



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 18
Proper 23 (C)

God Sent a Prophet
[RCL] Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

Look again at today's collect.

“Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...”

That's a good thing to pray for— “that we may continually be given to good works.”

In other words, we should do good work—God's work—in the world.

Just in case we get caught up in the idea that our works might be the source of our salvation, this prayer calls our attention to the true source of those good works: God's grace.

We pray for God's grace to precede and follow us *because God's grace is precisely what makes our good works possible.*

The order of that is very important. God's grace comes first. Our works follow. When you look at it that way, it can make that work seem a whole lot more manageable.

As a part of the Church, we are living members of the Body of Christ in the world. Our mission is God's mission. Our ministry is God's ministry. Our work is God's work. God empowers us to share in it with grace.

We heard this morning a portion of Jeremiah's message to the Israelites exiled in Babylon: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.”

Jeremiah is encouraging the Israelites to put down roots. It's as if he's saying, “You're in this for the long haul.”

It's not exactly welcome news to the Israelites in captivity. If you have been exiled from your homeland, “put down roots” is probably the last thing you'd want to hear the prophet say. The trouble is, prophets aren't in the business of telling people what they want to hear. Prophets are in the business of telling people the truth.

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So often, folks want to hear things like, “Everything’s coming up roses!” But nobody needs a prophet to tell them that. When everything’s coming up roses, everyone is content to go on enjoying the status quo.

What folks need to hear from a prophet are things like, “Brace yourself. Things are going to get tough for a while.” God sends prophets to be honest when people need honesty most, to “get real” with folks when the last thing they want to do is get real.

God sends a prophet to a couple who have decided they have no option left but divorce.

God sends a prophet to a woman whose job transfers her 2,000 miles away from her family.

God sends a prophet to a teenager whose father is sentenced to 12-15 years in a federal penitentiary.

It doesn’t do any good avoiding the truth. That’s why God sends a prophet—not to tell us what we want to hear, but to tell us what we need to hear when we need to hear it.

Times get tough for all of us. When they do, we don’t have to like it, but in order to have the slightest hope of getting through it, you do eventually have to accept it. So, God sends Jeremiah to tell it like it is. That’s why Jeremiah urges the Israelites to go on living their lives.

“Lay a foundation, put up some walls and build a roof, plant some food, get married, have babies.” In other words, “Do the work God has given you to do.” No, this isn’t an ideal situation, but it is the first step toward accepting their new normal, and they’ve got to do that to have a chance at surviving.

The daily life and work that Jeremiah urges them toward are not meant merely to distract them from their troubles. He is not saying, “This will take your mind off of things for a while. Have a hot bath, take a walk in the woods, get a coloring book or a cross-stitch pattern.”

The work that he is urging them to do is God’s work, and it is crucial for them to do it so that they can reconnect with God in this foreign land. As they resume their routine, they will, by God’s grace, be reminded that God is still with them.

Build the house. Who fashioned the stones from chaos? God.

Plant the garden. Who sends the rain from the heavens? God.

Get married. Who created us, one for another? God.

Be fruitful and multiply. Who blessed all of Abraham’s righteous offspring? God.

In a nutshell, the prophet’s message for them is this: return to a steady rhythm of life and you will once again realize that God’s grace is what makes your life possible—even in Babylon. If they prayed, as we did this morning, that God’s grace would precede them, then in the prophet’s message, that prayer is answered.

Life isn’t always easy. Even though we may not like it, we are often called to summon the courage to accept it. Sometimes we need to be reminded that getting out of bed in the morning and putting one foot in front of the other is all we have to do to experience the grace of God.

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It is hard, but it is not impossible.

There is a little church in a small southern town that has of late been through some pretty rough times. You may know some churches like it. One day, not too terribly long ago, nearly the entire congregation walked out. They weren't happy anymore, so they thought they would organize a new parish down the road.

That kind of division in the Church is the source of incredible lament. Imagine how hard it must have been for the faithful remnant of folks to walk into a nearly-empty building the following Sunday.

So, God sent a prophet.

Those of us who were not there will never know exactly what those faithful folks heard the prophet say. It probably wasn't "build houses" or "plant gardens."

Perhaps it was something like, "Answer the phone, pay the bills, print the bulletins, say your prayers." In other words, "Do the work God has given you to do."

There is another congregation at a small crossroads in the rural southeast that struggled with membership for years. People died, people moved away, people stopped coming. There were some disagreements, some harsh words, a few apologies, a lot of mixed emotions. Times were tough.

So, God sent a prophet.

They, too, heard a word from the prophet. "Things are going to be tough for a while. You are going to have to make some difficult decisions. Keep doing the work God has given you to do."

And so, the people of that parish prayed, they worshiped, they studied the Bible, they took care of the sick, they fed the hungry, they clothed the naked. In fact, they still do, and by God's grace, they always will.

By that same grace, so will we all.

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