

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 10.13.13

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Luke 17:11-19

If you were here last week and you're back this week, then I admire your fortitude. Last week's service was hardly cheering. As with this week, so with last, that we heard from Jeremiah and Jesus, and neither had much to offer that would make for return customers.

Jeremiah for his part was deep in lament—that is, if we still consider the book of Lamentations to have been written by Jeremiah. That's something most scholars no longer think is the case. But what is clearly the case is that both writers—the prophet Jeremiah and the lamenting voice of the book of Lamentations—concern themselves with the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon, the sacking of the city, the destruction of the Temple, the taking of the people (in chains, even) into exile, and the depopulated void left behind.

It was a story of un-creation—and inflicted on a people who had deep reverence for their ordered creation, their ordered civilization. Remember, two weeks ago we heard of Jeremiah going through all the legal proprieties in buying a vineyard—a vineyard that was lifeless, amidst a land that was war torn, while he himself was a political prisoner under house arrest and therefore hardly in need of a vineyard. He observed all the proprieties in conducting that transaction—though why, we wondered? Why do everything *just so*, for an ultimately absurd purpose? For this: because in such order is life itself, in honoring civilization's orderliness and propriety we assent to life and meaning and human thriving.

The Temple's pillars rose for no reason. At the very front, before the portico, those ancient pillars served no structural purpose to the building itself. They weren't weight bearing; they weren't to uphold the Temple roof. No, what they did do was symbolically hold up the heavens. When, in the beginning, God created the firmament, and separated the waters above from the waters below, God thus created the order that civilization would in time uphold, those apparently purposeless pillars so to illustrate. The Temple pillars were to hold up the roof of the world.

As for us, we have a hymn whose text recalls this reverence for ordered living: "Let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace, the beauty of thy peace." Order, beauty, peace: they go together. So then go together disorder, ugliness, conflict and violence and war.

This is what Jeremiah has been calling to mind on recent Sundays. When he hasn't been outraged or frightened, he has been deep in lament.

As for Jesus, last week, when the disciples had simply asked to have their faith increased, Jesus went on a tirade, told a parable that suggested the disciples were slaves and, as such, they should just get about to the work of servitude and stop asking for more stuff—more favor, more grace, more goodies. I mean, isn't it enough that they got to be the Lord's disciples? Did they really need more? More, more, more?

And, of course, he might have been right to call them on their privilege and their sense of entitlement, but he could have been a little nicer about, a little more *Christ*-like.

Finally, as for me, both a cautioned disciple who'd prefer now just to keep her mouth shut and an unhappy messenger of unhappy news, I know I came home from church last Sunday feeling lousy indeed. I said as much to Jack, my ten-year-old, who was just in from his own morning at church. "Church was awful this morning," I said.

"Why?" Jack asked.

"It was Jesus," I said. "He was in a really bad mood. So he yelled at the disciples."

Jack took it in stride, though. Wandering the kitchen where I was unpacking my bag, he said, "People don't like to think about God being angry."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Why do you think that is?" I asked. I've become over the years more and more comfortable with anger—my own, other people's, even the prospect of God's, so I wasn't just prodding him to prolong the conversation. I really did want to understand what Jack seemed to understand—but I also wanted to prolong the conversation.

"They think if God's angry at them, God will kill them," he explained. "God won't. But that's what people think."

How he would know such a thing is no mystery to me. How he'd have developed so high a Christology—that Jesus is God—is, though marvelous, hardly mystifying.

Once, when Jack was a baby and Tobias was a toddler and it was evening and I was finishing up in giving them a bath, Jack had reached the end. The day had been long, and he was done. Always a temperamental person, an exhausted Jack was an angry Jack, so he was screaming and fighting, and, still wet, he might have slipped from my grip to land either hard on the porcelain tub or submerged in bathwater.

I wanted neither to happen.

So I took him from the tub in firm fingers, white-tipped. I lay him carefully but decisively on his towel and, holding him down, my big hand covering his small torso, wrapped the towel tight around him. He was screaming and fighting, and Tobias, still in the tub, was getting scared. He could see that I was handling Jack forcefully.

But, in my experience, I knew that this is what Jack needed. To feel safe in a world where he had such will to power, to feel human when he might otherwise become monstrous (as many of us would, given half the chance), I knew he needed to be firmly held, tightly wrapped even. This was all the more the case when life became too much, when it felt as if the whole world might be smashed to pieces by his exhausted rage or desolate fear.

I felt like it was my job not to let the world get smashed to pieces.

Temple pillars.

“I just need to get him dried off,” I explained to Tobias, but also to myself, “dried off, dressed in pj’s, and heading off to sleep.” I noticed Toby’s tight face, though, his welling-up eyes. “Are you worried?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m worried you could kill him,” he said.

“Well, you’re right, I could,” I told him, because why bother lying? Kids can see the truth, even when they’re very young. “I could do that, but I wouldn’t.” No, of course I wouldn’t because to kill my son would be to kill me—which is the point of a high Christology, by the way. God didn’t kill Jesus; the father didn’t kill the son, or even send the son to be killed so God would be satisfied. God gave himself over to death; God, in Christ, died himself on the cross. That God the Father and God the Son are one and the same God means this wasn’t child abuse but self-giving love.

It isn’t often that I feel like God, but usually when I do it’s in relationship to my children.

Though why return to all that, you might wonder. Both Jeremiah and Jesus are feeling better today. As if the storm clouds simply blew over, today is a better day. So why rehash the struggles of the past?

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,” according to Jeremiah. “Thus says the Lord...to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” See, the storm has past. The worst has taken place. The people have passed through their most dreadful imaginings and have come out alive on the other side. So thus said the Lord: “Build

houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce... Seek the welfare of the society where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

You see, of course: this is quite a change of heart from what Jeremiah had been saying prior to Babylon’s tortured arrival in the land, and quite a change of heart from the lamentation that rang forth from the rubble remembered last week. Now we hear Jeremiah prophesying an utterly different hope for the people than that they escape the fate they seemed more and more intent on suffering. Now we hear him hoping that they build houses in Babylon, and live in them; that they plant gardens and eat what they produce; that they take wives or husbands, to have children and to multiply there.

This for a people who’d come to identify entirely with their land, their promised land; this for a people for whom intermixing with foreign nations was increasingly taboo; this for a people whose cultural autonomy was their existence—as it is for most peoples: they were to look forward now, even in a foreign land, rather than, lamenting, to look back; they were to live fully now though in among a foreign people.

You know, every time we move through these readings from Jeremiah, which is to say the late summer and early autumn of every third year, I always assume that Jeremiah’s prophetic weeping was about the people’s failure to live according to God’s way and the then likelihood that they’d suffer lamentable consequences for betraying the covenant. Jeremiah’s grief is in anticipation of what the Lord will do because of the people’s waywardness.

But then, when we come to this reading, I wonder if Jeremiah was more forward-thinking than simply that—if he wept not simply because the people failed to keep the covenant of old but also because the people failed to understand that Lord as ever also leading them into something new.

The fact that this “something new” was actually a land that featured early in the story. Here is where Abraham first heard the call of God who is to be found wherever you seek him. He is where Abraham arrived after having left his homeland and also his household gods. Here, in this new and foreign territory, which they resisted and resented, is the very place where they began.

Trust, therefore, Jeremiah seems to understand, that the Lord is still with you, even in circumstances that seem far from blessed.

Trust that God is faithful even in a foreign land.

When situations or machinations leave you asking in lament, “Is the Lord with us or not?” trust that the answer is, “Yes.”

That’s a tough move to pull off, I realize. Gratitude when what’s coming to you is resistance, grace when what feels most natural is resentment: it’s perhaps a little easier to achieve when you haven’t lost quite so much, or when you never expected all that much to begin with.

That would be the tenth leper.

A Samaritan walking this borderland, he had little to hope for—less even than the Israelite lepers. They at least still had a priesthood to return to that they might be declared officially clean. At the time of Jesus, the Jewish Temple was still standing, still a thing of glory; and the Temple cult was still in effect (though at the time of Luke’s writing of Jesus, the Temple was a decade-long gone). So the Jewish lepers whom Jesus had made clean and had told, “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” had priests they could indeed show themselves to. And by that proclamation that they were clean, they might also be restored to society in full communion.

But the Samaritan leper didn’t have it so good. His Temple, the one on Mount Gerizim, had been gone for over century by this point—destroyed, as it happens, by Israelite incursion as a result of the long-standing animosity between these two peoples. So, this leper had no active priesthood to go to, had no means by which to be declared clean and therefore suitable once again for social interaction. He had nothing but his sudden return to health—a lack that incidentally freed him up to notice his sudden health, to recognize it as a surprise, a blessing.

I think the timing of this incident is telling of something. Remember, immediately prior to Jesus’ encounter with these ten lepers is the event we heard last week—Jesus apparently aggravated by the disciples’ sense of entitlement, how they seemed greedy rather than grateful after all that they’d been privy to, how they seemed to want more.

This story of the ten lepers suggests what’s possible when a sense of entitlement is the furthest thing from someone’s sensibilities.

I said earlier I’ve been getting more and more comfortable with anger in recent years—my own, other people’s, even the prospect of God’s. I’m not afraid that anger is

equivalent to destruction. I'm not afraid that anger leads inexorably to violence or vengeance. Sometimes anger can be its own end, an expression unto itself that deserves attention, curiosity. Often I even trust anger.

Like lately—as the boys are growing into a new stage of life. They're ten and twelve now, so they can do a lot of things for themselves, and yet they still *act* as if they expect me to do many of those things. I've been pushing back against this—this assumption of theirs, this sense of entitlement, which I do for my sake (I'd like to live my life, not just theirs), but also for theirs.

After all, I want them to be grateful in life—about life and for life, which I want for them because some of the most pleasurable moments in my life are the ones that are overflowing with my own gratitude. That I am; that I am here; that I get to do this work among you all; that there are dogs and I love dogs; that there are books people have written for the purpose of allowing people like me to read them—and the same goes for music and the same goes for TV shows; that there are public servants who do the (what must certainly be) frustrating work of seeing to roads and bridges, schools and fire departments, social security and healthcare (things that are cautionarily called “entitlements”); that there is anything and everything: it's all so amazing. Gratitude sustains me, and sometimes stuns me.

And, as it happens, I think a sense of entitlement cancels out a sense of gratitude. The degree to which someone feels entitled to goodies in life, to getting their way, is the degree to which they are closed out from gratitude, this warm hearth where I would happily make a home.

I've never until this week thought about the relationship between anger and gratitude. It's not a direct line, but last week's worship service gave me a lot to think about and this week's lectionary readings put much of that in fuller relief.

Anger that breaks a sense of entitlement, anger that calls to account our assumption that blessing is what we've got coming to us: perhaps Jeremiah's anger had the effect he came to want for the people—that they open their eyes and look around, that they recognize, though they're not living as the expected to or even as they wanted to, that they yet are *living*, that there is a chance for truly living here even in this unfortunate circumstance. And perhaps Jesus' anger at the disciples and then encounter with the lepers had the effect it might have

had—that the disciples recognize how undeserving, yet chosen, they were for the task that had engaged them these three years hence. Disciples to the Messiah! Wow!

The journey was coming to an end. The gospel story this morning begins, “On the way to Jerusalem,” which is by way of showing that Jesus’ final days were upon him. The disciples were about to be witness to an event that the world is still coming to terms two thousand years later. And they really needed a grateful spirit in order to take it all in and moreover then to live it all out.

But even if it didn’t have that desired effect for all of those earliest disciples, it might yet us—we who are disciples too. We are privileged to be called to this journey of hope and triumphant joy and almighty love. And, yes, this might be an ill fit for the foreign land in which we dwell—fixed as is the culture where we find ourselves within in an imminent frame, closed off as so many people are to transcendence and mystery, refusing of any hope because the world is just too shockingly awful.

If we’re foreigners here, though, we’re wise to pray for the wellbeing of all around us—for in their wellbeing is our wellbeing, the kingdom to come one that is graciously to encompass all. As ever the, the choice is ours—to resist and resent the task lay before us, or to sit and truly consider it and then come to this familiar place:

Thanks be to God.