

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.9.22

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."
(421)

One of the lepers had nothing to return to. He had no choice but to move forward.

The other nine, they still had something to return to, the priests whom Jesus told them to return to: "Go and show yourselves to the priests," which they apparently did, for still having priests to show themselves to.

But the Samaritan leper: his priesthood was gone.

Sad, right?

On the other hand, that freed him up to follow in a new way.

I don't know. God comes at you in unexpected ways. The Holy Spirit comes at you in unexpected ways.

"On the way to Jerusalem," is how the story begins. This means Jesus was on his way to the cross, to his own death, which he well knew. It was a determined journey, this which he was going

on. De-termined, its end had long been known. But it was also a meandering journey. It would take him here and there, hither and yon.

As for now, it was taking him through this borderland between Samaria and Galilee, between the land where the Samaritans lived and the land of the Jews. And these people hated one another in that time-tested way, what Sigmund Freud 2000 years later would come to call the narcissism of small difference. Samaritans and Jews: these two peoples were very similar, so the many little differences...

They'd once been one, two tribes of many tribes gathered under one region and one king. They'd had similar cultic practices, similar cultural identifiers.

But time went on; and eventually came the question of where was the right place for worship, the absolute right place for cultic practice. The Jews established Jerusalem and built their Temple there. The Samaritans established Gerizim and built their Temple there.

Then the way they practiced began to diverge, little changes here and there, little adaptations here, bigger adaptations there—until they differed from one another in quite pervasive ways.

And then came the rivalry, the mutual suspicion, the commonly held resentment.

Have you seen that little video that was making the rounds on social media? Two dogs (maybe Dobermans?) on opposite sides of an automated gate caught on a surveillance camera. When the gate was closed, they growled and snarled at each other, noses poking through the gate. When the gate glided open, they wagged their tails and tried to negotiate play. Then the gate would glide closed again and they were back to hating each other.

Jews and Samaritans.

But these ten, nine Jews and one Samaritan, were together because they had a harder hardship than their old rivalry could cleave them apart. They were bound together by the common experience of being lepers and therefore being cast out of their cultures for the possibility of their being contagious.

Leprosy in the ancient world was a broad category. It included any skin blemish whose cause and cure were unknown. And since such things could be contagious and could also be harmful, the way to address it was to require any who had it to keep their distance from any who didn't.

Which might have been an overreaction. In some cases. Sometimes a skin blemish is just a skin blemish. But what we now call Hansen's Disease would have been included in the catch-all

category of leprosy. And, if left untreated, Hansen's can cause nerve damage, can result in crippling—of hands, feet, or even more general paralysis, or, worse still, blindness.

The stakes could be high.

Time was we moderns had to work hard to imagine such a thing. Social quarantining because of a mysterious illness? How primitive!

Not so hard to imagine now.

And remember hearing about COVID hotels, COVID colonies? If you had it, the best you could hope for is spending a few days, a few weeks, with others who had it. I heard of one COVID hotel, one in Israel: it sounded like a lot of fun.

Maybe these ten lepers weren't having such a terrible time. At least they had each other.

But they did want mercy, too.

That's what they asked for: mercy. Hollering from a distance, as was required of them: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

It's a quick interaction, barely an interaction. They holler for mercy. Jesus sends them back to their priests, back to their communities, as if now they might be made well, and deemed well, so to join again.

And on their way, they were. Made well, they now had cause to go their priests, these who served as public health officials, so to speak. They were to show themselves there, to be deemed as safe for rejoining, to be re-deemed, as it were.

And so, they would go.

—except this one. Except the Samaritan, the one who had no priest to return to, no priesthood to return to.

By the time of Luke's writing this, the Jewish Temple would have fallen (this time to Roman aggression) and the Jewish priesthood would have followed in that fall. Without a Temple, after all, there was little use for priests—since the whole purpose of priests was cultic worship in the Temple, sacrificing at the altar, on behalf of the people. Without a Temple, though, and without an altar, there would be no need for priests or a priesthood. For this, Judaism would become the religion we now know it to be, a religion of teaching and interpreting and holidays in the home, which is to say a religion of Pharisees and a rising rabbinical movement and now no active priests.

This was the case at the time of Luke's writing.

But at the time of Jesus' ministry, this hadn't yet happened—not for the Jews. When Jesus lived, Rome was still at bay, the Jews were still non-compliant but not belligerent, not aggressive.

More to the point, theirs was still a religion of priests. The Temple still up and running, Jerusalem still a sacred city and site for pilgrimage, Jesus sent those nine now-healed Jews to their priests, to show themselves to their priests. It hadn't yet happened, the falling apart of their cultic life.

But it had for the Samaritans. Their Temple, the one at Gerizim, had fallen about a century earlier, and therefore their priesthood might already have fallen as well, withered away without purpose or work.

For all this, Jesus' instruction that these ten lepers, this little leper colony on the go, each now return to their priests, meant something quite different to each of the men. "Go and show yourselves to the priests," might have been purposeful to the Jews among these lepers. But it wouldn't have been to the one Samaritan. It might have been restorative to the Jews. But it would have come as a near condemnation to the Samaritan. Far from mercy, it might have felt like further cruelty, evermore isolation. Now he was really alone.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "The question is whether our losses lead to resentment or to gratitude."

One's a lot harder than the other. Gratitude's a lot harder than resentment.

We're back with Jeremiah again this week. The weeping prophet. The suffering prophet. Just a few more weeks. If you're wearying of him, you're not alone. No one liked listening to him because he never said anything people wanted to hear.

Jerusalem would fall. Judea would fall. Babylon would come and take the people as exiles.

This was the first time, five centuries before Jesus, five centuries before Rome would destroy the city, this time Babylon. Which the people knew would happen. They *had* to know. They had to have sensed what was happening. Their power had waned while empires all around them grew. Israel, in the north, had already fallen to Assyria, which would then fall to Babylon, meaning Judea would be next. I mean if, Assyria couldn't hold them off, what hope did Judea have?

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, their hope was in the Lord. That's what other prophets were saying, too—that the Lord would remain loyal and moreover exclusive, that the Lord would adhere to Israel and Judea, leaving the rest of the world to fend for themselves.

But things had changed on that front, too. The defending presence of the Lord had changed character. The purpose of Israel and Judea in history had changed. Things had broadened. The promise had widened.

That's what Jeremiah seemed to think anyway, seemed to *discern*. History gave him good cause for this reassessment. Judea fell. Jerusalem fell. The Temple was ripped down, stone by stone. The people were taken into exile, the strong ones anyway, the worthy ones. The weak, the sick, the old or the very young with no one to care for them: they were left behind.

Things had changed. The old promise, the old covenant: what of that?

Jeremiah warned, "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Seventy years, though. Seventy years it would be this way. Not the brief time the other prophets promised. Not the few months, couple of years, for steely rebellion to take form and force. No, this was the new reality. This was the old promise taking new form, that the people build houses in Babylon, and live in them, that they plant gardens, and eat what they produce, that they settle in and find that, lo, life can grow up here as well.

"Take wives among these foreigners," Jeremiah said, "intermarry, and have children," which would have been unthinkable prior to just now. "Take husbands for your daughters; await grandchildren. Establish yourselves here," though amidst a people (the Babylonians) and an empire (Babylon) that had long been the stuff of horror stories, but which had now subsumed them and which, given prayer and patience, the people might recognize as presenting possibility they'd never have expected.

"Seek the wellbeing of the city into which the Lord has sent you—for in its wellbeing is your wellbeing."

Could they do this? Could they set aside their national pride, their assumptions of special status?

Henri Nouwen wrote: "The question is whether our losses lead to resentment or to gratitude."

The fact is we've lost a lot in the last few years. No matter where we focus that scope, the picture seems one of loss. We've lost time to quarantine, time together with loved ones with whom we suddenly could not get together—and that was time many of us really didn't have to spare. We've lost economically, though some have won big as the rich got richer through all this.

When it comes to church, the losses have only sped up. The crisis we'd thought was a few decades away really to be felt showed up suddenly, just outside the door. A recent Pew Research poll found that, in the United States, for the first time, church-affiliation fell to below fifty percent. Turns out, the fifty-year trend I've spent my lifetime amidst of steady decline recently in the last few years became drastic decline. And who know if, post-COVID, that trend will reverse a bit? It might. It might not.

The question is, whether this loss will lead to resentment or to gratitude. The question is whether this loss will have us open to new ways that present themselves, new possibilities that would have once seemed but *impossibilities*—or not.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, but that leper, that no-longer leper, what he gained was Jesus himself coming along, which we'd be fools to think will happen to us. Are you really suggesting, Liz, that we can expect such as this, our holding the tatters of our communities while Christ himself comes along and says, "I've got this?"

And my answer is, yes, sort of. The future is still out there—and it is God's future as much as it's ever been. And God is good, and God is with us, and God is still speaking, and we, at least, are still listening.

And things might not be as we want them. And they definitely won't be as they were. History never moves backwards. It always moves onward. But it never has yet come apart from God, which was Jeremiah's shocking testimony long before it was my flickering, sputtering hope. If the Lord could be found in Babylon of all places, then where could he *not* be found?

We are not alone. We are not the first to suffer such pervasive loss. And our losing in life has not reached its end. There will be more to come.

But outpacing that is the opportunity to love, the countless chances on any given day to act in love. One blessing to be found when the thickness and assurance of normal life fall away is the urgency of even the simplest love.

Thank the clerk at the store. Laugh at your neighbor's joke when you're both out getting the morning paper. Drop a note to your kid's teacher (or your grandkid's teacher) that you're grateful for all she does—or the school board member, or the select-board member. Wish the person whose path you cross when you're both out for a walk a good day. You just never know which of these might be Christ; you just never know when it might be you.

Thanks be to God.