 : 35] That's Jesus. People who planted themselves, their lives in the soil of truth and justice knowing that they might not live to see the harvest. And they did it anyway.

Not because that they were guaranteed success, but because the planting itself was faithful. The way that Jesus actually describes the kingdom of God is not as a conquering army it's not a fortune 500 company with a great five-year plan.

Jesus never described the kingdom as a viral movement or a political takeover. Instead, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field. And even though it's small when it's grown, it's the greatest of the shrubs becomes a tree so that the birds of the air can make a nest.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that someone took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened with the yeast. The kingdom of God is small.

It's hidden. It's underground. It's secret. It doesn't look impressive. You can't put it in a dashboard. You can't track its growth with analytics. A mustard seed is so small you can barely see it in your hand.

[25 : 47] Very funny aside, we once posted some photos in my old church of all the different Jesus' parables of the kingdom. and we tried to post a photo of two fingers holding a mustard seed, this little tiny seed and everyone who passed by it thought it looked like butt cheeks because the scale was all wrong.

You couldn't tell it was fingers. They're like, why did you post that? Great conversation starter in church. A mustard seed is so small you can barely see it in your hand.

Yeast is invisible once it's mixed into the dough and yet Jesus says this is what the kingdom looks like. Something so small you'd miss it if you weren't paying attention. Something working beneath the surface where nobody can see.

The kingdom does not look like winning. It looks like planting. I preached this about this a few years ago and I said something that I still believe now.

A mustard seed kingdom is subversive, underground, and foundation cracking. It's grassroots, bottom up, not top down. It's God refusing to coerce anyone into the kingdom but working slowly and secretly and persistently from below.

[27 : 03] And I think part of the disorientation so many of us feel right now is that we keep hoping for a tsunami. We want the big wave of justice that sets everything right all at once.

It's why I log into threads and Instagram and try to scroll to the bottom that doesn't exist to see if something finally good has happened. But Jesus never promised a tsunami.

He promised a seed. And seeds take time and seeds work underground and you can't always see what they're doing. A long obedience in the same direction is the willingness to say, even if I can't see the yeast, I will still need the dough.

And even if I can't see the mustard seed, I will still water the soil. And even when the results aren't in, I will still show up. Now, many of us in our bodies, we are tired and we are angry and we are grieving.

We are watching American democracy fracture in real time and you're wondering if anything you do matters. You're watching people raise up the cross and the Bible and use both to kill and hurt and maim people.

[28 : 15] You're watching churches abandon the inclusive liberating good news of Jesus for the false gospel of white Christian nationalism and you're wondering if there's any point in staying.

So, a few questions for the week. What is the work that I want to commit myself to, even if I never see it succeed?

What's the thing? Maybe it's racial justice, maybe it's queer liberation, maybe it's your neighborhood or your family, maybe it's a vocation that the world doesn't value.

What's that date palm that you're willing to plant knowing that you will never eat the fruit? Question two, are there places where I have let success metrics define my faithfulness?

Have I unconsciously adopted the pragmatic test that Dr. King warned us about where I have confused what works with what is right? Because those are very different things.

[29 : 22] Jeremiah's message was right for 23 years, but it never worked, not once. And who are my people along the way with me, also walking a long distance in the same direction?

Because it's not a solo act. Jeremiah had Baruch, Dr. King had the movement and SNCC, Jesus had the women who stayed at the cross when everyone else ran.

You need people who are walking the same road who will remind you why you started when you forget. And that's what the church is for, that's what this room is.

We're not here because we figured it out, we're here because we've decided a direction that we believe is right, and we're willing to keep walking it together. So, I got a voicemail that told me I'm evil, that I destroyed the church, I should read my Bible and learn my history.

And I thought about that voicemail a lot over the years and here's what I've decided. I'm going to keep planting dates. I'm going to keep kneading the dough, trusting the yeast I cannot see.

[30 : 37] I'm going to keep walking in the same direction, the direction of the liberative, justice-oriented, extravagant, boundary-breaking, enemy-loving good news of Jesus.

Not because it's working, but because it's true. And when I can't fly, I'll run, and I'll walk, and I'll crawl, and by all means, with your help, I will keep moving.
moving.