

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

I Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

What's the promise? What's the promise of a life lived in faith? What's the promise for those who follow the way of Jesus? Is it, “*Good things happen to good, faithful people, and bad things happen to bad, wicked people,*” and the even more subtle, “*If you are good, then bad things won't happen to you?*” Is it the message of the *prosperity gospel preachers* that *if you just give your life to Jesus, you'll be blessed with riches?* **What's the promise?** (*Pause*)

That is a complicated question, with a subtle answer.

Just listen to how **Jeremiah** answers that question. “**Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They'll be like a shrub in the desert, living in parched places, living in an uninhabited salt land**”—not much life there. From where **Jeremiah** sits, if the only thing you **trust** in is **you** and **your strength**, you just won't make it because *something* is going to come along **bigger and badder** than you. That's a promise.

But **Jeremiah** goes on. “**Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They'll be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream. That tree, it won't fear when the heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of the drought, it isn't anxious, and it doesn't cease to bear fruit.**”

For **Jeremiah**, the promise *isn't* that we *won't* encounter **heat** that can drain our last bit of energy; it *isn't* that we *won't* encounter a **dry spell** that can only be described as a **drought**; the promise *isn't* that **hard, hard stuff** *won't* come our way.

For **Jeremiah**, the promise is this: If you place **your trust in the Lord**, if **your trust is the Lord**, if **you trust this Holy Presence** that is *so far beyond you* and *so deep within you*, **your roots will run far and deep** and **run** to the places where **the deep waters flow** that **can help us stay green** and **alive** and **fruitful**, *even* when everything around us is calling us to *wither* and *give up* and *die*.

And **Jeremiah** *knows* that **which way the heart will go is never a given**. He says, “**The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?**” That was a rather stunning verse to contemplate this past Thursday, **Valentine's Day**, when I was working on this sermon! But we have to remember that in **Hebrew**, the heart *isn't just* the **seat of affections** and the **source of our feelings**. The **heart**, well, *it's everything*, and *it's complex*. It's the **innermost part of us**. It's **our soul** and **our mind** and **our memory**; it's where **our knowledge** resides and **our capacity to understand**; it's where **our will** lives and **our conscience**; it's the **seat of our desires** and **emotions** and **passions** and **courage**. *That is quite a stew.*

We all know the experience that **Paul** describes too well—that experience of **not understanding our own actions**, of **knowing the right thing to do**, **BUT not being able to muster the will to do it**; that experience of being able to **spot an action that is so not what you want to do**, an **action that you might even hate**, an **action that you know won't be good for you and that is so out of alignment with your values** AND **running down that path anyway**.

The heart is complicated because it's this **complex mix** of **knowledge** and **understanding** and **will** and **passion**. *The heart longs so deeply*, so it's *easily drawn* toward *things that masquerade as satisfying and fulfilling*, but, as the **psalmist** so rightly identifies, turn out to be **chaff that isn't rooted anywhere** and just **blows away when the wind comes**. These *seductive elements of the false self* that call to all of us—*power and control, esteem and affection, safety, survival and security*—these things *aren't* the **deep waters** that **sustain us** in times of **drought** when *the world goes brown*; *their promises are simply false*.

But as strong as the pull of the *false self* might be on our **heart**, the *true self* is calling us from an **even deeper place**, always. We **hear it in the voice of Jesus**. We **intuit it**, we **sense it in his actions**. That's why **the crowds came from all over**—from **Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon**—from **the heart of Jewish culture** and from **the lands of the gentiles**—they could sense *his energy*; they knew that *his very touch* was **healing**; they knew *his Presence* connected them to **the deep waters of wholeness for which they longed**.

They were **poor** and **hungry** and **full of grief**; they knew what it was to be **hated** and **excluded** and **reviled** and **defamed**. And just hear what **Jesus says to them** this morning—this comes from *The Message* translation: “**You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning. Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do . . .and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.**”

They who feel so **unblessed**, **Jesus called them blessed!** And all those people whom *the world identifies as blessed*, all those who have *means* and *status* and *power*—like all those **religious elites** that earlier in chapter 6 chastised Jesus for letting his hungry disciples **pluck grain on the sabbath** or who **chewed him out for healing on the sabbath**—all those folks who *have it made in the world's eyes*, just listen to what **Jesus says to them**:

“**But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.**”

Jesus knows what **Jeremiah** knew—**trouble will come, hard things happen, suffering is real, AND trusting only in our own self and strength**, well, *those roots are shallow*; they *won't sustain us*; they *won't satisfy us*; they *won't carry us through*.

But when we can **yield** and **let ourselves touch the energy** and **Presence of the One** whose wholeness is **far beyond the measures of this world**, well, we've *already* passed through the gate and entered the **kingdom of God**; the **hunger of our soul is fed at the deepest levels**; we **discover that our tears**

are just another form of holy water that can even water seeds of joy; and we learn that our core identity is *not subject to the slings and arrows of others*—we are anchored in the Way and the Truth and the Life; we are beloved sons and daughters of God, and *our status is not up for negotiation*.

The promise is *never* that things will be easy or go smoothly, the promise is *never* that we'll be protected from pain, or sorrow, or things that make us feel powerless and out of control (because sometimes, things *are* out of control); things *will* trouble our spirits.

BUT if we trust *in* the Lord, if our trust *is* the Lord, if we reach out and touch his Presence, if we allow his energy to flow into us, THEN our leaves will stay green *through the drought*, and we will discover life and love and abundance that our small self, our false self, our self-satisfied self can neither see nor access. *THIS is the promise of our faith*.

It's *not* happily-ever-after; it's **much more costly** than that, **and far more beautiful**.

The heart is bent toward such hard and lovely blessings; *so don't settle for anything less*. Amen.

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