

PENTECOST 14

Proper 19 - Year C

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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

¹¹ At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse, ¹² a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

²² “For my people are foolish;
they do not know me;
they are stupid children;
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil
but do not know how to do good.”

²³ I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos,
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

²⁴ I looked on the mountains, and they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.

²⁵ I looked, and there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.

²⁶ I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

²⁷ For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a
desolation, yet I will not make a full end.

²⁸ Because of this the earth shall mourn
and the heavens above grow black,
for I have spoken; I have purposed;
I have not relented, nor will I turn back.

Commentary from Matthew Sanaker

The prophet Jeremiah was active from the time of the reforms introduced by Josiah until the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar II. Josiah's reforms were an attempt to guide Judah back to living in a faithful covenantal relationship with God, as taught by Moses and recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy. In this passage from Jeremiah, the prophet is announcing the consequences that Judah will suffer, just as the northern kingdom of Israel suffered, for breaking their covenant with God, worshiping idols and foreign gods, and coveting the riches and lifestyles of neighboring kingdoms. Those with political power live in decadence while ignoring the needs of the poor, their fellow Israelites. In the verses that are omitted from our reading, 4:13-21, Jeremiah describes Jerusalem besieged by an invading army as a result of how they have been living and their unwillingness to repent and return to God. These passages from the prophet are difficult to read and make sense of when we proclaim a gospel of grace and forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption. Rather than consider the Israelites as “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” it might be more helpful to see the plight of the people of Judah as the natural consequences of wars among nations and the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. The natural consequence of loving God and loving our neighbors is peace; chasing wealth and power brings strife and conflict, which naturally leads to suffering and death for the innocent as well as the guilty.

Discussion Questions

What aspects of our culture feel like idols that people worship while neglecting the needs of others? How do you resist the temptation of worshipping those idols?

How are you and your faith community living into your covenantal relationship with God and acting as agents of peace?

Psalm 14

- ¹The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." *
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;
there is none who does any good.
- ²The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, *
to see if there is any who is wise,
if there is one who seeks after God.
- ³Every one has proved faithless;
all alike have turned bad; *
there is none who does good; no, not one.
- ⁴Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers *
who eat up my people like bread
and do not call upon the Lord?
- ⁵See how they tremble with fear, *
because God is in the company of the
righteous.
- ⁶Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted, *
but the Lord is their refuge.
- ⁷Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of
Zion! *
when the Lord restores the fortunes of his
people,
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad.

Commentary from Matthew Sanaker

This psalm is one of those that can be difficult to read and reflect on, but for those of us who read the news on a daily basis, it can feel like another day of scrolling through the headlines. Maybe that's part of what makes it hard to read; it's all too clear about the realities of human frailty and the potential for people to exploit one another. Still, the psalm ends on a hopeful note. We are not left to our own devices as we can call upon God for comfort, courage, and strength. The corrupt state of the world does not get to have the final word.

Discussion Questions

When have you faced adversity but found refuge in your relationship with God?

How do you share that experience with others?

1 Timothy 1:12-17

¹²I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Commentary from Matthew Sanaker

In this passage from Paul's letter, we hear him admitting that he has been one of the evildoers that we heard about from Jeremiah and the psalmist. Paul admits to having been a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. He demonstrates for us the need to approach God with humility, to recognize our own faults, admit to them, and having done so, we are prepared to receive God's grace. We know from Acts that Paul received God's grace while he was still an evildoer, before he repented of his sins against God and the followers of Jesus. And like Paul, after we recognize the grace that God has shown to us, we can ask God to help us to show that same grace to others, because we recognize, as Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Discussion Questions

How have God's patience and mercy with your weaknesses and faults changed your attitude toward people whom you consider to be evildoers?

Luke 15:1-10

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Commentary from Matthew Sanaker

There are a number of places in Luke where the evangelist tells of Jesus being criticized for keeping company with people the religious authorities look down upon or reject. In addition to teaching in the Temple and synagogues and having friends and disciples among those in positions of honor and privilege, Jesus associated with people on the margins of society, those who were outcasts because of their professions or behavior. This was not a distant charitable ministry for Jesus; he shared table fellowship with them and ate and drank with them, often as a guest. Jesus became a friend to sinners, which is to say that God loved the sinners of the world so much that he became incarnate to befriend them in a very real and personal way. To the Pharisees and scribes, that idea would have been blasphemous. So, Jesus tells them a couple of stories, and after each one, points out that God rejoices in the repentance of sinners. In fact, God finds more joy in the repentance of one sinner than in the ninety-nine righteous people who don't need to repent.

Discussion Questions

When have you felt like one of the lost sheep, or perhaps on the outside of the sheepfold looking in?

How do you follow Jesus in befriendng those on the margins in your community? How do you welcome people that others reject?