

“From Alajuela to Alleluia”
Jeremiah 31:1-6
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If you had hung out with certain members of ECF during the forty days of Lent, now blessedly over, you might have wondered what their obsession was with Alajuela. With all the Alajuelas coming from their lips you might have wondered if there was there a revolution starting out by the airport, or if the church was thinking about moving there, or if they were just overwhelmed by the beauty and drama of the Volcán Poás and the La Paz waterfall, and it was all they could say. It was Alajuela all over the place at ECF these last forty days, not because a certain team from that Costa Rican province had finally won the Clásico, but because their lips were sealed about why we are here this morning. You see, during our worship these last few weeks, we have kept ourselves from uttering the word we use so freely today, the wonderful Easter word of Alleluia, and so our worship leaders in particular have been very carefully substituting the word Alajuela for Alleluia. But today we have our full vocabulary back to worship God and I know our music leaders are happy to have their full repertoire of songs at their disposal.

The prohibition on Alleluia was, if you will, a churchwide Lenten fast, a preparation for the time when the word could flower more fully with meaning. Sometimes absence makes the heart grow fonder. Some of you may have visited the famous Pennsylvania house called Fallingwater, designed by the North

American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In that beautiful part of Western Pennsylvania, Wright specifically designed the home so that the Kaufman family could *not* see the fully beauty of their land and its waterfall from within their house, but would have to get up and go outdoors to fully appreciate it. Wright knew how easily the human mind gets bored and numbed, and so he used his architectural prowess to keep the beauty of that place from ever growing stale for its owners. Over time, even the most beautiful sunset will grow tiresome when seen from the same rocking chair on the same beach. That our Easter alleluias might have all the meaning they deserve, we buried them for a time. For every time, there is a season, so sayeth Ecclesiastes.

The people to whom Jeremiah wrote might have done something similar, being, as they were, in a time not unlike the Lent we celebrate. Their season of self-reflection and penitence may not have been voluntary, nor only forty days, but it tested their faith to its foundations. They had a lot to think about following their deportation to a foreign land because of the idolatry they had committed. They had a lot of sins to confess to be ready to return to Zion. These were the people of whom the Psalmist wrote, “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” And so we may even imagine them substituting words of their songs so as not to betray their God, so to speak, putting

Alajuelas of protest in place of Alleluias of praise. Those words, those songs had meaning, meaning that was reserved for their temple, their homeland. These were a people for whom the name of God was so holy, they would not even pronounce it, and substituted another word whenever it was read in Scripture. And so through their captivity, they found ways to cope, waiting in their own Babylonian wilderness for the same rescue their ancestors had received from Egypt.

Part of what made their waiting possible were these words of consolation we've just heard from Jeremiah, words which recalled the promises God had made, and words which promised more still: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you," God says. On Good Friday, some of us gathered here to remember the hour of Jesus' death. We heard the story from long ago, and we sang, and we prayed, and then we were reminded of our own complicity in the death of our Savior. In what are called the Solemn Reproaches of the Cross, we heard the recitation of God's continuing acts of faithfulness and Israel's repeated rebellion. Each reproach, each condemnation, concludes with the same words: "but you have prepared a cross for your Savior." They are convicting words, words which wound the soul, but they are not God's last words. The Book of Consolation, our words this morning from Jeremiah, remind us that even though we "prepared a cross for our savior," God's love for us did not die there. You see, God's first and last word is love, a love expressed so

fully in Jesus Christ that we can do nothing else but say Alleluia, and celebrate. For every time, there is a season, so sayeth Ecclesiastes.

The prophet Jeremiah said, “At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.” That time has come. The prophet Jeremiah said, “there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’ ” That day has come. And so, we’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. We’re marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God. Easter is here, full of promises delivered, hopes fulfilled, fears overcome, and grace abounding. Death is defeated! We have much to celebrate. Alleluia!

God’s people have gathered to join together our Alleluias this morning, and that is a wonderful thing, but there may some among you who have greeted this Easter morn with an involuntary Alajuela on your lips, with a restlessness in your soul, or a lump in the pit of your stomach, or an ache in your heart, that won’t let you celebrate and utter the word Alleluia. And that’s OK. Just because it is March 23 and the calendar says it is Easter doesn’t mean all your problems will disappear. But it does mean that this is a day to hear once again the words of hope, that “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you,” and to take heart that one day, because God defeated death through Jesus Christ, your day is coming to shout Alleluia at the top of your lungs. May God help us all to find our Alleluias, today and every day. Amen.