

Trust in the Lord

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

⁶ They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

⁹ The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

¹⁰ I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

I don't know whether I have mentioned it, but I have been working at an alternative worksite for the last few weeks. I have been assisting at a Michigan Works office. Most of the people we assist are people who have recently become unemployed and either for the first time or on a regular basis find themselves needing unemployment compensation to make ends meet in the interim before returning to their place of employment or having to seek new employment because they got fired or the company went out of business. So I have seen the look on their faces when they discover they cannot trust in their jobs for their security. Military power, technological innovation, social status, and economic achievement all tempt us to see them as ultimate sources of security and personal meaning. By contrast, today's lesson suggests that reliance on these apparent sources of power and control renders us insufficiently rooted for the trials that confront us. These expressions of human accomplishment might be good, but misplaced confidence in them

will eventually prove to be shallow and unsatisfying, compared with the "blessedness" of keeping God the object of our ultimate loyalty and trust.

It is true that most of us want to win the lottery or have some long lost relative die and leave us their fortune. We think this will make us truly happy and make all our fears, anxieties and problems to away. But, I have found the more I have the more I spend. That money does not fix broken relations, nor does it give peace or joy. The prophet insists that those who trust in human assertions of power will suffer in hard times, while those who trust in God possess the deep resources necessary to flourish, even in times of drought. It seems true, however, we know that the self-indulgent often seem blessed by their narrow preoccupation. The politically or economically powerful routinely make out pretty well, while the pious frequently do not enjoy discernible reward—and in fact can be penalized—for the priority they place on God. I think the prophet wants us to expand our understanding of "blessedness" and "curse" in this passage, by turning our attention away from the immediate and materialistic preoccupation of our culture and toward more ultimate notions of human happiness and fulfillment. **James Calvin Davis**

Jeremiah stood in the midst of a time of transition. His career as a prophet began in the shadow of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It ended in a time of exile. Having lost his home along with others when the holy city was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians, he was finally forced to flee to Egypt, likely against his will, by those who had remained to the end in Jerusalem. Jeremiah had seen it all coming and counseled the people to surrender or be destroyed. Now in these verses he preached a different and equally troubling message: exile was to be the new normal. How would the people of God respond? As if they lived in a desert? Or would they be planted in this strange world like trees rooted next to flowing river? Only one response would indicate faithfulness and trust.

In times of great change and transition, though, it is not always easy to remain faithful. Jeremiah spoke about those whose hearts would turn away from the Lord. His metaphor

for the unfaithful was that they would be like a shrub in the desert, constantly searching for water that could not ever be found. You have to wonder if we are not in the same bind, though our problem instead may be the flood of things we own and the abundance of choices we face in daily living.

Even though we live with seeming prosperity, we also live in a world that does not always feel right. It is as though the threat of being an exile hangs over all our heads. The plight of exiles from war-torn parts of the world is daily news. The homeless are exiles in our own cities. The jobless are exiled from meaningful employment. To face a serious illness means being exiled from health. None of us is immune from some threat of exile. The only question for Jeremiah was, which path were the exiles to follow? Living as if life were a desert and therefore a desperate struggle? Or living as if rooted by a flowing river, even though we are being tested and tried?

Jeremiah knew about living with difficult choices. He painted word pictures of impending doom and gloom. No one would be excluded from dealing with difficult decisions. In that light he declared, "The heart is devious above all else" (v. 9). The root of the Hebrew word for "devious" is related to the name of Jacob. Therefore Jeremiah's story and all our stories are somehow connected to those ancient stories about Israel—the name Jacob was eventually given. In matters of the heart much is complicated and complex.

Jeremiah's prophecy concerned the hearts of all in Judah, and not just the hearts and minds of those holding political and religious power. While other prophets may have railed against the structures and systems that represented idolatry and faithlessness, Jeremiah saw the issues of his day in far more personal terms. The problem between God and the chosen people would not be resolved simply in palaces or by armies. No, the path to wholeness and to the restoration of a relationship with the holy would begin inside each person—deep down in the heart. Jeremiah said that it was the Lord who would "test the mind and search the heart" (v. 10).

How do we hear this prophetic call of trusting in the Lord? Are we ready for God to test our minds and search our hearts? How do we hear this on a personal level and in terms of our faith and trust? Is this good news or a threat? It is easy for us to be deceived about ourselves. We each carry inside things that we wish were different. There are the unfinished parts of our selves. We are a work in progress, we say at times. So we may think now is not the time for this test or for our heart to be searched.

Jeremiah proclaimed that God is constantly testing our minds and searching the hearts. No one is excluded from this examination. Even the prophet was tested. A few chapters later Jeremiah lamented his lot and then said, "O LORD of Hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind" (20:12). Perhaps that verse lies behind the collect for purity that addressed God in this way, "to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid," and then made this petition: "cleanse thoughts of our hearts... that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name."

At times we are all tempted, of course, even as Jeremiah must have been tempted or tested, to invent a second self, a self that dreams of a life without worries and challenges. It was God's word that called Jeremiah back to the reality of his world. One way or another we all get called back to face the reality of our world and our need to be honest about ourselves. Jeremiah's vision meant accepting the challenges of change and maybe even of exile, with faith and trust in the God who sees deep within our hearts. The God who would test the heart is not to be feared, but only to be trusted. **George H. Martin**

Our deceitful heart can learn from the life of a tree. To biblical people desperate for water, the tree was symbolic of life that could withstand drought and storms. We see trees, their trunk, branches, and leaves: but the secret to the life of a tree is not what we see, but what we cannot see: the roots, thirsty tentacles reaching deep into the earth where even a hard shovel cannot penetrate, finding hidden moisture. Life happens in a subterranean place, in the dark. The fruit of marvelous processes that operate in dark,

hidden recesses comes to light, and we find shade, beams to build a house, fruit to refresh our bodies, nests for birds, the dazzling array of color as the seasons come and go.

Trees can teach us about life with God. The tree is no independent force; the tree does not decide, "I'll go be a tree in that other field for a few weeks"; the tree is not in a big rush to flit off with sparrows or people, wherever they might be going. No, "a tree gives glory to God by being a tree."

The tree can also be the image of humanity gone awry, for it was a tree's fruit that tripped up Adam and Eve. But the tree is also the picture of our salvation, of our rescue from the curse. Jesus bore the curse of crucifixion on a tree so we could be grafted onto the tree of God's people, so we might eat from the tree in paradise forever, where the secular will be a dim memory, and everything will always be about the glory of God. Such is the hope we have when we offer our hearts to God, trusting in Him. **James C. Howell**

Jeremiah finally had a vision of a time when God would give the people a new covenant. This time God would not use stones that could be broken. If people in the time of Jeremiah thought their hearts were beyond saving, soon they would hear of God's grace given them in a new covenant that would be written on their hearts. At the Last Supper, Jesus recalled this vision of Jeremiah as he held the cup in his hands and said it was a sign of the new covenant. Jeremiah's vision lives in our common life and worship. Even those in exile can take bread and drink from a cup, and remember not only God's love in Christ Jesus, but the affirming message of Jeremiah, who said God searches our hearts. If God searches the heart, let us pray that by God's grace, God will choose to dwell there as well, as we learn to trust in God day by day! **George H. Martin**

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