

Jeremiah's life and the book of Jeremiah are one and the same. He wrote what he lived and he lived what he wrote. There is no dissonance between his life and his book. Some people write better than they live; others live better than they write. Jeremiah, writing or living, was the same Jeremiah.

He is the prophet of choice for many when we find ourselves having to live through difficult times and want some trustworthy help in knowing what to think, how to pray, how to just carry on.

We live in such disruptive times right now. Jeremiah's life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history; the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong *did* go wrong. And Jeremiah was right in the middle of it all, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing.

Jeremiah stood in the midst of a time of transition. Having lost his home along with others when the holy city was conquered and destroyed, 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 folks to surrender or be destroyed. Now in these verses we heard he preached a different and equally troubling message: exile was to be the new normal. And the big question was—How would the people of God respond?

In times of great change and transition 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 sort of bind in the midst of this darn pandemic?

And Covid is just one piece of living in a world that does not always feel right. It is as though the threat of being an exile hangs over all our heads. There is the plight of exiles from war-torn parts of the world. The homeless are exiles in our own towns and cities. The jobless are exiled from meaningful employment. To face a serious illness, such as Covid, means being exiled from health. Sometimes that involves long term effects on our health. Seems like 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. Does make you ponder how Jeremiah's story and all OUR stories are somehow connected to those ancient stories about Israel.

Jeremiah's prophecy concerns 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 been railing 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. His stance was that 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”.

Are we ready for God to test our minds and search our hearts? Indeed, 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 might say at times! Does that mean that the present time is prime time for our heart to be searched?? Jeremiah claims that God is constantly testing our minds and searching our hearts. No one is excluded from this examination, no matter how disruptive or uncomfortable that might be. Even the prophet himself is tested. A few chapters later in our reading Jeremiah lamented his lot and then said, “O Lord of Hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind”.

At times we are all tempted 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. The God who sees deep within our hearts is the same God who would test the heart and would want us to realize that it is not something to be feared, but something to be trusted.

As we turn to our Gospel read, Luke’s version is known as the Sermon on the Plain. Tradition holds that Jesus also gave a Sermon on the Mount—according to the text in Matthew. The gospel writers must have chosen the geography for a reason. By putting Jesus on a mountain, perhaps Matthew wanted us to think of Moses on Mount Sinai. As Moses gave the law to Israel on high, so Jesus gave the gospel on high also. By putting Jesus on a plain, perhaps Luke wanted us to see how accessible Jesus was—not above but among the folks to whom he spoke.

What came out of Jesus' mouth were the beatitudes—a series of blessings he pronounced on those who were there. The form of speech he used was a common one. Beatitudes are short, two-part affirmations that sum up common knowledge about the good life. The form of what Jesus said was familiar to his hearers. He said, “Blessed are...” and they all got ready for some nuggets of wisdom. But the *content* of what he said no doubt rocked their world. “Blessed are....you who are poor? ....who are hungry? ...who weep now? Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man...?”

It was a shocking substitution of bad things for good things, in which blessedness was equated with the very things folks did their best to avoid—poverty, hunger, grief, hatred. In every case, Jesus made those equations even stronger by tacking a reversal of fortune onto them. “Blessed are you who are poor,” he said, “for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

As you may be able to guess by now, the impact of the beatitudes has everything to do with who *you* are! If you happen to be one of the hungry folks, then what Jesus is saying sounds like darn good news. If you happen to be one of the well-fed folks, then it sounds like pretty bad news. The words themselves do not change, mind you. They simply sound different depending on who happens to be hearing them.

One of my favorites, Barbara Brown Taylor, has this to say about it.

“The catch is, the beatitudes are not advice. There is nothing about them that remotely suggests Jesus was telling anyone what he thought they should do. When Jesus is giving advice, it

is hard to miss. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” That is definitely advice—love, do, bless, pray—one imperative after the other, with no distinction between rich or poor, hungry or well-fed. It is the same list for all, whether they happen to be weeping or bent over with laughter.

The beatitudes are NOT like that. In them, Jesus does not tell anyone to do anything. Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world’s lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is not even judgement. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel.”

Well, neither the going up nor the coming down is under our control, as far as I can tell. But wherever we happen to be the promise is the same.

We are God’s beloved, and we are called to be whatever God has created us to be. Nothing less. And with that, perhaps we should be less concerned about our reputations. UCLA basketball coach John Wooden used to say to his players: don’t worry about your reputation because that is only what other people *think* you are. Worry about your character because that is who you actually *are*.

Peter Eaton says this: “Our God is the God of those who have nothing *but* God. That actually includes us too, even if our need

of God is masked in part by our prosperity or privilege. In the final analysis, we are as naked as the poorest of the poor, and our possessions are no tabernacle for everlasting. To paraphrase Johnny Cash, we must not be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use; but conversely we must not be of such earthly use that we are no longer heavenly minded.”

Blessed are you who loose your grip on the way things are, for God shall lead you in the way things shall be.