

In the midst of our Scripture lesson this morning, Jeremiah has been complaining to the Lord about the hardships of being a prophet; the people refuse to listen to his warnings and those who oppose his message are plotting evil against him. But in Jeremiah 12:5, Jeremiah hears the Lord asking him an interesting question; God says: "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" In other words, if you think things are tough now Jeremiah, just you wait; they are going to get worse before they get better. If you are having a hard time coping now, how are you going to cope later? What you are looking at now Jeremiah is just the beginning of troubles to come.

We read something very similar from Jesus in Luke 23:27-31 on His way to the cross. Luke tells us, "A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then ""they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" ' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" In other words, if they can set green trees on fire, how much better will the dry ones burn!

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?" "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

We see some things happening in our world today that were inconceivable just a few short years ago. Almost nobody thought it possible that a handful of terrorists were capable of bringing down both massive towers of the World Trade Center in New York City in just one hour and 45 minutes.

In January 1991 the average price of a gallon of regular gasoline in the United States was \$1.19; in January 2000, nine years later, the average price of a gallon of gas was \$1.27, an increase of 8 cents in nine years. The average price of a gallon of regular gasoline in January of 2008 was \$3.11, an increase of \$1.84 per gallon in just eight years. Almost no one would have

believed that that could happen. If someone would have told us ten years ago that by July of 2007 the United States of America would be in debt to Japan to the tune of over 600 billion dollars, to the People's Republic of China over 400 billion dollars, and would owe Arab exporters of oil over 100 billion dollars, we would have thought they were out of their minds; and, we owe even more than that today. Ron Paul, who tried unsuccessfully to gain the Republican nomination for President this year, says that we actually owe China two and half trillion dollars. At the rate we are going, we are likely to lose our freedom without anyone ever firing a shot. Keep going in this direction and it won't be long until all the land we live on and count on for food and all the companies we work for will be owned by foreign nations. Case in point, Toyota sold more cars worldwide than GM in 2007.

I think a lot of what has happened is due to a false sense of American superiority. We have thought that we are richer and stronger and smarter than anyone else in the world and that we can throw our weight around whenever we want and get whatever we want whenever we want it. But the guys who planned the demise of the World Trade Center are smarter than we thought. And, it was not just about blowing up those buildings and killing a lot of people. Bin Ladin's plan has always been to bring down the West in general, and America in particular, by destroying its economy. The Trade Center towers were just the first two dominoes in a long chain of other dominoes to follow. And, it plays right into his hand that our politicians are corrupt and that the movers and shakers on Wall Street are greedy and vice versa. I think you know me well enough to know that I am not an alarmist; nor do I usually put much stock in conspiracy theories, but I'm pretty sure all of this stuff is interconnected and is going very much as the evil one has planned it. But who could have imagined all of this even 10 short years ago?

And, almost everyone from my generation down, has grown up believing that nothing like the Great Depression of the 1930's could ever happen again. In fact, we were told and taught in school that safeguards were built into the system to guarantee this. But after what happened to the stock market over the last two weeks, nobody is very sure of that any more. The whole economy of the world is teetering on the edge of collapse. If it doesn't fall, many books will be written in the future to explain

how it almost did and why it didn't. For now, the verdict is still out.

Now, why am I telling you all this, and what does it have to do with following Jesus Christ? The point is that up to now, the present moment included, we have been and are doing all right. Life is generally good. We still have the freedom to meet together like this to worship God. We have clothes on our backs and food in our bellies. We have roofs over our heads. We can go out to eat and take vacations and buy things at Walmart prices. We have access to good healthcare. So far, we are relatively safe from violence. But, despite all the freedoms we have and the wealth and other privileges that are ours, most of us will confess that we are not where we ought to be spiritually. We talk about our struggles to be faithful in our personal devotions, we complain about how hard it is to read and understand the Bible, or to spend any significant time in prayer. We confess our impotency in leading others to Christ. We are ashamed of how little we give to help the poor or to promote world missions. Some of us say that we would like to be more faithful in attending church and Sunday School, or that we would like to be a part of a Bible Study if we could only find the time.

What do you think God thinks about our excuses? I think He might say something like this: "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?" "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" "If you can't stand up for Me now, when things are relatively easy for you, how are you ever going to stand up for me when your life gets really hard? Given the mess we seem to be in as a nation right now, I don't know what to expect from the future, but my gut tells me that life isn't likely to get any easier and it might get a lot harder. What should we be doing to prepare ourselves spiritually for this uncertain future? Several things come to mind.

The first word is directed to anyone who may be sitting on the fence. If anyone here today has been holding back from making a complete dedication of his or her life to Jesus Christ, it's time to surrender. If anyone thinks that he or she can navigate the future without knowing Christ as Savior and following Him as Lord, I believe that person is badly deluded. If you've been holding on to some sins more tightly than you've been holding on to Christ, it's time to turn that around. It's time to repent, to

change your mind, and to ask Jesus Christ to come into your life to forgive and cleanse you from sin. It's time to acknowledge Him as King and put Him in charge of your future and to commit yourself to obey Him in the day-to-day operation of your life. This is a great time to get serious about a real commitment to Jesus Christ. Get off the fence and get serious about being His disciple.

The second word I have this morning is for anyone here who has received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; but who is, nevertheless, keeping the Family of God at arm's length. In other words, you are a believer but you are trying to make it as a Lone Ranger believer; you come to church but you stay on the fringes of the fellowship. You are not involved in Sunday School, Bible Studies, Prayer Groups, or in any other way actively seeking to go deeper in your relationship with Christ and with His people. You are not currently discovering or using your gifts and talents to further the work of God's church. It's time to change your mind and rearrange your priorities. We need you to be on board with us 100% and you need this also. These days in which we are living and the future we are being thrust into will demand us to be dedicated disciples not dabblers. It's time to be serious about following Christ. We need to be thoroughly dedicated to Him and to one another if our souls are to survive in the strange new world that is presently and rapidly unfolding before our eyes.

The third word is to those of us who are already thoroughly invested in following Christ. It's time for us too to take it up a notch. We first need to seek the Lord and lay our fears at His feet and trust Him for the future. He has promised to be with anyone who is committed to being with Him. He says, "I will never leave you or forsake you." He says, "I am able to supply all your needs in Christ Jesus your Lord." It's time to search the Scriptures, pray, and to reach out to others with new urgency. Current events offer us a window of opportunity. A lot of people these days are bewildered and afraid. They are searching for answers as to why we are in the mess we're in and how they are going to survive into the future. We who know Christ need to be vigilant to see the fear in the eyes of the people around us. We need to be bold about asking them about and challenging them to consider the state of their souls. We need to see and take advantage of opportunities to share the promises of Christ.

The fourth and final word I have for all of us today is that now is the time for us to declare Who we are going to live for and Who and what we are willing to die for. Many Christians around the world are putting their lives on the line everyday for Christ. Christians in many Moslem countries and Christians in many communist countries are persecuted, tortured, and put to death for such subversive activities as reading the Bible, meeting together for worship or refusing to bow to the statues of their national leaders who demand for themselves god-like worship. North Korea's leaders, for example, demand total worship. People cannot pass statues of these leaders without bowing unless they want to be accused of treason and face severe punishment. You have heard of Darfur but you may not know that most of the people who have been killed and are still being killed there are being killed because they are Christians or at least non-Moslems.

If you think it's hard to be a Christian now, try to imagine what it would be like or will be like if and when the anti-God forces in America take over our nation. Try to imagine what it would be like or will be like if and when we fall to the militant Islamists whose fondest dream is "death to America." Try to imagine life in America under Chinese rule. You say, "impossible! These things could never happen here!" If the events of the past 10 years teach us anything, they teach us not to be too sure. We need to be prepared for anything and to decide ahead of time that our real and true life is found in Christ. We will live for Him and if necessary we will suffer and die for Him. It's time to get serious about our faith for these are serious times.

"If we race against men on foot and they wear us out, how can we compete when they come with horses?" "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" If we aren't willing to stand for Christ and serve Christ now, when it's relatively easy, how are we going to stand for Him when times are hard?

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110
4thstcog@pennswoods.net

Sermon for October 12, 2008

Spiritual Training for Tough Times
Jeremiah 11:9-12:5

Jon R. Neely, Pastor