

Sunday February 13, 2022

Desert Living

by Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! Sometimes reading the Bible can feel a little flat. Or really REALLY flat. Sometimes it can feel out of focus. We either don't know what to do with a story that seems so distant and remote from our lives, or we have heard a story so often that we kind of pass write over it. Sure, the words are comforting, but they don't seem fresh or new to us anymore. We think, "Yes, we've seen this episode." This is a rerun. Has the Bible ever seemed like a lot of reruns to you? It certainly has for me.

Sometimes when I hear the scriptures read on a Sunday, my first impulse is to think, "Yeah, so what?" I feel like I've walked into a room to find the television on and am watching the middle of a movie. I have no idea how it started or where it's going. I just get to see this little bit before I change the channel or turn the TV off. Or, it's like watching someone channel surf a bit. The Jeremiah Channel. Click. The Psalms Channel. Click. 1 Cori...click. I really don't like Paul and his informercials. Luke TV. Click.

In Jeremiah today, what we miss are the first four verses where the prophet declares that God's people are so accustomed to sin, to their mindless habits, to their own way of doing things, that it is literally engraved, carved into their hearts with a diamond point. As you might know, a diamond is so hard and so sharp it can mark up just about anything. Jeremiah declares our selfishness, our certainty, or exerting control over every aspect of our lives and leaving God out of it has literally set grooves into our hard hearts. The prophet declares, Cursed. Cursed are those who trust in the world. On their own strength. By their own propulsion through life.

This is hard for us to hear. We like to believe we really are in charge; that we call the shots. That is, sure calling on God for in an emergency is fine, but we have the day-to-day stuff handled. Prayer isn't going to help me pay my taxes or cook dinner tonight. Or, if we

habitually pray at a certain time of day like in the morning or before a meal, it can seem like just a reflex like putting on a seatbelt when we get in the car. Valuable to be sure, but not something we think about. Sometimes the Holy One feels like this too in our lives. A long-time habit. Something we rely on but don't ever pay attention to, like home owners' insurance.

We are told in both Jeremiah today and in the psalm that if we live by our own best efforts, we are headed for failure. If we think we've got it together, we are going to find out how messy life can get. Life won't always be smooth sailing, the Old Testament says, and when you hit a crisis, what will you do? The readings today say to us, there is a better way than crash and burn, and that way is God. But what does that even mean to us today, thousands of years after these words were first put down on paper. Six hundred and forty years before these words were translated into the English language for the first time. What does "trust in the Lord" and "delight in law" mean to us so far from those people and that place.

Today, Paul in Corinthians seems to be echoing just those sentiments. He is saying, "What's the point of all this anyway?" He says if Christ didn't rise from the dead, then none of us will. He says that if we won't rise to new life body and soul, then Christ surely didn't. He seems to say this a lot, but it can be hard to understand why he goes on repeating himself. We all know how Paul likes to talk. And talk. And talk. Am I the only one who sometimes feels like Paul could be a high-pressure car salesman character in a sit-com? But Paul says something at the end about "first fruits of the dead" and the psalm today said something about "bearing fruit in due season" and then there was Jeremiah going on about a tree and that tree planted by water will not cease to bear fruit, even in a draught.

I think we are on to something here! If this were a television show or a movie, we'd definitely call this a clue. Jessica Fletcher on Murder She Wrote would say, "I think we're on to something!" Sherlock would say, "The game is afoot."

So maybe the first thing we want to remember about the Old Testament is that it was written by a tribal, semi-nomadic people who lived in a vast desert region. They travelled across endless vistas of stone and sand. It was an arid climate. They could easily die of exposure, heat exhaustion, dehydration. They were always concerned with how much water they had and where their next drink of water was coming from. In such harsh, dry conditions, their whole lives centered around life-giving, life-sustaining water for them, their families, and their livestock.

This is why water is so crucial in these Old Testament readings. They compare someone who relies upon God to a well planted tree. And where is the tree planted? Next to a stream. That is, the Loving One is the life-giving and life-sustaining water of our lives. The Holy One gives us such life, that the circumstances of our lives, the landscape we live in, doesn't matter. Drought, fire, heat, upheavals, storms, plagues, pandemics, people who don't use their turn signals, it literally doesn't matter. Because the Merciful One will sustain us with that cool, deep, ever-flowing water of grace and love.

When you have to conserve and ration your water, focusing on where your next fill-up is all important. It is easy to focus on how little we have. So maybe we begin to hoard that water. Or we stay up late into the night worrying about where our next bit of water will come from. This is what happens when we start running the show. This is what the scriptures are saying to us is the result of relying on our own limited resources, our finite selves. Scripture then says that God is even more important than water. That The Holy One is even more important than our daily bread. That we should turn in all our circumstances, in all of our plans for the day, in all of our thinking about the future to the Loving One who will give us true life. Deep life. Sustenance regardless of what might be coming. That we can come to rely on an unlimited and infinite God, rather than our finite selves.

But how do we do that? It might seem hard, almost impossible to most of us. It certainly does for me. It might even seem a little high

minded. Something holy people in the Bible did, but certainly not something I can replicate today. I mean, what are those seats of the scornful anyway? Ridiculous.

Well, I am glad you asked! The seats of the scornful are not so hard to imagine. Do you remember those two old Muppets from The Muppet Show who sat in the back heckling everyone? Their names were Statler and Waldorf and they were always making fun at someone's expense. Doubting at length and at high volume when others were doing their best. I am sure you know a few. I am sure you may have sat next to them a few times. I certainly have. So, if I find myself sitting a little too close to Waldorf and Statler, I can probably be sure I am not "rejoicing in the Lord" but rather in enjoying my own skepticism and pessimism. Maybe even feeling a little superior to those around me.

So how do we move at least a few rows away from the hecklers, closer to that life-giving, life-sustaining flow of God's love?

Well, no one is going to like this answer, but the answer is, practice. Nothing glamorous. Nothing heroic. Nothing that is going to get us a lot of attention and praise. Just a whole lot of simple practice. But hear me out just a little more before you turn off the sermon channel.

We know that professional athletes train. Almost every day. We know that artists spend decades honing their craft in quiet before they are suddenly "discovered." Contrary to popular belief, most writers spend years writing words, deleting words, editing words, until they become an "overnight" success.

So too with us. That is why they call it a spiritual practice instead of a spiritual perfection. That is why even though we plant a standard sized apple tree today, it won't give us fruit for years, maybe not even for eight years. No wonder there are so many doubters in the world. No wonder so many people feel they have to rely on

themselves. We say, “I don’t have time to wait on you God. I need results. Now.” Sorry. Not sorry.

But Jesus tells us today in the Gospel that trusting in God takes time. That grace comes from unlikely places. Usually not the places we were looking for. Not in any of the places where we have done things for ourselves, by ourselves, and entirely our way. Anyone in a longtime relationship knows that once the first rush of love is over, there is a lot of daily tending to do. That in order to keep the relationship healthy and strong, daily maintenance is usually required. Even if that daily maintenance is learning when to keep our own mouths shut!

Why would our relationship to God be any different? It is something we grow into. From when that first seed is planted at our baptism, until we, like Christ, are raised into new life beyond death. The sum of the gospel today is everything changes. The good things AND the bad things don’t last. Life is uncertain and being a Christian doesn’t save us from uncertainty or change. We will have both weeping and joy. The pandemic has shown us this again and again. But as Christians, we are called to rely upon God who will sustain us in both the best of things, and the very worst. A God who is capable and life-giving through all the changes, the upsets, the outbursts of violence, and the uncertainties.

Emergency responders train in order to be able to respond instantly in a crisis without having to think about it. So too, God calls us to daily practice our faith. To find daily ways to trust. To let go of our vice grip of control and let God just a little. Until it becomes engrained. Until it becomes a way of responding when we realize one more time that we are reaching for the steering wheel from the passenger seat.

We do this so that a new way of living is etched into our hearts. Not one of self-will, of fearful reaction toward life. Not one closed off to the world to keep us safe from all the bad things that could happen. That might happen. Because that closes us off from the good too. Instead, we can choose to love. Live a life where we let God take the

lead a little at a time. Until that new groove on our heart plays the sweet music of God’s love for us. Of that tender care. Of the life-giving and love-surrounding waters that carry us safely through our days and nights.

So that by practicing a little each day, we can respond faithfully in the crisis as well as the blessing. In the long periods of drought as well as lush green seasons. With practice, with patience, we come to know that our lives will bear fruit, far beyond what we can see now. Long after we rise to new life.