

Sunday, February 17, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Taking Root

Jeremiah 17:5-19

INTRODUCTION:

Today's reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is a recurrent theme throughout the Bible – blessings and woes, the way of life, the way of death. Through stories, prophets and especially the teachings of Jesus, God is constantly warning us of what blessing or disaster lays ahead according to our behavior. It's really no secret - behave badly and bad will most certainly follow. Do the right thing and the eventual result will always be blessing.

Jeremiah knew this fundamental truth well, which is why he viciously condemned the rulers, denounced the priests, and accused the false prophets for leading the people astray. He also confronted the people for their blatant idolatry and pronounced severe judgment **unless** the people repented.

Needless to say, Jeremiah was NOT a popular man! For his prophetic preaching he was branded by many as a traitor.

Jeremiah spoke about the blessings and woes that will naturally follow according to our individual responsibility. He desperately implores us to trust in God's reliability or, like a shrub planted in the dessert, suffer the inevitable fate.

Hear this reading from Jeremiah Chapter 17 verses 5 through 19.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

The Lord says,  
“I will put a curse on people  
who trust in mere human beings,  
who depend on mere flesh and blood  
for their strength,  
and whose hearts have turned away from the Lord.  
They will be like a shrub in the desert.  
They will not experience good things  
even when they happen!  
It will be as though they were growing in the desert,  
in a salt land where no one can live.

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My blessing is on those people who trust in me,  
who put their confidence in me.  
They will be like a tree planted near a stream  
whose roots spread out toward the water.  
It has nothing to fear when the heat comes.  
Its leaves are always green.  
It has no need to be concerned in a year of drought.  
It does not stop bearing fruit.

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The human mind is more deceitful than anything else.  
It is incurably bad. Who can understand it?  
I, the Lord, probe into people’s minds.  
I examine people’s hearts.  
I deal with each person  
according to how he has behaved.  
I give them what they deserve  
based on what they have done.

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The Word of God leading us to be a people of God...

Sometimes, (in fact, if I'm honest, many times) what I read in the Bible sticks in my throat like a chicken bone. I just can't swallow it. The sayings and proclamations are conflict with my experience and seem to oppose the theology I follow. Sometimes scripture aggressively challenges what I *think* I know about the God I worship. I get agitated when I read it and unsettled with the teaching or prophesy. So, when these scriptures come up in the lectionary, I try hard to *avoid* wrestling out a sermon and simply choose an alternative scripture that is offered for the week. But sometimes there is this spiritual pull that won't let me go and I am oddly drawn back to that chicken bone. It's like those click bait ads on the internet that you know you should avoid but for whatever reason you are compelled to take the bait. Today's click bait scripture is from the wildly eccentric and quite peculiar prophet named Jeremiah. So that's what I'm wrestling with. Maybe his words caught in your throat too. Let's see if we can wrestle out a blessing.

Please join me in prayer.

Holy God, I admit that sometimes I wonder if the scriptures actually do speak for you. Yet I also believe that your word is holy and true. Help us all this morning to see beyond the fixed ideas we may have about you and may we come to understand the blessing imbedded in these words. We ask you to guide us in Spirit and in truth. Amen

In my early 20s, I was new to the Christian faith. The church I was attending taught us to quickly and firmly categorize all of life into one of two places; heaven or hell, good or evil, saved or unsaved, us or them. Make your choice, God's way or your own way. It was a simple life, sorting things into either this bucket or that container. We all like the certainty of either black or white, blessed or cursed, sacred or profane. Binary thinking helps us make sense of our lives and guides the choices we make.

But, over the course of the last 20 years, life has taught me that our reality is not so neat and tidy. There are infinite shades of gray and the deepest truth is always wrapped in an enigma of paradox. In my experience I have, in fact, lost my life only to gain it. What had seemed to be curses have been transformed into blessings and what I thought were blessings actually turned out to be narrow prisons holding me captive to false beliefs and wishful thinking. I have discovered that to surrender to humility is in fact the source of the greatest strength I've ever known! These experiences have led me to largely abandoned the dualistic, binary thinking of my younger years and in doing so have found a deeper, wider wisdom, a more expansive God. I have found great peace sitting comfortably in paradox and in simply accepting the wonder of mystery. I'm really okay with contradiction. I truly believe that, in the spiritual realm, paradox is not a problem to be solved. For me, paradox has become a mystical portal in which we view the vastness of God. I have come to understand that the binary thinking of my youth systematically served to constrain my ability to comprehend the

Divine Presence that is all around us. Ironically, it is all too often that organized religion functions as the primary mechanism that seeks to codify and domesticate what is clearly a wild and untamable God. The mystical fullness will never be easily sorted into bins or comprehended through tidy equations. As my seminary professor was fond of saying to his students, "That is a feeble god, unworthy of worship!"

At first glance, today's scripture seems to want to reinforce a dualistic approach. Jeremiah pits curses against blessings, flesh and blood against divinity, the human intellect against the transcendent God, the natural world against the super-natural cosmos. So, maybe you can understand why I would rather not preach on Jeremiah's prophesy.

Jeremiah claims that God will put a curse on people who trust solely in mere human beings. Those who depend completely on mere flesh and blood for their strength will not find it. He says that only those who confidently trust in God will be blessed. What do you think? Has that been your experience? I know plenty of secular people who are good and kind, successful in business and appear happy but have no use for God what-so-ever. Is the human mind more deceitful than anything else? Is the mind incurably bad, as Jeremiah claims? Of course not! Our minds were created by God, and all God creates is good. So what's going on here? What is God saying to us through the prophet?

Jeremiah's claim is that when we trust in our human intellect alone, it will never be enough to make the world right. He likens the secular life to a shrub struggling to survive in the desert. It's a vivid image of a meager, malnourished existence that is barely clinging to survival. So intense and all-consuming is the struggle that even when good things happen, we will be oblivious to the blessings that rain down on us every day! We become blind to everything but our inability to find sustained contentment. Happiness is fleeting and satisfaction alludes us. That may very well be the curse. The incurably bad and deceitful mind is our inability to see beyond the temporal life. We limit our ability to grow and thrive. Our resilience is diminished.

The blessing that comes with trusting in God is not a life of comfort, free from failure or loss. But it is a life of resilience that can endure all of the enviable sufferings that come our way. Jeremiah says it's like a tree planted near a stream with deep roots. Even in long periods of drought we remain healthy and alive.

At some point in every life we come to feel like we are under some kind of curse and even our best thinking is powerless to change the outcome. This is the place where blessing comes. We are left with no alternative but to surrender to something greater than mere flesh and blood for our strength. We are forced to

our knees. It is here in the dry, lifeless ashes where we will discover our roots magically begin to take hold and new life begins to germinate. We are nourished with a living water that is not of our own making.

In a few weeks we will begin our Lenten journey. This year we will focus on courage. Each week Jean and I will preach on an aspect of courage and many of you will engage in small group discussions as well. The hope of lent is to deepen and widen our root structure, to position ourselves near the stream of living water and nurture our mind, bodies and spirits into a wholeness beyond the limits of binary thinking and into the vast limitless freedom that God offers. Let us take root in the wonder and mystery and find our courage in simply following in the Way of Jesus. AMEN.