

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
11th Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 28:14-22; Psalm 46; Hebrews 12:15-29; Luke 13:22-30

RCL Readings

Introduction. This Sunday is the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. We are almost halfway through the season of Ordinary time. Ordinary time can stretch out to feel very ordinary yet it is anything but when God is involved.

Common Theme. Never mind a liturgical season – when you are halfway on a journey, it can be just as difficult to return the way you've come as it is to go forward. Life can be like that too in mid-life – too old to be considered young and too young to be considered elderly. Yet youth and ageing present their own unique challenges. This comes through in all of today's readings. To Jeremiah, he is too young – “only a boy” to be a prophet, let alone a prophet to successive kings and a kingdom in upheaval. Psalm 71 is sometimes known as “A Psalm for Old Age”. The Gospel reading intersects a story of a woman who has been suffering tremendously for 18 years from a crippling infirmity. The writer of Hebrews offers fearsome imagery, including the shaking of the heavens, which gives pause to ponder no matter what our age or stage or circumstances. God is present throughout to bring hope and life, refuge and restoration.

Jeremiah 1:4-10. Jeremiah is one of the major prophets of the Bible. His life and pronouncements are written in the book that bears his name. His words are among the most pessimistic in the Bible. But this is hardly surprising as he lived at a time of great upheaval in Jewish history. His ministry took place during the reign of King Josiah, who ruled the southern kingdom of Judea in the seventh century BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrian empire in 721 BCE, and the ten Jewish tribes were exiled. When Babylonia rose to power in the region, Jeremiah prophesied that all would not go well at their hands, much to the disdain of the incumbent ruling classes. He endured beatings, plots against his life, had to go into hiding, and eventually was also exiled. He lived to see the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Beth Hamikdosh, the Holy Temple. Jewish tradition holds that Jeremiah wrote the Book of *Eichah* (Lamentations) which Jewish people read on Tisha B'Av, a day of fasting and mourning that commemorates the destruction of the first and the second temples.

When Jeremiah first receives a word that God has appointed him to be a prophet (1:5), he protests that he is only a boy (1:6). God disregards his protest and commands Jeremiah to “go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you” (1:7). But God backs his command “to go” with the promise to always be present: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you” (1:8). There is a distinct pattern in scripture, with a great challenge comes great promise. When Joshua takes over the mantle of leadership from Moses to lead the people into the promised land, God says to Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Josh 1:5) and also “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with

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you wherever you go” (Josh 1:9). Given what Jeremiah had to utter and what he had to endure, he would need to hold onto God’s promise with all his heart. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the verses from Jeremiah and Joshua about having courage and not being afraid are given to encourage people facing their own hardships.

Psalm 71:1-6. This psalm is sometimes subtitled “A Song for Old Age”. Verse 9 reads: “Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone” and, in verse 18, “Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.” A Jewish mystic called Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer re-read verse 9 as “Don't cast me away from passion! Don't let me see myself as an old person reading an old letter - let it become a new letter for me!” (Noach 68), implying that no matter how old we are, we have the ability to see ourselves and the world around us anew. Rabbi Benjamin Resnick comments that the Babylonian Talmud goes to great lengths to show that Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef was illiterate until the age of 40, but nevertheless became an ancient sage. He was later given the title *Rosh la-Hakhamim* – “Chief of the Sages”. In other words, we are never too old to learn and grow!

Notwithstanding this important lesson, the set lectionary reading strangely ends well short of these defining verses to do with old age. The first six verses are the classic reminders found consistently across the psalms that God is a place of refuge – “my rock and my fortress” (vv. 1, 3) and our deliverer or rescuer (vv. 2, 4). God has been a source of hope for the psalmist from birth (vv. 5, 6), throughout life, even until and into old age. There is a fascinating Jewish custom that dates back to Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (also known as Baal Shem Tov) that the psalm that corresponds with your age should be recited every day. If you have turned twenty and are now in your twenty-first year of life, you recite Psalm 21. If you are 70, having reached threescore and ten years, then you pray Psalm 71, a psalm about hope and new possibilities in the face of old age. How appropriate!

Hebrews 12:18-29. The imagery from verse 18 onwards is both awesome and fearsome. The events of Mount Sinai are recounted with fire, darkness, storm and trumpet blast (12:18-19), divine words spoken (12:19), animals being stoned to death for touching a holy place (12:20). Moses is even said to have been terrified (12:20). This is contrasted with the events of Mount Zion where a heavenly Jerusalem is revealed with angels joyfully assembled (12:22). The work of Jesus as mediator is affirmed. Instead of the blood of Abel that cries out for justice, the blood of the new covenant established in and through Jesus speaks a better word (12:24). “Father, forgive them,” cries out Jesus from the cross. With utterances worthy of the prophets of old, the writer of Hebrews calls people to be thankful, worshipping God with reverence and awe (12:28), and warns that there is no escape for those who refuse him (12:29).

Luke 13:10-17. Typical commentaries on this healing event portray a very negative view of Jews and Judaism. Here are two examples. The first is by Michael Wilcock in the *Bible Speaks Today* series. The second is by Tom Wright in the *Luke For Everyone* series. Wilcock says:

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Both the parable and the miracle which Luke records next (concerning the barren fig tree and the crippled woman) are about religion: not real inward religion, whose spiritual and moral aspects have been touched on already, but religion as an institution. It is on the religious system of Judaism as it existed in the time of Jesus that we see the searchlight of his gaze now turned.

So the searchlight of Jesus focuses on the sabbath, which Wilcock describes as follows: “The sabbath day was an epitome of Jewish religion: a gift from God, full of spiritual meaning, but so fossilized and encrusted with traditions that it had become practically lifeless.” To Wilcock, this passage speaks of “the hypocritical Jews.” Tom Wright takes a different tack, but no less negative one. He likens the tying up of the woman by Satan to refer to “the one who has Israel as a whole in his grip... The enemy, the accuser, has had Israel in his power these many years, and Jesus’ kingdom-message is the one thing that can free her. But Israel’s insistence on tight boundaries, including the rigid application of the sabbath law, is preventing it happening.” A lifeless religion, the hypocritical Jews, Israel in the grip of Satan – these negative generalities, and other similar commentaries on the text, say more about our anti-Jewish heritage, than anything else.

By way of contrast, David Flusser (*The Sage of Galilee*) says “for Jesus there was, of course, the peculiar problem of his relationship to the law and its precepts, but this arises for every believing Jew who takes his Judaism seriously... the Synoptic Gospels, if read through the eyes of their own time, still portray a picture of Jesus as a faithful, law-observant Jew.” In another healing on the sabbath (Luke 6: 6-11), Jesus alludes to what Flusser calls “a well-known classical expression of the Jewish humane approach to the other”. An ancient rabbinical saying says,

Therefore only a single man was created in the world, to teach that if any man has caused a single soul to perish Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if any man saves alive a single soul Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved alive a whole world.

According to Flusser, this saying was known by the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BCE – 40 CE). A positive view of some sabbath activities is also referenced by Jesus. So perhaps Jesus was not making a generalised statement against the law, religion, and Judaism in particular by healing this woman but an important statement about his own authority and radical life-giving presence. In so doing he also affirmed and displayed the true meaning of the Sabbath within Judaism as he was the Word made flesh.

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ACNA Readings

Introduction. One of the strengths of the lectionary is that it makes us wrestle with the hard teachings of the Bible as well as being edified by other more positive and gentle teachings. We would be foolish only to study and learn our favourite verses in the Bible and disregard the whole counsel of God. Jesus both teaches us the good news of the Kingdom and warns us of the dangers of ignoring his message.

Common Theme. Complacency is the feeling of contentment and self-satisfaction with the unawareness of impending danger and trouble. Complacency is very subtle in how it enters our personal lives as well as our communities and slowly erodes our faith with apathy and indifference. The Scriptures admonish us to be diligent, awake and aware of our spiritual condition and the times we are living in. Complacency in matters of faith can be very dangerous.

Isaiah 28:14-22. The people of Israel have several everlasting covenants with the Lord: the covenants of Abraham, David and Moses, and of course the New Covenant. Now Isaiah has some harsh things to say about the leadership in Jerusalem for they have made another covenant, a false covenant, this time with death and Sheol (the underworld). In context this is referring to an alliance with Egypt for protection against Assyria. Isaiah proclaims that this new covenant is based on lies and falsehoods. The Egyptians are weak; there is no security nor future with them and the alliance will only lead to destruction. The situation spiritually is the same as it is politically. God had established his people in Zion and the Israelites should have trusted in the promises of God and not embraced the lies of the world. They had become too comfortable thinking that God would not notice their sins or how they trusted in the strength on men or perhaps, if he did notice, do nothing about it. Isaiah proclaims something once thought impossible: the Lord who had fought against the Philistines and the Amorites would now rise up and fight against his own people. We should not become complacent into thinking God is not a God of justice but only a God of love. This would be a dangerous misrepresentation of the Lord. God will deal with sin. Perhaps we ought to deal with it first.

Psalm 46. The sons of Korah had to make a difficult choice during the wanderings in the wilderness. Do they side with their own flesh and blood or choose to side with the Lord? They chose God and watched as the earth swallowed up their rebellious family. By the time of King David the descendants of Korah served as Levites in the sanctuary, very much involved in musical worship. With this tragic past as part of their history the sons of Korah encourage us to look to God as our source of help and refuge in times of distress and trial. God is a very present help; he is close to us and not someone distant and removed from our situation. God is described as a mighty fortress, he is heralded as the commander of heavenly armies, he is powerful and strong and can certainly afford protection to his people. There is no need for us to surrender to fear nor lose hope for the future. In verse 10, the imperatives “*Be still and know that I am God*” are in the plural (הִרְפוּ וַיֵּדְעוּ). Our acceptance of the kingship of God and his love is not only at

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an individual level but as a community. Being still does not refer to inactivity but rather we should stop raging against God's will and know he cares for the nations and the world he created.

Hebrew 12:15-29. Salvation is both an individual event and a community experience. Hebrews urges the community to look out for each other so that “no one fails to obtain the grace of God” and subsequently loses eternal life. This section actually begins in the previous verse 14 where the author admonishes us to pursue peace and holiness, concluding that without holiness no one will see the Lord. The idea of “pursuing peace” was a mitzvah for Jewish people in the Late Second Temple Period and is still a pursuit in modern Judaism. A generation before Jesus, the sage Hillel said: “Be the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to Torah” (Pirke Avot 1:12). Hebrews now gives us even more reasons why we should pursue peace as it pertains to the salvation of others around us. The author contrasts the physical Mount Sinai with the heavenly Mount Zion to describe how much everything is superior in the New Covenant. In Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period, the blood of Abel features prominently in various judgment scenes of the world to come, such as the Testament of Abraham. In that text, all mankind must first process past Abel who sprinkles his blood on them, and only the righteous proceed. Hebrews makes it clear that the blood of Jesus is far superior to that of the blood of Abel. Verses 25 to 29 then give us another warning not to ignore the voice of Jesus. We are admonished by the author not only to listen to Jesus as individuals but also to care for our neighbours by making sure they listen, too. Not only should I be concerned about my own personal sexual immorality but I should be concerned for my neighbours' godlessness as well. Sin is both a personal as well as a community issue. Loving our neighbour includes helping each other overcome the works of the enemy.

Luke 13:22-30. After setting his face towards Jerusalem in Luke 9, Jesus does not make a straight line for the Holy City. He travels slowly, meandering between the towns and villages, teaching as he goes. In an unnamed village by an unnamed person, Jesus is asked a very pertinent question of the day: are only a few people going to be saved? The response of Jesus is to make it personal. He does not say what God is going to do regarding who or how many people will be saved but rather focuses on our individual responsibility towards the Kingdom. “Make every effort,” says Jesus. We should note that Jesus is not talking to pagans who know nothing about God; these are Jewish people with a long sacred history. The concept that only a relatively few people would actually enter the Kingdom was a well-known part of Second Temple Period literature. In the book of 4 Ezra 8:3, it says, “Many have been created but only a few saved”. This is reminiscent of the saying of Jesus in Matthew 22:14, “Many are called but few are chosen”. The concept of a narrow door is found in the Testament of Abraham 11:1-5 which describes the judgment scene at the end of time in which the inhabitants of the world either go through a narrow or wide gate. Again this is paralleled in the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14 where he urges us to take the narrow option. Jesus is challenging the people, and us, in their complacency. In his teaching, we discover that the people who think they already belong in the kingdom find themselves in the end to be excluded and on the outside of the door. The people knocking on the outside for entrance complain that

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they know the master of the house, that they once had fellowship with him. However, in rebuke, they are called “evildoers”. They are on the outside of the house, not because of something they don’t know or because of not knowing who the master of the house was, but because of something they have done. They have done evil!

This is a message for the Church today. People who think they fellowship with the Lord should not become complacent in their knowledge of the Scriptures or of Jesus the Messiah. We are called to strive to enter the narrow gate. What is one of the obstacles? Works of evil. This is not works righteousness. Good works don’t gain you entrance. It’s works of evil that keep you outside. There is a difference.

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