

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
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*Insistent, Persistent Hearts*  
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Nebuchdrezzar King of Babylon from 605 – 582 BCE

When one reads about Nebuchadrezzar (also known as Nebuchadnezzar), what emerges is a man – and a family – that was on an unrelenting mission of conquest and empire-building.

Nebuchadrezzar followed in the footsteps of his father (another 5 syllable tongue-twister of a name) Nabopolassar. Nabopolassar's major achievement was his deliverance of Babylon from its dependence on Assyria and his participation with the Medes in the destruction of Nineveh and the assassination or deportation of its inhabitants.

Nebuchadrezzar's first major conquest was in 605 BCE in the Battle of Carchemish. He and a huge army was sent by his Nabopolassar to push back the Egyptians from Syria and Phoenicia. Nebuchadrezzar was successful, and later, when Nabopolassar died on August 15, 597 BCE – his son took over as king.

The family insistence on conquest and expansion continued during the time of his reign.

To assure peace with his powerful neighbor to the north, Nebuchdrezzar married Amuhia, the daughter of a Median king. Once he had stability in the north, he was able to proceed westward in his efforts to extend Babylonian influence into Syria and Judah. However, he soon faced setbacks in his attempts to overwhelm the Egyptians, and others looking on as Babylonia seemed to falter – too the opportunity to mount their own challenges, producing rebellion again Babylonia. Ultimately, the challenges were settled by Nebuchdrezzar when he captured Jerusalem in 607 BC deposing King Johoiakim and beginning a time of conflict that ended in 587 BC with the destruction of the temple, the elimination of the Kingdom of Judah, and the relocation of a sizable portion of the population.

The demise of Jerusalem was a major loss and massive disorientation among the Judeans. Much of the population was killed or executed. The remaining Jews of any importance were sent off into exile in Babylon. Those left behind in Palestine were destitute and lacking direction. The Hebrew nation had been

stripped of its independence, its king, the temple, and their land. It was, basically, total militaristic and social defeat.

Following his military successes, Nebuchadnezzar focused his sights on building Babylon into a mighty empire – literally. His system of laws and his Hanging Gardens – for most modern students – are better known than his destructive insistence on power and domination – power that got his and his nation to the point where time and resources were available for some, quite amazing domestic projects.

Whatever Nebuchadnezzar and Nabopolassar may have been – they were unquestioningly persistent and determined – willing to risk it all – in achieving their history.

Speaking of insistent and persistent – let's talk a bit about Jeremiah. We have spent the last several weeks reading and considering how this prophet attempted to guide the Jews during the several stages of the Babylonian conquest.

We have read and listened to his prophesies, delivered over the reigns of Judean kings beginning with Josiah in 62 BCE and continuing on through the succession of kings: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and the brief rule of Gedaliah ben Ahikam. Jeremiah never ceased to speak or do what he believed he was called by God to do, even when (as most prophets do) his prophesies placed him in direct conflict with the powers – and often, citizens – of the day.

Jeremiah prophesied an ineluctable, unavoidable disaster for the Jews unless they changed their ways. He launched his prophetic mission in his native village of Anathoth, but was rejected by the villagers. His message: castigation of the people for forsaking God and the Torah and turning to idolatry – was surely, not easy to hear.

Along the way, in our studies - we saw the human side of the prophet Jeremiah and his compassion for a people and the impending terrible destruction. He, knew, too – disappointment, at his impotence in changing people's ways. We have read of times when he felt disgusted and at loss with his people and his life.

We have read even how Jeremiah disobeyed God, continuing to pray for the people of Judah, believing somehow that God would forgive him such disobedience.

His voice rose out of his discouragement, once again – insisting against all popular and governmental sentiment that Judah should surrender to the mighty forces of Babylon, and not join in the rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. He was considered a defeatist by those who disagreed with him -- and his stance was rejected. Jeremiah could not, would not embrace the idea that Jerusalem and the

Temple had an almost magical inviolability. He knew, perhaps, that God was not about “magic.”

Viewed as a traitor, Jeremiah was even declared an outlaw during the reign of Zedekiah and placed in detention until the final destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar.

Finally, Jeremiah watched as the last hope for the survivors was shattered with the assassination of Gedaliah.

Still, Jeremiah and God – never gave up. He called on the Jews to resettle, to build homes, raise children, and await the time when God would make the new covenant with them – a covenant so personal and deeply felt – that it was described in terms of God writing it on their hearts – to the point where they should no longer need to teach one another to “Know God” for they all should “Know God” from the least to the greatest.

Insistent, persistent, hearts in the midst of chaos, turmoil, destruction, defeat, fear, loss – a time when success nonetheless was still judged by conquest – nation or no nation, dominance or subjugation, king or no king – and the outcome: either way – a sign of God’s judgment.

It must have been a very difficult time.

There would be another 600 or so years before Jesus would emerge by the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist, beginning the public ministry that in three short years would ultimately change the world: as followers or in response to his followers.

Following the destruction of the temple and in the time before the birth of Jesus, the world would come to know Cyrus the Persian who allowed the Jews to return to their land, the conquests of Alexander the Great, the first translation of the Torah into Greek – the LXX, the Maccabean revolt, the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, the rule of Herod and his sons, the birth of Jesus in 6 BCE, and the continued domination of the land by the Romans and their ubiquitous use of crucifixion as a form of public execution.

Jesus would have known all of the history and the circumstances of his life – his *sitz en lieben*, which is a hermeneutical term to help in the interpretation of the bible. Basically it refers to considering the Bible against the backdrop of its time.

Yet, there is another term: *sitz in der Liebe* – which means setting in love. Jesus and other insistent, persistent hearts knew both. They knew their setting and they knew their love or passion. It’s not surprising that the last days of Jesus’s life are referred to as the Passion Story.

Everything in flux, chaos, risk – serious, daily risk – and Jesus tells others a story about continuing to pray and not losing heart in this morning's reading. He was, most certainly, telling a story about himself.

First Jesus tells us to pray always. God's people are praying people. Then he tells about the widow who seeks justice against her opponent.

In Greek, the word for opponent is *antidikos* (an-tid'-ee-kos). It is translated into opponent (as it is used here) some 13 times in the Bible.

More often, it is translated as adversary (or adversaries) and appears 193 times throughout the Bible. The confusion comes from one aspect of its meaning: opponent (as in a lawsuit) or as Satan (that is, arch enemy). The more colloquial use of the time would have included both of these, as well as references to all sorts of other “adversarial” conditions. The context, as always, is the key.

How did Jesus use the word? That's for us in our hearts to determine, but considering his ministry and the growing enmity of many toward him – I'm sure there was every bit of cosmic meaning to it, as there was for Jeremiah in his prophecy and Nebuchadnezzar in his determination to deify himself.

The message: that the widow's earnestness prevailed even with the unjust judge is a message of hope. How often do we not pursue something because even though we might believe it is right, fearing that it will ultimately create a situation will backfire against us. How often do we base our decision on the *sitz im liebe* than *sitz im der Liebe*, or at least some combination of the two?

But Jesus addresses this in the most basic of ways: such work, regardless of the outcome will be pleasing to God. “Just think,” he might have said, “if your persistence can overcome injustice, regardless of the backlash, think how pleasing your heart will be to God. And be assured,” he might have added, “of God's promise of justice to you.”

So, today, for us, what of the insistent, persistent heart? How much are our actions based on the *sitz em lieben* and how much on the *sitz em der Liebe*?

How do we face justice even when there is considerable risk, if not to our physical safety – then to our reputation, our gentility, our unwillingness to rock the boat.

How do we exemplify and model the words of Amos: “letting justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?”

Gentle comment.

Where in each of us beats our insistent, persistent heart?

In some ways, always, we only know part of that beat. I am one who believes that Jesus did not know what was to be the final outcome of the journey he began on the riverbank of the Jordan, any more than Jeremiah knew where the prophecies of God would lead him.

What I do believe, is that with each beat of their hearts – just like with each beat of ours – we build a growing response to situations as they occur, applying the passion that is in each of us to conditions that continuously call for more. How far are we willing to see the heart through to its fulfillment, to the God that we know because God has written God's name upon it upon us?

There is no way to take such a journey without encountering adversaries, sometimes friends or others who can no longer support us because we have just, "...gone too far."

When that happens, it seems that Jesus has told us what to do in this morning's readings and elsewhere: Pray, be present, teach, and be persistent – for such things are pleasing to God.

When all is said and done, I think that's enough.