

A Tough Job For Anybody – Pentecost +17C, Proper 19C

The prophet Jeremiah was active at a critical time in the history of the Kingdom of Judah. With the conquest of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians still recent history, Jeremiah's people were well aware that a similar fate could be theirs. He has been depicted over the years as a stately, pensive and wise fellow with a big white beard. If we think of the typical image of God's very self: flowing robes, flowing beard, big head of curly white hair, we'll be close to the idea of Jeremiah too. All we have to do is replace the fiercely powerful look on God's face with one of deep contemplation and/or sorrow over the fate of his people, and we have our prophet. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel comments that the book is written as if Jeremiah not only heard as words but personally felt in his body and emotions the experiences of what he prophesied: "Are not all my words as fire, says the Lord, and a hammer that shatters rock?" Through Jeremiah, we receive God's personal testimony about what it's like to have us for kids.

He had insistently warned his people to mend their ways before it was too late, but their response to Jeremiah was mostly outrage, rejection, persecution and torture. The men of Anathoth attempted to take Jeremiah's life. When he complains, the Lord lets him know the attacks on him will only get worse.

Pashur, a temple official, had Jeremiah beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin for a day. Finally, King Zedekiah's officials put Jeremiah down into a cistern, where he sank into the mud and would have starved to death, had not a Cushite pulled him out.

Jeremiah remained imprisoned until Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587BCE.

His witness continues in his book of Lamentations after the conquest. Ironically, once the Babylonians were in charge, Jeremiah was treated well and is said to have died peacefully, though still unhappy with his people.

And what was the nature of Jeremiah's criticism? We heard it today, both in his words, and those of the Psalmist:

"For my people are foolish, they do not know me," (says Jeremiah in Chapter 4, speaking for God) "A fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,'" echoes psalm 14.

"They are stupid children, who have no understanding."
Jeremiah

"The Lord looks down to see if there are any who are wise, but they have all gone astray." Psalms 14 and 53

"They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good."

"They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

We see a bit of a common theme here... it boils down to this: Instead of looking for a relationship and alliance with goodness in the universe, the people have continuously turned to worldly power and wealth, while abusing the poor and vulnerable and neglecting their welfare. "Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread?"

Remembering their history when, full of faith, the people had followed Moses into the desert, Jeremiah portrays Israel's earlier affinity for God as that of a new bride for her betrothed. He wonders what has happened to them to make them betray this bond. He warns that Israel's ingratitude and unfaithfulness presages her doom: "Thus says the Lord: 'I remember for you the affection of your youth, the love of your espousal; how you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.'" But now, "Besiegers come from a distant land; they shout against the cities of Judah. They have closed in around her like watchers of a field, all because she has rebelled against the Lord."

The message of Jeremiah is clear: "You once were found, but now are lost; could see, but now are blind."

Of the futility of trusting in man instead of in God, he declares: "Thus says the Lord: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like a tamarisk in the desert, (an extremely dry and scraggly tree) and blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, for he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, that spreads out its roots by the river, and its foliage shall be luxuriant.' O Lord, the hope of Israel! All that forsake the fountain of living water shall be ashamed. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved."

Healing, then is the goal of this prophecy, the closing up of a deep wound, the return home of spiritual wanderers, whose absence brings about confusion, twisted values and grief. Likewise, when Jesus tells his stories about the Kingdom of God, he is describing this home, this wholeness,

this healed self. Today's parables portray the great longing God has for reconciliation among humankind, and the extravagant lengths God will go to bring about healing of the human family. It sounds crazy to leave 99 sheep vulnerable while looking for one lost one. It seems unnecessary, maybe even obsessional to waste time and precious lamp oil searching for a small coin. But God's crazy obsession is to heal the family, to open up a safe house and home where all will be fed, none will go thirsty or lost; where peace will prevail and all may walk in favor.

For many of us, participation in such a spiritual society and family requires change. The kind of self-examination and self-awareness that makes for a safe and peaceful home does not come naturally. If we are among the comfortable, we tend to want to preserve that comfort, even in the face of evidence that the whole is in trouble, and despite warnings about the future. But change we must, or we will once again be lost. What Jeremiah tells his people, and what Jesus is both describing and embodying for us is a spiritual economy where, no matter what happens in the marketplace of the world, we will always have safety in God's Kingdom if we seek it.

The wacky and colorful experience of a 3D movie is perhaps not something any of us wants to have every day. You have to wear those silly glasses, and things look weird. But unless you wear the glasses, you can't see the movie. Today, as much or more than ever, it is only by looking at life through Kingdom glasses, 4D you might call 'em, or YahwehSpex, it's only through these that we can hope to stay whole and see what's coming at us with any kind of peace. It is only by considering what our thoughts and

words and actions look like to a loving and universal benevolence that we have the hope of making healthy decisions.

As the great Sanskrit proverb has it:

Look to this day, for it is life,

The very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the realities and verities of existence:

The bliss of growth, the splendor of action,
the glory of power.

For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow only
a vision.

But today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a
dream of happiness

And every tomorrow, a dream of hope.

Look well therefore to this day.

Without such an attitude and orientation, our energies and plans and resources will all be squandered in recreating dead dreams and preserving unhealthy institutions and ways of doing things. But with the grace of God's goodness flowing through our veins, no matter what challenges we face we can meet them with imagination, extravagant selflessness and new purpose.