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Sermon Notes for September 5, 2010
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“God: Then and Now...Maybe; You Decide”

These comments may end up being equal parts about what I believe and what I don't believe. They will not, however, be about the absence of!

So let's look at the text of Jeremiah.

The time is in the 7th and 6th Century BCE and there is a lot going on. The constant struggle between Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia (insert) Babylon, its violent effect on Jerusalem and Judah is in full swing – more like a pendulum that's out of control. Every time one of these nations changes its position, in terms of power, the whole region is affected. The sometimes united nations of Jerusalem and Judah have at different times sided with others to establish a better position in the region, and the outcome was worse than expected. Jerusalem was conquered, the Temple looted and destroyed, and the many captives taken off into Babylonia.

Kings of these Hebrew nations were sometimes good, and mostly not so good. Once a king stepped out of alignment with the dominant power the punishment was beyond harsh. King Zedekiah, for example, who had made this mistake, was first forced to watch his sons killed and then to have his eyes taken plucked out before he was sent off to suffer and die in captivity.

In the midst of all this was Jeremiah. He lived and prophesied much of his life during the time of five kings: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoichin, and Zedekiah. The time of Josiah, is known as a time of reform of Judah and Jerusalem, initiated by the discovery of a Deuteronomic scroll found in the temple wall during its reconstruction. Josiah used the scroll to call Judah and Jerusalem back to its roots of the Mosaic Law. And, from all that Jeremiah's would prophesy, the trials and tribulations and wars and destruction of the time were based on **not** following these Laws as God had commanded, according to Scripture.

Jeremiah, himself, had a tough time of it. Along the way, he was attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put in stocks, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, and thrown in to a cistern by Judah's officials. It appears that speaking out

in a challenging voice on God's behalf got you into as much trouble then, as it does now. More about that in a minute.

All this is to say that the nation of Israel, Jerusalem to the North and Judah to the South, sometimes united, sometimes divided, sometimes at peace and often at war – all the events were seen as either the result of the approval or disapproval of God. We see both in the reading of Jeremiah from this morning. In the first half, we're doing pretty well.

It starts out pretty well: the clay is in the potter's hand and an imperfection is removed by what seems to be the loving and creative hands of the potter. Suddenly it shifts to God who is creating evil to befall the broken beliefs and promises of the nations of Israel and Judah.

Whoa! Talk about a fast scene change!

Jeremiah and those who wrote and rewrote his book, most likely added the hyperbole to emphasize what they wished to at varying times, but the bottom line was: "If you do what God has called you to do – you will be fine; if you don't you will be punished – and everything is seen in that spectrum.

We still can't quite get away from these strident and narrow dictums in certain places today. There are still many who see God as a sometimes approving and sometimes punishing entity; an entity to whom we pay homage and of whom we live in fear.

I just don't see God like that.

And I believe in sum total, the Bible does not present God like that. But in a world that is so broken in many ways and so in need in many ways, it's a lot easier to balance out the "good and the bad" as judgment by God. It's an answer, at least. Even if it's wrong.

I hesitate to spend too much time on the polity and theological struggles in our church when I speak on Sundays. There are probably a lot of reasons for that. One is that it can really be boring unless you have an interest in it. It can also be very discouraging, because we are frequently talking about what's wrong and why it needs to change. I would much prefer to carry a lesson that is uplifting rather than one that is pedantic and points to our shortcomings. The other important reason for avoiding too much criticism is that there is much good here. I do not see the talking about the struggles as voiding that good – neither do I see being faithful as ignoring what is wrong. But that may be an acquired taste for some, as they come to learn more about us.

So I seek balance in finding ways to integrate teachings and inspiration – which means I pray a lot, so that whatever we do will be found as welcoming, provocative, and real to our life situation, today.

With others, our church has been in the midst of figuring out how to fully welcoming people who are LGBT for quite some time. It is no different than what is going on in our broader society, I know that. I just think we are called to be better in welcoming and opening our doors, leading the way for acceptance.

And the struggle expands into the question of honoring same gender marriages. There are legal and theological ramifications for this – and a lot of opinions and efforts to invite or reject such blessings and legalities. We have a lot of Old Testament Jeremiahs living in a world that is no longer in the 6th Century, using the same arguments of God's wrath and destruction unless we return to the Mosaic Law, at least in terms of how it might be defined *in this way* for truly no one wants to return to full Mosaic Law.

I'm not kidding either. In July, at our General Assembly, we continued to struggle to make changes in our polity to eliminate the all but ban on the ordination of folk who were LGBT. This is a recent response in one of the chat rooms:

As I see it, the 219th General Assembly failed its math test by subtracting instead of adding. I refer to its action regarding G-6.0106b, where it subtracted instead of adding. The given reason was that all of life instead of just human sexuality should be under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And then it substituted a general statement that will be open to myriad interpretations. Fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness are clear witnesses to a Christian view of behavior in human sexuality. Can anyone rightly deny that America is in the throes of a monsoon of sexual immorality? The litany is unending: 50% divorce rate, widespread shacking up of couples before marriage, 40% of children born to unmarried mothers, ... widespread addiction to pornography, pedophilia in abundance, serial polygamy among the rich and famous, etc. Our witness to faithfulness in marriage and chastity in singleness has just been removed. Instead of subtracting G-6.0106b, the G. A. could have added words that brought other aspects of human life under the Lordship of Christ. It could have added instead of subtracting. If this change passes, I can see the headlines now: Presbyterians eliminate faithfulness in marriage and chastity in singleness from requirements for ordination! Let's keep G-6.010b and let the next G. A. add instead of subtracting.

And it's all the fault of the homosexuals...

Prophet? Gadfly? Or just out there...

The problem is that the rationality of the argument has no foundation except the long running theme that some of us are God's children and some of us are not, and unless we all see God in exactly the same way, living in exactly the same way, following exactly the same rules...well, those who don't should be punished, excluded, and tossed into the modern day cisterns of marginalization and degradation.

I was in California for the last week of August attending and supporting The Rev. Dr. Janie Spahr in her trial for marrying same gender couples during a time in California when it was legal to do so. It was an amazing ecclesiastical occurrence, during which 11 same gender couples who Janie had married put their lives into full public view, so they could be examined and cross-examined in an effort to make it clear to others – a witness to others – that their lives were as rich and full of love and faithfulness as any other “marriage” might be.

And in a stunningly sad and woefully non-prophetic ruling, the ecclesiastical court found Janie guilty on three counts of violating her ordination vows, the church constitution, and other rulings of the church that referred to marriage as being between a man and a woman. Then, they commended Janie on her ministry to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community, further asking for forgiveness from the community for its treatment at the church's hands.

The real prophet, the loving prophet, the prophet calling us more closely into the love and presence of God in all the fullness of our creation was the one, again, tossed into the cistern – and this time with an entire community.

And why? Well, this is the hard part, because the reasons for any exclusion, for any act of violence, or any hardness of heart has to do with a combination of teaching, experience, fear of one another, and distance from a loving God.

This is the God often presented in the Old Testament. The God that uses violence, rigidness, fear – to keep people in line. If that is the God we hold on to in the day and age we are in the 7th Century BCE. – no wonder some would run from God.

The struggle to bring this church into its fullness by including all is rooted in the faithfulness of the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament and even in the writings of the Old Testament – if we seek it. It is the language of welcoming, embrace, and closeness to God. And it is an endeavor, a witness, a faithful presentation of the gospel that can bring healing to this world in ways that we are ignoring, and for which we are paying the price.

Paul's writing sends back to Philemon Onesimus who has been shunned for one reason or another. He sends him back, and in the great love he has; the love he shares with Onesimus and those who shunned him – he asks them to take him back, knowing he could insist upon it. He asks them to take Onesimus in and

learn from him – and if there is anything they feel Onesimus owes them – to put it on Paul's account.

The God that Paul knows, that draws him to such inclusion, healing, and learning from one another is the God that I know, and I believe that Jeremiah, in the language he had and the way it was recorded knew the same God, who beneath and beyond it all – just wanted us to love one another as God has loved us.

This is not the easy love. The love of kindness, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, hospitality, generosity, justice, prophecy, openness, transparency, heart – in other words, a reflection, as best we can, of God's self in our lives and treatment of others. This isn't so easy, but the alternatives are much worse.

We and Jeremiah have much in common in doing our best to discern God in our lives and how we are to live, as a result of that God in our lives. We have something else though; we have Jesus of Nazareth who probably struggled as well in turning people from the wrath of God to the Love of God.

It seems we are in good company in trying to do the same. Let this be a place for you where we love one another, the stranger among us, and welcome all. And let this be a place where we are known for the determined opposition to marginalization at any level and a heart and action for justice, in all the places we may find otherwise.