

"So easy to lose..." "

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I again find myself in the midst of Jeremiah's apocalyptic rant. I mean, he really does let it rip, as he attempts to embody God's voice, with:

- my people are foolish, stupid children, no understanding, skilled in doing evil...

and after going on and on, ends with:

- Look, I am preparing a disaster for you devising a plan against you.

These are some serious charges to be levied at the people of Judah and Jerusalem. We know that they were in big-time conflict and that really bad things were happening to them: terrible battles and invasions, and we know that when they had the upper hand, they fought just as everyone else did. They seemed to be caught in a real cycle of warring and little peace.

And, when they did bear the brunt of the violence and suffered the awful outcome of the conflict, there were voices – voices calling out the leadership and the people for bringing the wrath of God upon them because of their lack of faithfulness and actions.

I sometimes find myself reading these writings almost like a history book or lesson. It's easy to do. I really don't have a first-hand point of reference. Even so, it's not a history lesson. And it's not fiction. It is a lesson in landscapes, based on faithful people trying to make sense of things. People who have come to know their relationship with God as syncretic, that is a combination of their own traditions, those of the nations around

them, and a lack of scientific understanding of causal relationships. And, clearly, some serious issues in international relationships. It all led to a belief that God was directly involved in their day-to-day lives and that they were on Earth in some huge Regents Exam, believing they were here on Earth to be constantly tested: rewarded when they did well and punished when they did poorly, and subject to destruction if they went too far. It had to be a tough time.

It's a shame, because during these times, some six hundred years or so before the birth of Christ - and going back even before that it's all about punishment. It started with the first disciplinary action in the Garden of Eden followed by more testing, punishment, doom-saying – right up to today for some. And, deep underneath the currents of our times, this fear of bad things happening to good people is often connected to God and either God's indifference or vindictiveness. It's an old myth...and it should have been lost long ago.

Instead, something else was forgotten, lost in the story of the Garden of Eden when it was simply accepted that that first mistake, that first "sin" was never forgiven. It was a mark and a sign of our fall from grace. From that point forward, the love and creation of God, the caring for God's children in a garden was shut out for good, never to be returned to, guarded by cherubim with flaming swords. We, as a human race, were punished and banished.

If only we would think of it all a bit differently, rather than accepting a thousands years old story to explain creation. And, you know there really was no one there to write this all down.

The story, that first story, and all that followed set us up, biblically, to be wary of the wrath of God. Now, not to be mistaken - there are many stories of goodness, Joseph for example, and the Psalms, and Ruth and Naomi, and others, but the overarching theme was that faithfulness and behavior were always being watched and, sooner or later, would be dealt with severely.

The ancient Schema, the Great Commandment were known and prayed "Hear, O Israel..." but there seemed to be times when that love was too much to ask, too painful to bear, and the course of events went awry to wars, devastation, exile, guilt, and more. It just seemed that love couldn't win out over the systems of power that took advantage of anything other than a message of love to control and contain

So, it is no surprise that the faithful and the oppressed were always looking forward to a time when this would be righted. Today, 2500 years later, there are still those who miss the message of Love that exceeds eros, agape, and filios. We still hear of apocalypse from Jim Jones to Wako and beyond. What is it that has such a sorrowful, nihilistic, hopeless grip on some? What is it that too often tells them the solution is to destroy themselves or others to attain purity?

And, it's not as if the messenger didn't arrive.

For Christians and the many who know him as a prophet and leader, was in the teachings of Jesus. It strikes me that he entered into this time following the "truth or consequences" of a God who appeared to be more of a game show host, at times, than "my help in times of trouble." And look who he gathered around him to get his message across, not the ones who were vested in continuing control through intimidation of God's wrath if you don't do as we say, but the folk who may or may not have even gone to temple, let alone spent a great deal of time trying to understand the actions of God in this world. They were the oppressed, the workers, the underclass of society and the workers below the city in Fritz Lang's classic Metropolis.

It is to them that Jesus came, and you will notice that rarely does he debate theology with them, I actually am unsure that he ever does - so I will say rarely, just in case.

Sure, now and then Jesus gets a little angry and his rhetoric rises, as we have seen in some of our lesson studies, but for the most part - for the very most part, though, his lesson is the schema, The Great Commandment, it is the theme, the foundation, the root of his being, and he walks the walk of the path.

And, so, this is what I think Luke was trying to get across in this morning's reading. I think the lesson is not about going out and looking for lost sheep in the brambles or lost coins under the dresser. There's not too many people who search for sheep these days, and a coin that goes too far

under the dresser is going to be left there until the day when the dresser is moved.

No, what I think he is saying is don't let go of the truth about God. Don't let anyone get you down the path of thinking that somehow we are better than others, that we are more righteous, that's what got all twisted up in the Old Testament connecting human events with God's punishment.

What I think Jesus, though Luke, is saying is: If you have lost forgiveness for someone - find it. If you have dropped your hope and it has rolled out of sight - find it. If you have begun to think that things befall you because God is testing you...reach back to the Great Commandment, know you are loved, know you were not created to be punished, and reach out to your neighbor in any way you can.

[Maybe tell the story about the dog, as an example fo "Can I help you" a continuation of the tradition of hospitality, as something that has been lost.]

We are in a time of high politics, disagreements, arguments, bigotry and worse. We are in a time when it is easy to point to others and say: This and that befell so and so because of thus and so. Jesus and the other great leaders always said - do not judge. You know why? Because it is the first step of elevating ourselves above others, and it is not in God's great creation for us to lord over anyone.

In the recent weeks, we have been subject to continued images of new horrors, promises of destruction of the symbols of others - which is *really* a symbol for the destruction of others. We've been living in remembrance and the reminders of the attack that befell us 9 years ago this weekend (as if we who live here need to be reminded). The 2001 attacks on the USA along with where to build houses of worship – these and more have morphed into the political theme in a mid-term election year. Themes that are based not on right or wrong. I don't believe that. These are themes, in my opinion, that are rooted in better than, subjugation, punishment, and elevation of an elite: just as were the politics before Jesus, during his time, and still - too often - in these times of ours.

The politics are not my concern, because there is no one broad brush to apply and even if there were, the politics are secondary, separate, from what many believe will resolve the issues we face in this world. The lives of people affected by hunger, lack of a place to live, compassion, company – yes, we work to change the system.

But something else has to come first that is too easy to lose when we get caught up in the details. We can lose the sense of who we are in the face of how much there is to do. And who we are is a people created and loved by God and called into love with one another.

It is that which we don't want to lose, which we should go to any lengths to find find when it seems to have slipped away. It is that, which the ancients had never found in their belligerent, bellum, and unpredictable God. The

Good News is that we have found what they missed. Let us hold on to it, to God's love, with all our heart. And to Jesus and others who point us in that direction.

For as the Scriptures also say:

Be still and know that I am God.

And let the people say, Thank God!

Amen.