

Jeremiah 2:4-13

4 Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 5 Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

6 They did not say, "Where is the Lord
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?"

7 I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.
But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.

8 The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers[a] transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.

9 Therefore once more I accuse you,
says the Lord,
and I accuse your children's children.

10 Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.

11 Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.

12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the Lord,

13 for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

Psalms 81:1, 10-16

1 Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

10 I am the Lord your God,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

11 “But my people did not listen to my voice;
Israel would not submit to me.

12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
to follow their own counsels.

13 O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!

14 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies,
and turn my hand against their foes.

15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,
and their doom would last forever.

16 I would feed you[d] with the finest of the wheat,
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.[a] 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” 6 So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?”

7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus[a] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and

the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Sermon: Consistently Inconsistent

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This past month has been a time of very challenging scriptures from the lectionary. It's a tough time in the church year as we begin preparation for advent and the joyful arrival of Christ into his creation. It's a time of deep reflection and soul searching, it's a time for some hard truths to be faced. So, while the last few weeks have had some pretty heavy lessons, you'll be pleased to know that this week.....is no exception.

That's not completely true, there are some amazing words of hope in the Hebrews reading and we'll be spending some time exploring that but really, the tone of the lectionary hasn't really changed much, and the reason for that is that the tone of Israel hasn't changed very much.

We've been reading from Jeremiah. Jeremiah has a very hard job. He sees disaster coming toward the people that he loves. Remember the promise and the warning of God – If you live the way I tell you, you will prosper in the land I am giving you, and you will be a great light, a blessing to all the nations around you.

But, if you don't follow my decrees, if you live as the other nations do, you will become just like them, and will be consumed up by them.

What Jeremiah sees is that God's people are no longer living as a special people. They are acting in the same self seeking manner as the rest of the world – worse really, because being the people of God they should know better. Those who used to be mistreated slaves in Egypt are mistreating their own people – they are using debt to leverage their brothers and sisters off the land God gave to them to increase their own profits. The courts are corrupt, only serving the needs of the rich and powerful while the weak are trampled underfoot. Jeremiah sees that his own people are destroying themselves, they're destroying each other, and that a foreign army is rising up to finish off the job. There's a storm coming – Jeremiah sees it, and it's his job to warn the people.

But of course nobody wants to listen. The people in power are comfortable, things are going their way and life couldn't be better – profits are up – who needs that other kind of prophet to bring you down? They don't understand that Jeremiah is trying to save them, he's trying to warn them. The people didn't listen, but let us listen to the words of Jeremiah and hear what he was trying to say.

Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.

5 Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

The people have turned away from God, so naturally there must be a reason for this. God created humankind as creatures that have free will – we are rational beings - we observe the reality around us, we make assessments, and then we make decisions based on good evidence – at least, that's what my humanist brother tells me.

So God picks up this mood and says – what is it exactly that convinced you to live away from me. Since I am the one who brought you out of slavery in Egypt, and brought you into this land, fought all your battles and defeated all your enemies. If you have turned away from me then surely you must have a pretty good reason.

But it turns out that there is no answer to this question. It brings to my mind the quote by GK Chesterton ‘The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.’ In other words, there is no specific complaint against God or Christianity – there is no fault in God. It just seems like it might be a lot of effort and we don’t want to invest in it to find out if God is in fact who he says he is.

Apparently the same was true back in Jeremiah’s day. It is important to note that here God is not challenging those who are actively wrestling with their faith. There are big questions that we ask when we face difficulty. Often our faith is called into question when we get a serious illness or have an accident. If we lose our jobs, or the market wipes out a big chunk of our retirement savings we begin to ask why – certainly it is often the case that when we lose someone very dear to us, when our world gets shaken down to the core we have some serious questions for God.

Those questions are real, and God welcomes those questions – the psalms are full of them – Will you forget me forever? ... How long will my enemy triumph over me? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; And by night, but I have no rest. Yet You are holy, You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

God is not afraid or offended by our deep questioning of him and of our faith – doubt is always going to accompany belief – that’s ok. But that’s not what we hear in the passage from Jeremiah. God is asking – what’s the charge, but the people don’t have any specific issue that is driving them away from God.

And as a result of this is that the people begin to worship worthless things, and become worthless themselves because their actions were never intentional. The words used here for worthless is the Hebrew word Hebel, which we find in Ecclesiastes translated as vanity or futility. It means something like a vaporous puff of wind. It is insubstantial, virtual – like a pokemon stored in your phone.

An insubstantial people worshiping virtually nothing. Perhaps things haven’t changed all that much in three thousand years.

The way people got to that point was not through any conscious decision making, Judah began its rejection of God simply by no longer telling God’s story.

The people did not say,

Where is the Lord

 who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
 in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
 in a land that no one passes through,
 where no one lives?

The priests did not say, “Where is the Lord?”

Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,

Jeremiah writes about the people, the priests, the handlers of the law, the rulers, the prophets – none of them were asking ‘where is the Lord?’ Nobody was looking for God because nobody remembered God. They had forgotten what God had done in the past, and so they expected nothing from the present.

A couple of weeks ago we sang ‘tell me the old, old story’ - or perhaps it was at the Cedarwood worship. The point is, we need to hear the story, our story, again and again or we forget. We forget who God is, and in so doing we forget who we are. We become lost just as the people of Jeremiah’s day did. When we stop asking where the Lord is, we stop thinking about things like justice and righteousness, and instead we start becoming self-serving and ignorant.

We trade in our living spring of water for a cistern that doesn’t hold water. We not only abandon our spring, our source, we aren’t even able to hold only what we’ve been given in our cracked cisterns. And as we hear in this morning’s psalm, God will let us go in our stubborn ways and do whatever we want. God will allow us to turn away from him, to dig our own cisterns, and even to bring ruin upon ourselves. God will not force his will upon us.

The problem is that we are inconsistent, we are unthinking. But thank God that our salvation does not depend on our behaviour - God is the consistent one. It is God who is the author and keeper of covenants.

The writer of Hebrews states that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. This is a beautifully powerful statement that we can skim through without thinking about it – but what does it mean that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow? Jesus is consistent. Though he is begotten of God, there never was a time when Jesus wasn’t. There never was a place where Jesus wasn’t. There never will be a time or a place where Jesus isn’t present, where God is not active. This is good news. This is the basis for our hope.

Because our consistent God has said, ‘I will never leave you nor will I forsake you’ then our own inconsistency and our own fickle nature aren’t necessarily the end of the story - as long as we keep returning to God’s consistency. As long as we keep telling our history – our His story – as long as we keep returning to the fountain of living water.

In Jeremiah God accused the people of no longer seeking him, of no longer asking where is the Lord? So where is the Lord? Do you ask that question? Psalm 46 tells us to be still and know God. Where is the stillness in your life? When is the stillness in your life?

You see, the people of Jeremiah’s time didn’t know how to make time in their lives – remember, they hadn’t made any decision to reject God, they just got too busy making money and building grand homes and they no longer had the time to ask – where is God?

The world of today is not so different than Jeremiah’s world. We’re so wrapped up in worldly things that we forget that we’re heavenly beings. We’re so immersed in the temporal we forget that we’re eternal. Jesus the Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever, and he invites us into his eternity.

Instead of continuing to talk, I'd like to invite you to experience a moment of eternity. Let's take a Sabbath moment on this Sabbath day. It may feel a little awkward – we're so used to filling up every second with sounds and flashing lights – but we'll do it anyway. I'll leave you with the question – where is God?

Your mind will wander – when it does, don't get worked up, just gently return to the question – where is God. Where has God been in the past week, where is God right now, where do I expect to see God in the next few days? Let's take a couple of minutes.

(reflection time)

I like to come in here early in the morning – before the traffic starts up outside, before Nancy comes in, or Hilda. I come into this sanctuary and I read the word of God to the empty pews. I shout it out loud. I pray in here – for you, for my family, for myself. There is something about a space where people have been praying for generations – there is something holy, something tangible – I can feel it, smell it – taste it in the air.

When I ask where is God, I know that God is here – in the air, in his word, in the wood – in you. This week I felt God in this building, I felt God while praying in a Hamilton hospital room, I felt God while cooking up jam in my kitchen. What I've learned is that this whole business of asking where God is has nothing to do with the fact that God is hard to find, or is hiding in some way – it's all about us taking the time to just stop for a moment and look around.

This is what God is calling us to do. This is the same lesson we learned about the Sabbath a little while ago – setting aside time to intentionally connect with God, to drink from the fountain of living water. Because God is consistent. God is always there, patiently waiting, wanting to give. It is us who are inconsistent, it is us who wander away, distracted by some shiny thing the world puts before us.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever, Amen and Halleluiah