

Jeremiah 2

THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO ME, SAYING: GO AND PROCLAIM IN THE HEARING OF JERUSALEM, THUS SAYS THE LORD: I REMEMBER THE DEVOTION OF YOUR YOUTH; YOUR LOVE AS A BRIDE, HOW YOU FOLLOWED ME IN THE WILDERNESS, IN A LAND NOT SOWN.

ISRAEL WAS HOLY TO THE LORD, THE FIRST FRUITS OF GOD'S HARVEST; ALL WHO ATE OF IT WERE HELD GUILTY; DISASTER CAME UPON THEM, SAYS THE LORD.

HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD, O HOUSE OF JACOB, AND ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. THUS SAYS THE LORD:

WHAT WRONG DID YOUR ANCESTORS FIND IN ME. THAT THEY WENT FAR FROM ME

AND WENT AFTER WORTHLESS THINGS, AND BECAME WORTHLESS THEMSELVES?

THEY DID NOT SAY WHERE IS THE LORD WHO BROUGHT US UP FROM THE LAND OF EGYPT, WHO LED US IN THE WILDERNESS, IN A LAND OF DESERTS AND PITS, IN A LAND OF DROUGHT AND DEEP DARKNESS, IN A LAND THAT NO ONE PASSES THROUGH, WHERE NO ONE LIVES?

I BROUGHT YOU INTO A PLENTIFUL LAND, TO EAT ITS FRUITS AND ITS GOOD THINGS

BUT WHEN YOU ENTERED, YOU DEFILED MY LAND, AND MADE MY HERITAGE AN ABOMINATION.

THE PRIESTS DID NOT SAY WHERE IS THE LORD. THOSE WHO HANDLE THE LAW DID NOT KNOW ME; THE RULERS TRANSGRESSED AGAINST ME; THE PROPHETS PHOPHESIED BY BA'AL, AND WENT AFTER THINGS THAT DO NOT PROFIT.

THEREFORE, ONCE MORE I ACCUSE YOU, SAYS THE LORD, AND I ACCUSE YOUR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN.

CROSS TO THE COASTS OF CYPRUS AND LOOK - SEND TO KEDAR AND EXAMINE WITH CARE

SEE IF THERE HAS EVER BEEN SUCH A THING

HAS A NATION CHANGED ITS GODS EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE NOT GODS?

BUT MY PEOPLE HAVE CHANGED THEIR GLORY FOR SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT PROFIT

BE APPALLED, O HEAVENS, AT THIS BE SHOCKED, BUT UTTERLY DESOLATE, SAYS THE LORD

FOR MY PEOPLE HAVE COMMITTED TWO EVILS: THEY HAVE FORSAKEN ME, THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER, AND DUG OUT CISTERNS THAT CAN HOLD NO WATER

I don't know about you but I find that beautiful. Heartbreakingly, beautiful.

The kind of poem that calls into being a new world – and opens up a way – provides a window to see what could be. A glimpse into a world that already is, if only we could see it, if only we could hear its music.

And I believe it hints at not only a window, a doorpost, a welcome sign and a key – a way into that world.

One of the things that has become clearer to me from living in this community is the power of the arts. To walk around this town, to see the murals, to browse in the shops read the posters on the bulletin boards and have coffee in the little restaurants....it to come face to face, as it were, with the power of the visual. It astounds me to see photography, paintings, and see the world through the eyes of those artists. They simply see things I would never see, left to my own devices. They hold out to us a different world.

Likewise with drama, the written word, the spoken word....it is the high calling of writers and poets and prophets to speak, to write into being a new world. "What if it was like THIS" they say

And our minds are opened.

And you KNOW that one word, one image, one sentence, for better or worse can tilt your world. We know that. In our upcoming Dessert Theatre that's one of the themes. One character hears someone say "God loves you just as you are" and her world is changed forever.

Poets and prophets like Jeremiah have the burden and the joy of holding out to us the possibility of that new world. The alternate, reconfiguring, WHAT IF world

What if the world looked like THIS they say. OR THIS? And suddenly the ground shifts and possibilities open andGod smiles.

Some history now: Jeremiah is living at a time when the world was shifting, whether they liked it or not. Here is a very brief history of how we got to this point.

Let's start with Abraham and Sarah, who are called to follow God into an unknown future. This is pre history – but it's the story with which the country of Israel begins. Abe and Sarah do follow, and they are promised three things: a land, descendants as many as the stars in the sky, and God's abiding presence. They are followed by all the matriarchs and patriarchs...they end up as slaves in Egypt. This becomes their defining story then: after 400 years in Egypt, God raises up a prophet who leads them out in miraculous ways – the parting of the Reed Sea – the Exodus. The story of the people becomes this: we were once slaves in Egypt but God rescued us with a strong and mighty hand and led us to freedom and into the promised land."

They wander in the desert, receive the 10 commandments, and finally enter the land they believe has been promised to them. After a period of rule by judges, they establish a monarchy. First Saul then David, then his son Solomon. God makes a promise to David that there would always be someone from his line on the throne of Israel. The temple is built, and the country is defined for better or worse by temple and king.

After Solomon, the country splits into two, a series of really bad kings, the country loses its political power and is about to be invaded by Babylon. The prophets had been yelling loudly for hundreds of years that unless they started going back to the ways of God, back to justice for the poor, seriousness in

the worship of God, there would be disaster. You may want to argue (and so you should) about whether God brings disaster on people for disobedience, but that is clearly how the prophets saw what was happening to their country. The leadership and the people had forsaken God and therefore had not kept their side of the covenant. They had been unfaithful, like an unfaithful husband or wife, and were risking the very relationship and their own wellbeing.

This is the world into which Jeremiah is born.

During his lifetime what the prophets said did come true. Babylon came in, invaded, destroyed the temple conquered the country and took the best of the population into captivity. No more king no more temple THE VERY THINGS THEY HAD COME TO RELY UPON FOR THEIR DEFINITION AS A PEOPLE. THE VERY THINGS THEY BELIEVED GOD HAD PROMISED WOULD NEVER HAPPEN.

Their whole existence is now in question – AND they are slaves again, this people who every year at Passover would celebrate their great escape from slavery in Egypt are now right back where they started. It was devastating. Everything they once believed about who they were, who God was, how the world worked...it was all in the ashes of the temple.

Into that world God calls Jeremiah Remember his call from last week?

NOW THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO ME SAYING

BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW YOU

AND BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I CONSECRATED YOU'

I APPOINTED YOU A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS

AND THEN I SAID "AH LORD GOD - TRULY I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO SPEAK FOR I AM ONLY A BOY"

BUT THE LORD SAID TO ME

DO NOT SAY I AM ONLY A BOY; FOR YOU SHALL GO TO ALL TO WHOM I SEND YOU

AND YOU SHALL SPEAK WHATEVER I COMMAND YOU

DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEM, FOR I AM WITH YOU TO DELIVER YOU SAYS THE LORD.

THEN THE LORD PUT OUT A HAND AND TOUCHED MY MOUTH AND SAID TO ME

NOW I HAVE PUT MY WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH.

SEE, TODAY I APPOINT YOU OVER NATIONS AND OVER KINGDOMS

TO PLUCK UP AND TO PULL DOWN; TO DESTROY AND TO OVERTHROW; TO BUILD AND TO PLANT

And so it is Jeremiah's burden and call to hold the pain of the people in his heart for the rest of his life.

He was taken into captivity with them, and in what he believed to be the Spirit of God, which he experienced as a fire in his belly that would not be extinguished until he spoke the truth, he spoke to them.

Today's reading is so beautiful...it's looking at the relationship between God and that people

Like a romantic relationship. Today's reading is likeit's like the words of a wife or a husband, looking back on a marriage that has gone horribly wrong....

He starts out by saying "I remember when we were first in love...do you? What happened to us?"

And then the speaker goes on to say "What's wrong with me – was I not enough for you?" This is God speaking, in the poem – What's wrong with me God says how was I not a good partner for you? And when things started to go wrong, and you felt far from me....you didn't even come looking for me – you just turned to someone else so easily even though you knew there was no love no life there.

(read verses 1-8)

It just makes your heart ache, doesn't it? It's very real, very – well – it opens up a whole different world thinking about God like that.

Just one thing I'd like to focus on for the rest of our time with this text – and that's verses 6 and 8

When things get bad, in life – and they do, and they will – when things get bad, and your world has tilted and you're questioning everything even God – a really good thing to do is say "Where is God?". That's the *very* question to ask. And really want to know the answer. Notice – (read verse 6 again) That question is also a statement, a memory of what God has done and who God has been in the past. That provides a very different context for your question where is God. Not an answer, not that – but a place from which the question can be asked. Where is God? To ask it as though the question matters. To seek the one you once loved and perhaps love still – to ask, where is the beloved – and take the time to find the answer.

In captivity Israel did that very thing. Through prophets like Jeremiah and others they forged for themselves a faith that was in ways brand new. The Judaism that had been based on king and temple was gone. A brand new Judaism was born, based on synagogue, torah and Sabbath. Without the temple they discovered that God was with them in their homes and so home Sabbath worship became the norm. Local synagogues would develop....that never would have happened if the temple had not been destroyed. They found the answer to the Question where is God, but they had to learn to ask the question first. Thanks to Jeremiah.

The quest for real life, real answers, real integrity in the midst of chaos and uncertainty is a brave and holy work.

To settle for less is to drink muddy water from a broken leaky cistern when there is a fountain of fresh water just waiting if we have the courage to turn to it.

If you are facing a time in your life of brokenness and questioning; if the things you have learned to count on for meaning and purpose have been taken from under you –

Listen to Jeremiah – what if God were like an estranged lover saying “can’t you remember when we were first in love?” What would the world be like if that’s how God was?

And when you find yourself in that place of brokenness and emptiness – when you feel you’ve been drinking from a broken cistern, ask the question. Ask where is God and be ready for the silence and then, for the fountain of new and living water.