

Jeremiah 1:4-8

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’

Jeremiah 1:14-19

Then the Lord said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgements against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.

A Tipping Point? Rev. Ray Miller November 16, 2008

What a great country we live in – the United States of America. Don’t you agree? I mean, this is a land to which people from other nations have come and many people still long to come, because of the promise they see here. There have been people coming from every nationality, every ethnicity, every race on the face of the earth, so much so that we have been known, unlike any other nation on the face of the earth, as a melting pot. I am proud to be an American. And there is so much diversity, so many blessings in our land. Immense wealth. Unbelievable beauty. So many gifts. When my late wife and I decided to move to Fort Collins, I wanted to move to a place where there was a university, with all the athletic and cultural lessons that come from that. One of the first things we did, even before we moved here, was to buy season tickets to the CSU Rams football games. And we have had those ever since. Yay, yesterday! Yay, next Saturday! Well, we hope. I wanted to live where we could go to major college athletic events and music events and all the rest of it. What a blessing to discover something that I didn’t know was going to be a blessing, because, you see, one of the favorite moments at football games, regardless of whether you win or lose comes just before the game begins, when the band ends their pre-game show by playing “America the Beautiful.” Wow. You know, that was inspired by a woman who went up to the top of Pike’s Peak and looked out and saw the majesty of the mountains and the fruited plains. Whenever the band plays that, and they always start off softly, and then as they form themselves into one single line and they come moving –

I sit on the west side, and that's where the move – the volume increases, and it just sends shivers up and down my spine.

“America the Beautiful” – I want us to sing that. Let's see if you can do as well as the CSU band. One verse, it's up there on the screen..... Pretty good, maybe we can all go and join the band next fall.

On Tuesday of this week, we observe Veterans' Day. When I was a kid, it was called Armistice Day because it was giving honor to those who had fought in World War I, and then after a few more wars, it was changed to Veterans' Day, I don't know just when. It was a time to remember and give thanks for all of those men and women who have served in the armed forces of our country. Men and women who gave, sacrificed part of their lives and in some cases made the ultimate sacrifice. I want to invite anybody who has been in the armed forces, or currently is, to stand, and I want you to stay standing. Quickly now, stand up. (Applause). Now, don't sit down. In appreciation for your service, we're going to sing another song, a song that unites us in our country: “God Bless America.”

What has all of this sacrifice that has been made over the decades been about? Freedom. But freedom is always freedom from something, and freedom for something. Freedom from tyranny, and oppression, and slavery. Freedom for? I believe that it is freedom to fulfill the destiny to which God has called us as a people. That destiny is best spoken, for me, by the words inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores, send them, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” That's who we were. That is the destiny of America as I see it. But today, when we lift up our eyes to see, as Jeremiah was told to lift up his eyes and to see the nations of his time, what do we see? Financial meltdown. Athletes and entertainers paid salaries in the millions. CEOs who are paid obscene salaries, and who, when they lead their companies into failure, are given huge golden parachutes while there are millions of people in our American family and tens of millions of people in our global family who are without. Families that are losing their homes, becoming homeless. Families who can't afford health insurance for themselves or their family. Families, older adults, who are no longer filling subscriptions because they can't afford to do that, and that per my daughter, who works for a prescription-filling company. Schools that are deteriorating, both in facility and in quality, so that millions of our graduates from high school today are ill-equipped for jobs or college. What happened to the destiny of America?

The sixth chapter of Deuteronomy: When the Lord God brings you into the land with beautiful cities that you did not build, with houses filled with all good things that you did not fill, when you have eaten and are full, beware, lest you forget the Lord who gave it to you. Do not forget. Do not forget that the gifts that we have received, the blessings which God has bestowed upon us, that these are intended to be given to us not just for ourselves, but are to be given on behalf of and in ministry to the people of our American family, the people of our global family, so that we can be a light to the nations.

I lived most of my life in the Chicago area, and one of the slogans we used to have there, back in the happy days, was, "I want to be like Mike." Michael Jordan. There was a time when the nations of this earth would say, "We want to be like America." But what has happened, and how do we return to our divine destiny? I invite you to hear what the prophets of the Old Testament have to say. You know, I haven't preached on the prophets of the Old Testament since ... I don't know when. But we're studying the prophets in our Disciple I class, and the message of the prophets is as relevant, if not more so, than it was in their day.

Now understand, a prophet never wanted to be a prophet. Everyone called to be a prophet would say, "I don't want to do it." Because they knew that they weren't going to be very popular. There were false prophets, false prophets who told the people what they wanted to hear. You know, there were prophets in Jerusalem who said, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord – God lives in the temple in Jerusalem, our city will never fall." But in 586 BC, the city fell, was laid waste, and not one stone of the temple was left upon another. You know what we used to say? "The oceans of the world, the oceans of the world. We're safe in America." And then 9/11 occurred. The prophets who lived 2700 years ago resonate with our world today. Here's what Micah says: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Amos, a prophet called in the same time, a shepherd, sent up to speak to the people and the hierarchy of the northern kingdom. I love Amos. Amos says this. This is God speaking through Amos: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies, even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. And the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an every-flowing stream." Justice is not what's mediated to those who break the law in Biblical terms. Justice is how we deal with the people of our world, how we use the gifts with which God has blessed us, how we fulfill the destiny to which we have been called. And that destiny was first given to Abraham. God said to Abraham, "I will bless you, and you will become a great nation, so that all nations will be blessed through you." Isaiah says, "We have been called to be a light for the nations." So light, kindness, justice, humility, righteousness, these are the things that God wills for us to be, and surely we, who named Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, that's who we are to be. Remember Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength. You shall love your neighbors..." This has nothing to do with the way you feel about your neighbors. I have some neighbors that I don't feel real good about. I don't. But this is not about how you feel about them. This is about what you do in response, in relation to them. My neighbors that I used to have, as an example, in 2004 in February, after my wife June had died, I got sick. I mean really sick. I was coughing, I

had a temperature... what do I do, I have a dog? A new dog. I couldn't afford to put the dog in a kennel, at least I thought not, so I medicated myself, but I got weaker and weaker, and finally when I walked my dog, I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. And whenever I had to stoop down and pick up some deposits, that's a gentle way of saying it, I could hardly get back up on my feet again. Finally I woke up at 3 a.m. one morning, and I was so sick. I picked up the phone and called my next-door neighbor. I said, "Tim, I need to go to the hospital and I can't drive myself." He said, "I'll be right over." He came over, took me to the hospital, stayed with me in the emergency room until they diagnosed double pneumonia, stayed with me until I got in my room, and before he left he said, "Ray, don't worry about a thing, we're going to watch over your house, we'll take care of your dog, we'll feed your dog, we'll walk your dog, and we'll clean up in the house after your dog." Because he was a new dog, and you know how that is. That's love. It didn't matter how he felt about me. What did matter was that he spoke to my need. Jesus put it this way: "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was an immigrant, and you welcomed me. I was a stranger, and you visited me. I was naked, and you clothed me. And whenever you do it to one of these who are in need, you do it to me." That's the kind of life that is pleasing to God.

I titled this message "A Tipping Point." I don't know, there's a book by that name. I think we're at a crucial moment in the history of our country, 214 years old. That's not very old, for a country. The tipping point is this: Do we move from here into the future with fear, or with hope? And whether we move with fear or hope makes all the difference in the world in the way in which we live our lives. FDR said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," and I believe that with all my heart. Hope in the Lord, for he is good. God says, "Let us sing a new song to the Lord," and we need a new song, a song of hope. And we Christians have been given so much. We in America have been given so much. The question is, what do we do with what we have been given? How do we love the people of our American family, the people of our global family, how do we do that? We in this church have been wrestling with that, and we've got a lot. Look what we've done. We sent volunteers to Putnam School. We send help, mission teams, to Guatemala and to Angola and to Pine Ridge and to Mississippi and to New Orleans and to Holly, Colorado. We have people working at the food bank, and people involved in Habitat for Humanity. We had an event here last Tuesday, "Faith to Faith," in which we were trying to figure out, how do we bridge the gap between peoples of different faiths, on the face of this earth, so that we can not see people as enemies, but see them as persons into whom God has breathed the breath of life just as God has breathed the breath of life into you and into me. So, who will we be, First United Methodist Church of Fort Collins? Some will say, "What can I do?" But there are ripple effects to everything we do. Whatever we do, let's not act out of fear. Let's believe that God is with us, and that God will be with us as we move into the future, and as we reclaim our role as a light to the nations. Are we able to do this? You bet. Are we willing?