

Bible Tuesday for Epiphany 6, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10

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. 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. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. They shall be like a tress 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. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? 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."

This section of Jeremiah starts at 16:1. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God proclaims that he is husband to Israel and they are his wife. However, at the time of the prophet, Jeremiah, Israel has been horribly unfaithful and God has proclaimed that he has given them over to the punished by Babylonia. As a metaphor for that, God says to Jeremiah, a young man, that "You are not to marry nor are you to have sons or daughters...for the sons and daughters born in this land, and their mothers and fathers...They shall die gruesome deaths. They shall not be lamented or buried; they shall be like dung on the surface of the ground..." Thus begins the prophecy of doom given by God to Jeremiah.

Why is God so frightfully punishing Israel, His chosen people?! The first verse of the above text gives some hint. Israel has been forging alliances with other idol worshiping nations, as opposed to trusting God. Israel has been worshiping the pagan gods of the peoples around them as opposed to worshiping God/Yahweh alone. Some Israelites have been sacrificing their infants to the idol Dagon, and their livestock and first fruits crops to Baal and Ashera/Astartes. Israel has allowed the wealthy to rip off the poor in the courts, to lend money at high interest rates (it is forbidden by God's law to charge any interest at all!) and neglect widows and orphans with impunity. There is no justice or compassion for the raped, the abused, or the chronically ill. Many in Israel do not rest on the Sabbath, or they, themselves do but they make their servants, slaves, and animals work all day every day.

While God does not promise military victory to those who trust Him, God does promise abundant life, as a tree thriving next to a stream.

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked nor take the path that sinner tread nor sit in the seat of the scoffers; but their delight is in the law [Torah, as in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy] of the Lord, and on this law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in due season and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. It is not so with the wicked, who are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

We tend to think of the book of Psalms as a collection of poems written by King David. While some psalms are ascribed to him, many are not. And while the psalms do read in Hebrew as poems, they were most certainly hymns sung in worship, during pilgrimage, and around the house. Our hymnals are organized with liturgies in the front, then interchangeable liturgical music, and then hymn in order of the church calendar: first Advent, then Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, lesser festivals (saints' days, annunciation, Transfiguration, etc.). Then come parts of the worship service, gathering, the Word, Holy Communion, Sending. Finally, faith practices: lament, praise, prayer, etc.

The psalter is organized much more loosely than our hymnals. The opening and closing of the psalter contain psalms of praise. The main body of the book of Psalms is comprised of hymns in no particular order.

Above is the first psalm in the psalter. It lays out Jewish life in a nutshell. "If you seek to walk in God's way (LAW) and meditate on that prayerfully daily, living that life, then you will flourish and thrive. If not, you will wither and be a displeasure to God."

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died!

Paul is reacting to letters written to him by the congregation in Corinth, as well as firsthand accounts folks in Corinth have given him. Obviously there are folks in the congregation in Corinth who are denying Jesus' resurrection. Why? Lots of reasons.

First, not even the Jews were of one mind regarding afterlife and resurrection. Sadducees did not believe in any kind of afterlife and found support for their position in the Hebrew Scriptures. Pharisees did believe in resurrection and afterlife and found support for their position in the Hebrew Scriptures as well.

Second, Romans and Greeks were conflicted about the afterlife as well. Some religious cults did believe in afterlife but not resurrection. Many believed the "soul" continued in some form but the body was discarded after use in this life.

Third, many early Christians, because of their former religions, believed that Jesus was raised in spirit only. Others believed that Jesus was pure God and never really died, therefore did not have to be resurrected. Both of these heresies continued on into the

4th century, necessitating church councils and the writing of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

For obvious reasons, this passage of Romans is part of the lectionary cycle for Easter Sunday.

Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with [the twelve] (whom he had just named and called) and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungering now for you will be filled. Blessed are you who are weeping now for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

While the gospels of Matthew and Mark have Jesus preaching from a hill down onto the crowds, hence the name "Sermon on the Mount", Luke has Jesus healing and teaching on a level plain. Jesus and the disciples were just up on a hill where Jesus identified the twelve soon to be apostles. Then Jesus and they come down to join the disciples to address the crowds on the plain.

Luke tells us that not only are there Jews from the area in the crowds, but also from Jerusalem. There are also Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon in the crowds! A constant theme of Luke/Acts is that the gospel is for everyone! In Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses so to tell of Jesus come down the mountain with a new teaching fits the motif. Luke emphasizes the equality of people, "The hungry are filled with good things while the rich are sent empty away," more of a role reversal than equality, but moving toward that direction.

Note that Jesus heals and ministered before he preached. People who are relieved of their suffering are in a much better place to listen and learn. Perhaps this is where St. Francis developed his teaching, "Proclaim the gospel constantly. If necessary, use words."

The word, "Blessed" is translated from the Greek "Makarios". In ancient Greek, "Makarios" referred to the gods who were above suffering, in a kind of bliss only available to the eternal and powerful. Over time it came to refer to the dead, who were now joining in the bliss of the gods. "Makarios" morphed to refer to the very rich who were, like the gods in a state of bliss that meant complete lack of hunger or fear of the future.

How remarkable it is that Jesus uses this word denoted the bliss of the gods to refer to “the poor”, or better translated, “the completely destitute.” In Hebrew Scriptures, wealthy Jews were rich because they were favored by God whereas the poor were poor because they sinned against God and poverty was their punishment. But in this sermon, Jesus says the rich are cursed by God because they are content to be full while others go hungry, content to be laughing at the expense of others, while others grieve. The poor are the blessed because rather than being cursed by God.