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First Reading: *Mike Mulligan & His Steam Shovel* by Virginia Lee Burton

Second Reading: Jeremiah 31:27-34

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." ³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Sermon:

There was this moment when Andrew and I realized that we had lined up a sermon series based on children's books for the final six weeks of the Presidential Election.

This was not an intentional decision. We organized these dates maybe six months ago, when the election didn't feel so...visceral. We were thinking...fall. New school year. Children's books.

As we have sunk further and lower than I think anyone of us could have imagined six months ago, there has been such an enormous desire

within me for meaning-making. For a respite from the insanity. For a grown-up in the room. There is a desperate need, I think, for words of wisdom and hope. Andrew and I have both struggled with the idea of the preacher's voice in a time like this. What words of hope, challenge, or rebuke are called for in this moment?

By doing this series, I worried, we might run the risk of looking escapist. Like we're retreating from a very nasty, very significant election. Or maybe we are just tired of talking about police shootings or implicit bias or Syrian refugees.

Maybe – I worried - maybe what we need is a grown-up in the room and instead we are retreating into children's books.

But then I actually reread *Mike Mulligan* for the first time in years, and realized that I might have been underestimating the power of children and their stories. Don't get me wrong - there are plenty of terrible children's books out there but at least the classics speak to our most important values and our hopes for the future. They aren't dumbed down for a younger audience. They are elevated above our adult cynicism.

Virginia Lee Burton wrote *Mike Mulligan* in 1939, when the United States was still clawing itself out of the Great Depression. It's a story about a working class man and a steam shovel that both find themselves increasingly unnecessary in a marketplace that is all about the bottom line.

There is an undertow of anxiety and sadness beneath this story that is not entirely resolved by its happy ending. This is a *truth-telling* book, I realized, and it is also a *hopeful* book. That is more than we've come to expect from our politics and exactly what we long for in church.

Amazingly to me – Mike Mulligan finds a great conversation partner in the prophet Jeremiah. I was prepared to look for another text more appropriate for this sermon, but then I heard the voice of the prophet:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel...I will watch over them to build and plant” (27-28). Now who

knows what images those words would have conjured on another week but this week I had a hard time seeing anything other than Mike and Maryanne, working faster than ever with God watching.

It's true that we perform better and faster before an audience, and some of the people of Popperville – especially the little boy – were cheering on Mike and Maryanne in love. But Burton is also very subtle in revealing the mixed motives of the town, including the people who love a spectacle, the people who love a house on fire, and the people who intend to profit from failure.

In my opinion, the most haunting picture in the book, which Burton also illustrated herself, is the one where Maryanne is working so hard and so fast that thick black smoke and soot have filled the air, nearly choking out the sun. I look at that single image and I see the desperation of single parents working multiple jobs, the despair of factory workers getting pink slips, job applications filled out and thrown away, students running ragged to get into good schools under mountains of debt. I also see parking lots and pipelines and climate change and water wars. The book was written in 1939 but its not hard for me to feel a little bit of 2016-style anxiety.

“Hurry! Hurry!” shouted the little boy. “There’s not much time!”
Dirt was flying everywhere, and the smoke and steam were so thick that the people could hardly see anything. But listen! BING! BANG! CRASH! SLAM! LOUDER AND LOUDER, FASTER AND FASTER. (32)

Sometimes that’s just an evening commute on Martin Luther King Boulevard.

In the end, the smoke clears and Maryanne and Mike have done it. They’ve finished the cellar, with every corner dug out at perfect ninety-degree angles. And they realize that they are trapped in the hole because they left no way out. And Henry B. Swap refuses to pay them because the job is not technically complete. Also, because, #America.

This is a dark moment for a children’s book. But it also captures the American dilemma in a story so straight-forward that kids can grasp it. Again and again we receive or transmit the message that we are

increasingly unnecessary or inadequate. Then we kill ourselves achieving the impossible, only to find ourselves prisoners of our own success, or swindled by our neighbor, or running out of gas.

What's amazing, I think, is that kids feel this too. They live with our anxiety.

This is our second week with the prophet Jeremiah, and although we've only moved a few chapters, we are light years away from last week's reading in terms of tone.

As a brief reminder, Jeremiah's words come to us from a scary and uncertain time in Israel's history. The nation split into two kingdoms, northern and southern, in 922 BCE. Two hundred years after that, the upper kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian empire. The Southern kingdom of Judah was constantly under threat from neighbors like Egypt and Babylon.

Finally, the Babylonians invaded Israel, kidnapped the king, ransacked the Temple, and carried Judah's most promising young people away into exile. The Book of Jeremiah was written from that place. It's a long, stormy meditation on how in the world God ever allowed the chosen people to be so humiliated.

Jeremiah's answer, while long, is straight-forward. The Israelites have failed to follow God's rules. He says it in his own salty way. "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look around and take note. Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth" (5:1).

"Like a cage full of birds,
their house is full of treachery;
therefore they have grown great and rich,
they have grown fat and sleek.
They know no limits in deeds of wickedness;
they do not judge with justice
the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,

and they do not defend the rights of the needy.
Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord” (5:27-29)

So Jeremiah doesn't mince words. You have failed and God has allowed you to be taken into exile. The core of your failure was spiritual, but the symptom of your failure is economic: you stopped caring about the poor. And your community now finds itself in shambles.

I guess we should stop here and talk a little bit about the difference between a contract and a covenant.

You don't have to be an *economist* to know that the American economy is largely contractual. That is to say, it chugs along on the basis of millions of contracts. My cell phone works because I've contracted with AT&T to pay the bill. I'm able to pay the bill because I've contracted with Brown Memorial to pay my salary. Brown Memorial is able to pay me because you folks have pledged a certain level of giving. And so on and so on. If you pan out far enough you'll eventually find something like Rousseau's Social Contract, which suggests that we all give up some of our freedom and money in order to participate in this interdependent community. You give a little to get a little. If and when one party breaks the contract, the other party is released from their obligations as well. If my cell phone stops working, I'll surely stop paying the bill.

That's a contract. A covenant, however, is different.

If the signature image of a contract is a signed document, the signature image of a covenant is a sworn oath. A contract is a commitment to a transaction. A covenant is a sworn relationship between people. While most people associate the language of covenant with marriage, it actually appears in all kinds of forms throughout the Old Testament.¹ When Abimelech and Issac settled their land dispute, they did so through a sworn covenant of peace (Genesis 26). Joshua and the Gibeonites made a covenant to end a war (Joshua 9). David and

¹ "Covenant." Bakers Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology.
www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant

Jonathan swore an oath of lifelong friendship (1 Samuel 20). A covenant says, “The fundamentals of this relationship have been defined. The nature of the relationship is not rooted in the ability of the two parties to maintain their contracts. The nature of the relationship is rooted in the *promise*.”

When a couple stands before God and the community and says they will be faithful to each other using the phrase, “for better or for worse,” they are articulating the principle at the heart of a covenant.

The shortest summary of the Old Testament that I can summon is that God swears a deep and abiding covenant love for Israel, and all manner of “better or worse” breaks loose within its bounds.

By the time of the prophet Jeremiah, it's fairly obvious that while the covenant endures, it's been a struggle since day one. So when Jeremiah announces that God will make a new covenant with Israel, that is big deal.

“This is the covenant that I will make...says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The day is surely coming. It's as though Jeremiah pulls back the curtain, just a smidge, to reveal a future that the exiles can scarcely imagine. It's profoundly hopeful. More hopeful and more generous, I have to say, than most churches.

The day is surely coming, says the Lord. And just as surely as it is coming, it is as equally surely not here yet. That's the tension of this text.

Now it's no secret that Christianity has claimed this language of the new covenant as the centerpiece of its own theology. And for good reasons. When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples, he took the cup and said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in

my blood' (Luke 22:20). Paul does the same thing when he says that we should be "ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6). It is a very powerful idea, this notion that Jesus ushers in a new relationship with God, a grace-filled life. But even Paul acknowledges that we still understand only a fraction of what that means. And just like the Israelites, we are still living in the tension between promise and its reality.

That tension between the promise of God's new economy and our struggling reality is captured really beautifully in the pages of *Mike Mulligan*. I think it's this truth-telling that gives the story its power.

Even as a child I knew that Maryanne was not going to discover that she was as powerful as diesel engine. I'd seen too many diesel engines, and too many landfills, to buy that. Her days and her work were coming to an end. There would be no new contracts.

In the end, despite a herculean effort, Mike and Maryanne hit the wall they've been running from all along. They failed. Even the well-meaning members of the town have no idea what to do about it.

While it is true that we work faster and better when someone is watching, it is equally true that we eventually grow tired or distracted or discouraged. It is true that whether people are watching or not, we fail.

Virginia Lee Burton was brave enough to tell that truth, but she tells another truth that I believe smacks of God's gracious covenant love. When we truly know our neighbors, when we don't just watch them but also *see* them, we have the power to transcend the contractual web where we live and die. We have the power to name and claim the covenant relationships that shape us and save our communities. We have the power to remind people that healing is not always about going back to how things were before. Sometimes healing is about moving forward into a more graceful, grace-filled way of life.

That's the sly secret of Mike Mulligan. No amount of huffing and puffing is going to make Mary Ann faster and better than the diesel engine, but she is witnessed and loved into a new way of life, and in the process she literally heats up the town hall, creating a space where community happens. Even Henry B. Swap hangs out there.

That's church. At least, it should be.

When I was researching this sermon, I found a really interesting article in a 2006 issue of the Boston Globe.² It was a profile and interview with an eighty-seven year-old man named Dickie Berkenbush. He lived his whole life in West Newbury, which is a little township on the edge of Boston. Dickie Berkenbush has this very clear memory of being a child and being dragged off to a dinner party with his parents.

They were sitting at the table with a friend who was chatting away and he was bored and waiting to be excused when their friend mentioned that she had written a draft of a children's book but had no idea how to finish it. She had literally dug Mike and Maryanne into a corner, she said, and couldn't figure out how to get them out. The book project was tabled for the time being.

Dickie thought about the garage where his father worked. It had a steam-operated boiler than reminded him of Maryanne. He suggested to Virginia Burton that Maryanne could be converted into a boiler for the town hall basement. Burton loved this idea so much that she used it in the book and even credited Dickie with a funny little footnote on the appropriate page. Of course the book went on to sell 70 million copies, so you could say that Dickie had a big impact on the book, but you could also say that the book had a big impact on Dickie. The Globe reports that when he become an adult, Dick Berkenbush served as the Fire Chief of West Newbury for thirty-seven years. For ten of those years, he was also a police officer. And for nine of those years, he was also a selectman. To put it mildly, he was a citizen.

² "As a child, his steam fueled hot 1939 children's classic." The Boston Globe, March 30, 2006.

When he died in 2009, his life was celebrated and his death was mourned by the entire community.

Friends, that's the holy place where scripture and history and children's literature collide, I believe. Reminding us of who we are, who we should be, who we can be, and what we might dare hope for our children. We cannot escape nor deny our current situation, the dire economy of the world we currently live in, with its brutal contracts and crude powers.

But we still have the power to see each other and name each other as children of a covenant love. We still have the power to name ourselves as formed by an enduring promise. We have the power for care for our youngest and cherish our oldest, not for what they give to us but because that's the nature of the promise. We have the power to stand in solidarity with the poor and to fight for the oppressed because they are part of this covenant too. We even have the power to forgive those who have failed and betrayed us because this covenant love is for better and for worse.

We can do it. Our children will see it. And the day is surely coming, says the Lord, when this house will finally be put in order.