

Sermon – “Grumbling at Generosity”

Sunday, September 15, 2019

Scripture Readings Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Luke 15:1-10

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“A hot wind comes from me,” the prophet Jeremiah announces as words from the Lord God. “[N]ot to winnow or cleanse—a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.”¹

Jeremiah’s message was not speaking toward a point of joy and triumph for the nation of Israel. In his time Israel was run under by a foreign army, beaten to destruction, even the temple of the Lord demolished, the people captured and exiled to Babylon.

Chapter upon chapter of this prophet’s words chronicle the ways in which the people chosen by God had in that era chosen something else, and had inverted justice. If you read very long in this section of the scriptures, you’ll have no question why a sustained, lengthy diatribe denouncing the catastrophic collapse of justice and morals is called a “jeremiad”. Jeremiah looks around, or, rather, witnesses to God looking around and being profoundly unhappy with what was there to be seen. The whole society of the time was implicated in all kinds of crimes he names: allowing falsehood to reign, greed to rule, and oppression and harm to run free even while speaking words of “peace”. “No justice, no peace,” activists of today sometimes shout, and Jeremiah spoke essentially the same truth into the rampant injustices of his own day. We heard today part of his vision of the outcome of it all:

I looked on the earth, and
 lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens,
 and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains,
 and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked,
 and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and
 lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins
 before the Lord, before his fierce anger.²

Around 23 centuries later, in the Year of our Lord 1748, a storm came upon the merchant ship *Greyhound* in the North Atlantic. This was, for a man aboard that ship named John Newton, a rescue

¹ Jeremiah 4:11b-12 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Jeremiah 4:23-26 (*NRSV*).

ship. He had been a slave trader, a crew member whose vulgar and recklessly rude ways were excessive even by the standards of the 18th Century sailors who were his shipmates.

Newton could have placed himself well in those words from the prophet Jeremiah, words of a hot, pursuing anger of God, but he would not yet have known or understood that at the time, for as of yet he did not yet know the pursuer, nor the nature of the pursuit.

As widely varying thinkers as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Neil Gaiman have opined that evil carries within it the seeds of its own destruction, and John Newton's life could easily be the example they had in mind. He was an enslaver of human beings, a ready participant in the buying and selling of persons for profit and wealth, a man so far lost in his loutishness and disregard for moral ways that he was found insufferably obnoxious even by his own partners in this already evil work, who ultimately could not tolerate him and imprisoned and enslaved *him*, first aboard ship, and then by handing him off to a slave dealer in West Africa, who gave him over into the slave ranks of his wife, where he was abused and mistreated just like those he had shipped across the oceans.

It was after Newton's father heard of this, and asked others in the sea trade to search him out, that he was eventually found and rescued by the captain of the ship *Greyhound*. And it was on his voyage back home aboard this ship that he encountered the storm. John Newton had renounced faith, so he would not at this time have likely recognized in his own life the parallels to what we heard from Jeremiah, of God's anger bringing destruction, tearing down evil and making desolate its home.

Nor was Newton an educated man, so he may not have known of his spiritual kinship with another prophet, Jonah, who if you remember was given purpose by God and turned his back on it. Jonah was pursued fiercely by God, angrily, and he, too, was come upon by a storm at sea.

But what John Newton did know was that he was, in the very moment of his seeming escape, caught in a dangerous, deadly tempest. He had just witnessed a man washed overboard from a spot in which he had, moments before, himself been standing. He knew the ship was taking on water, and he brought God into the mix apparently without, at first, thinking about it. "If this will not do," he exclaimed, after adopting a plan where he and another man tied themselves down so they could operate the ship's pump without being swept over the side, "then Lord help us."

For hours he worked that pump, and when the storm subsided, the crippled ship, severely lacking in food, limped onward for two weeks before making port. It was at this time that, for some reason, Newton could not let go of the memory of the words he had uttered in the middle of the danger—"Lord help us"—the rescue call thrown out to God, and he found himself pondering his worthiness to receive such help. This experience became what he later pointed to as his moment of being turned toward God.

And it was quite a turn, eventually, for this man who was so profane in his manner and language that he astonished ship captains, who was a ready accomplice in the Atlantic slave trade, ultimately became a clergyman, and penned the words to the hymn "Amazing Grace". It was by no means an instantaneous turnaround; in fact, it took years of the new truth growing in him to crowd out the old commitments and end their grip on him, but he became, in time, someone who was capable of

looking with open eyes upon his own guilt and truly *seeing* it, recognizing that his recovery from being that person could only be named as a gift of the grace of God.

One thing you may have noticed was that our two Bible readings today present an appearance of sharp contrast between two different pieces of the mystery of the nature of God. From Jeremiah, the hot wind and anger of God's perfect justice, rolling in to tear down and leave nothing of the former things which served the ways of injustice. And at the same time, from Luke:

Now all the *tax collectors* and *sinner*s were coming near to listen to [Jesus].

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow *welcomes* sinners and eats with them."³

We may not at first know what to do with the juxtaposition between these approaches, both appearing in the same Bible: the hot anger against unrighteousness, *and* the welcome of the unrighteous. John Newton found himself the living embodiment of both. He had run a ruinous life, found an angry God in pursuit of him, heard the words of that God, and they were, of all things, merciful! Restorative. Cleansing. "'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear / And Grace, my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear / The hour I first believed."⁴

It is a perplexing thing, because we in ourselves do not often know how to reconcile the good and true anger that comes with the love of justice with the mercy that comes with the love of human beings. Even the prophet Jonah, whom I mentioned earlier, had a hard time with this.

Do you remember his story? He was called by God to preach, in the great and sinful city of Nineveh, of God's coming judgment. Jonah ran instead, in the exact opposite direction. He boarded a ship to escape the orders he had been given, but God chased him down.

He, too, was hit by a storm, in which he, too, recognized that in it God was speaking to him. He told the sailors to throw him overboard to save their lives, and when they did, the storm stopped...for them. Jonah still had to be swallowed up by a great fish and spend three days in its belly before he was ready to come around. He finally gave in, travelled to Nineveh, preached loudly of God's wrath...and what happened to the people of that city? They *heard* what he said. They repented, hoped for God's mercy, and they were given grace, spared from punishment.⁵

But Jonah? He watched this happen and he got angry.

He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."⁶

³ Luke 15:1-2 (NRSV).

⁴ John Newton, "Amazing Grace".

⁵ See Jonah chapters 1-3.

⁶ From Jonah 4:1-3 (NRSV). As Jesus does with the grumbling onlookers in Luke 15, God argues with Jonah following this exclamation, suggesting the inappropriateness of hoping for the destruction of sinners rather than their redemption.

This sounds an awful lot like the scribes and the Pharisees from the Luke passage, doesn't it? Grumbling in anger and frustration to see people who do not deserve mercy receive it. Who is this Jesus, who will let go of people's sins and welcome them into his company?

But John Newton knew what was going on. "This fellow *welcomes sinners*." This is a Gospel—good news! God brought him ruin, just as promised to Israel in Jeremiah, but you may remember one odd little line in God's words there: "yet I will not make a full end." Newton's ruin was the devastation of wickedness and injustice; these were to be allowed to rule no more. And only in the destruction of the structures of wrong could the redemption of the person who inhabited those structures take place. It is a story not of destruction *versus* redemption, but a story of destruction *as* redemption. It is the same story we watch Jesus walk and summon us to follow: death as the path to life. Our rebellion, what Paul calls our slavery to sin,⁷ the foolish, wayward and irredeemable crusts we have constructed upon ourselves and by which we are then constrained, none of this will survive the fire of God's righteousness.

But we can. The grace of being stripped of our worst pieces is indeed something we surely fear, yet it is truly a grace, for it will bring forth new, clean selves, allow us to live into the truest nature of our identity as bearers of the image of God. "This fellow welcomes sinners." What does that mean? It means that God welcomes me! It means God welcomes you!

It means that even though we eventually face the scary light of perfect, relentless, unstoppable righteousness when we finally meet the face of God, we are welcomed into the arms of that light.

We start out hearing Jeremiah's strong words with great discomfort, for they are harsh. He warns that there is no hiding place from God. But there is, he also declares, refuge and deliverance in God's arrival...if we are prepared to leave injustice behind in the process.

From Jeremiah 7:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.⁸

In other words, this is the same God we hear of from Jesus Christ, too; the God who still, after everything, welcomes us, who relentlessly hunts down the wayward sheep—in order to bring it back. When we are given a word which convicts us, like John Newton was given, like the people of Nineveh were given, like every sinner who has ever encountered Jesus has been given, it is a word whose

⁷ See Romans 6:15-23. Jesus himself uses similar language also in John 8:31-36.

⁸ Jeremiah 7:3-7 (NRSV).

deepest purpose is calling us. We are *welcome*. May we hear this, believe this, and take joy when it finds both us and every sinner on the road beside us. Amen.