

“Journeying with Jeremiah, Part Four: The Impossible Possibility,
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 11th 2016 (17th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28

Last Sunday...last Sunday Jeremiah introduced us to God-the-potter, God the artisan, in whose hands resides the destiny of the nations: at times to flourish, at times to diminish, as the potter sees fit. And yes: with that image came the hope that Israel would heed the prophet and mend its ways before it was too late. Alas...as this morning's reading makes clear...Israel did **not** listen, and the prophet therefore has no choice but to offer words that promise woe for his beloved people. And yes: being not only a faithful prophet but a true poet, it is impossible for us not to be moved by the picture of desolation Jeremiah paints.

*I saw the earth and look! it was waste and void
and the heavens, their light was not there.
I saw the mountains, and look! they were quaking
and all the hills were tossing about.
I saw, and look! the human was not there
and all the birds of the skies had fled.
I saw, and look! the garden land was a desert
and all its cities were ruined
before the LORD, before God's burning anger!*

What Jeremiah here foresees is the eventual destruction of the city of Jerusalem by invaders from Babylon. *How* he depicts that, however, involves nothing less than an image of the entire cosmos being erased: creation—as in the first chapter of Genesis—being undone! The earth itself: waste and void! The heavens: their light gone! Mountains: quaking! Hills: tossed about! Human beings: all gone! The birds of the air: nowhere to be found. Gardens turned back to desert! Cities ruined! Apocalypse! Apocalypse now!

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The exceptionally fine commentary...the commentary I have been consulting to help guide me through this very big Biblical book—the book of the prophet Jeremiahⁱ—that commentary uses the term “prophetic hyperbole”...

...in other words, prophetic exaggeration...

...to try to help make sense of the dramatic language
Jeremiah employs as he tries to alert his countrymen to the danger awaiting them. And yes, none of us here should regard ourselves as entirely ignorant of such prophetic exaggeration, since it's one of the many rhetorical devices the

prophet Jesus of Nazareth was only too happy to employ, unless we actually believe that we ought to take literally his warning that if our *eye should cause us to sin we ought to pluck it out*, or his warning that *if our right hand should cause us to sin we should cut it off*. We recognize such hyperbole for what it is: in all of its trenchant urgency. And yet!

That having been said! Surely there is a certain irony in describing as “prophetic hyperbole” Jeremiah’s depiction of creation undone, given that I do so on the 15th anniversary of that other September 11th: the one we would just as soon forget all about. Suffice it to say that it is highly likely that very few of us will have forgotten where we were and what we were doing and thinking and feeling precisely 15 years ago today. Then again...then again...

When we ponder...when we consider...the nature of this morning’s gaathering—putting to one side the events that transpired 15 years ago—it’s hard to shake the impression that Jeremiah makes a rather uncomfortable presence in our midst. Like so many other North American Mainline Protestant congregations, we have designated this day as our Rally Sunday. All across North America it’s time for congregations like ours to break out the balloons, throw some confetti, dust off the Sunday School curricula, and if you’re real luck, order up some pizzas! Time to party! All of which begs the obvious question:

What in the world is Jeremiah doing here? Who invited him? Can we ask him to leave? Why does he insist upon being so dour, so melodramatic? Can we ask him to lighten up? Or do we simply need to summon the courage to tap him gently on the shoulder, and point him to the door?

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My friend Ed Searcy...now a **retired** United Church minister...my friend Ed Searcy recently made the point that the prophet Jeremiah, courtesy of the Revised Common Lectionary—has a fascinating way (once every three years) of disrupting the late-summer/early autumn festivities of those Christian Churches foolish enough to invite him to the feast. Knowing just how odd a figure any of the prophets would cut at such a gathering as this...knowing just how especially odd a figure Jeremiah cuts...what’s the point in extending an invitation to such as he? Why bother opening that particular door? Why continue to regard ourselves as a place in which the prophets—including this most tormented of prophets—are extended a welcome?

And yes: it ought to go without saying! Part of the answer to that question revolves around the definition of the prophet we played with a few weeks back, when we first met Jeremiah. We learned that God, as part of God’s call to Jeremiah, assured the young man that God’s own word would reside on Jeremiah’s lips. And so yes: as the Church, it’s pretty hard to shut the door to

those have been authorized to cry out: "Thus saith the LORD". But frankly...frankly our need for Jeremiah and his ilk runs even deeper.

The great 20th century Jewish scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel...

...that's a photo of Heschel with his friend and close associate, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King...

...Abraham Heschel, in his monumental study of the prophets, begins by asking a pretty basic question, namely: "What manner of man is the prophet?" Be clear that the answer Heschel provides to that question doesn't replace the definition of the prophet as one who "speaks the word of God". Rather it supplements that definition. In effect, Heschel describes the prophet as one who has no choice...**who has no choice!**...but to notice all of the things from which we tend to avert our eyes. The prophet chooses to see those things; refuses to let them go. And yes: because we tend to avert our eyes, the prophet can at times seem (as Jeremiah most certainly does at times seem) to be way over the top! Here's how Heschel puts it.

The prophets' "breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions. They speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God. Is not the vastness of their indignation and the vastness of God's anger in disproportion to its cause? How should one explain such moral and religious excitability, such extreme impetuosity?"

Here's how Heschel answers his own questions. Listen again.

"The niggardliness of **our** moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by **our own** failures, is a fact which no subterfuge can elude. Our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience. The prophet is one who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon the prophet's soul, which is thereby bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words."

God. God is raging in the prophet's words. And yes...yes: that is why Jeremiah...uncomfortable as he makes us...that is why Jeremiah...and those other prophetic figures...most certainly do need to have a place right here...right here in our midst. Lest we grow self-satisfied! Lest we become complacent and smug! Lest we find ourselves, in the midst of our celebration, ignoring the cruelty

that continues to stalk, the injustice that continues to swarm, the abuse and predation that continues to threaten God's precious ones. God help us! God help us if we ever conclude that Jeremiah is no longer welcome in our midst.

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A final thought.

Those of you who pay attention to the Sunday bulletin, may have noticed that I managed—for this morning's bulletin—that I managed to choose and to highlight the one small verse from this morning's troubling text that actually does contain within it a glimmer of hope. *For thus saith the LORD: "The whole land shall be a desolation...(here comes the money quote)...the whole land shall be a desolation yet I will not make a full end."* **Yet I will not make a full end.** Scholars predictably debate whether that comforting little tidbit actually belongs there...debate whether perhaps some later editor (finding Jeremiah's bleak vision too hard to swallow) felt the need to add a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. Frankly, I don't have the expertise to weigh in on that sort of debate. But this much I do know!

As followers of Jesus Christ, we not only are permitted, but frankly we are commanded to hear the testimony of Jeremiah—the testimony of all of the Prophets as well as the testimony of the Law and the Wisdom literature that fills the pages of what we call the Old Testament—we have no choice but to receive all of that splendid and troubling testimony not in naked isolation, but as part and parcel of God's gift to us of Jesus Christ: a gift through which God makes it clear that Jeremiah, in claiming that God will "**not** make a full end" is offering us something more substantial than wishful thinking. You see: when we preachers invoke the name of Jesus Christ at such a time as this, it isn't (at least it ought not to be) some lame attempt on our part, to add a happy ending to an otherwise baleful text. On the contrary: if we are prepared to open our eyes, we will notice numerous instances in **all four** of the New Testament Gospels in which Jesus of Nazareth sounds an awful lot like an Old Testament prophet: a prophet through whom God rages much as God raged through Jeremiah. In such instances it is our Jesus—neither meek nor mild—who cries out against cruelty and indifference, against **our** cruelty and **our** indifference! There's nothing complacent about the comfort God offers us in the name of Jesus Christ. And yet!

The comfort we are offered in Christ is real and meaningful comfort. Throughout the Old Testament—and even throughout much of the New—we come face to face with the heart-break that drives Creator God to weigh the option of making a full and complete end of our humankind. Having continually rejected that possibility throughout the Old Testament, in Christ God makes it clear that such a possibility has become an impossibility: one that is eternally ruled out of bounds. On the Cross God demonstrates what it might, in fact, look like were God to speak that final dreadful sentence of doom. And yet, on that

same Cross, we are shown God's eternal intention to embrace us with arms open wide. In the process summoning us to this table: this table where we are not only fed...but through the superfoods we consume here, are made hungry again! Fed with finest grain, all the more to hunger—as the prophets hungered before us—to see God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Our thirst well quenched at this table, and yet still thirsting—as the prophets before us were thirsting—to see God's righteousness burst forth in our midst and yes, burst forth in our very lives. All the while eagerly waiting and eagerly watching for that day when all God's children...

...**all** God's little ones...will come to know the full height and depth and breadth of the love that will never let them go. Not now! Not ever!

May it be so! Amen!

ⁱ Part of the Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries series, the three volume (!) set on Jeremiah is by Jack R. Lundbom.