

Sermon, Proper 17C, Jeremiah 2:4-13, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Good morning! Welcome to week two of the prophet Jeremiah. Last week we heard his call story, and then in the part we didn't read God basically told Jeremiah to get ready for Jeremiah's people to attack him, because the messages that God would give him would be difficult. Doesn't that sound lonely? Can you imagine? God assures Jeremiah that God will be with him, but that Jeremiah's own people will attack him. Not defeat him but attack him. That would be a tough call to accept.

Gary and I talk about calls like that sometimes. Sometimes it sounds like people only feel called to things they want to do. But God does not call us only to what we want to do. Sometimes God calls us to go to places we don't want to go or stay somewhere we don't want to stay.

But that's not the focus of today's reading. In the first four verses of chapter 2, which were not included this morning, God remembers the people of Israel as if they were a young bride devoted to God, following God in the wilderness.

And then we have today's passage. "Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob." When this reading comes up every three years, I am usually drawn to the image of cracked cisterns, but this year two other lines jumped out at me: "They did not say where is the Lord who brought us up out of the land of Egypt?" And then a bit later, "The priests did not say, where is the Lord?"

Jeremiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. Babylon was lurking, threatening to invade and overcome, and the people of Judah—Jeremiah's people, God's people—worried that they were going to fall to that powerful empire, which, spoiler alert: they did. The people felt desperate and turned away from God and toward idols. Other gods, false gods. Like Baal. The people lost hope and abandoned God.

They chased after things that did not profit, Jeremiah tells them. They did not lament and ask, "WHERE IS GOD?"

In the midst of this judgment, God through Jeremiah lifts up the tradition of lament. Instead of trying to serve Baal, the people—including priests—could have collectively raised their voices and railed, "Where is God?" God had protected them for forty years in the wilderness, providing them with just enough manna for the next day. But they seem to have forgotten that. They believe that they are going to fall, so they turn to superstition, to other gods. They probably thought, "we need to do *something*." "We'll try anything." "What can it hurt?"

As I said last week, God has expectations of us. God has expectations of loyalty. The southern kingdom of Judah turned away from God in the hope that something else could save them, and they lost everything.

Do you turn away from God and toward something else? What are your idols?

One idol many of us struggle with is money, and we hear more about that in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have."

Do you have that all figured out? If you say that you do, I won't believe you. Some people don't have quite enough to get by, but many of us have enough and just want more. We compare ourselves with others and with their cars or houses or shoes or vacations and think that if we just had a little more, we could do *that*. If we just had a little more, we wouldn't have to worry.

That gets into dangerous thinking because money can't save us. Money is not divine.

Judah in the time of Jeremiah was a place of high anxiety, and America feels something like that to me now. We have so much division, politically and religiously and culturally and financially. The pandemic caused some places to close and has been hard on other places that are still trying to figure things out like restaurants and churches and airlines. Inflation right now scares me. The number of people not coming to church scares me.

What scares you?

Would more money help?

Maybe, but saints of St. David's: don't put all your faith there. Our faith belongs to God alone, and being faithful does not mean that we can't question, or that we can't ask, "Where is God?" In fact, that's one of the most faithful questions we can ask. That's one of the questions spiritual directors and pastors ask. Where is God in this? When I stop and ask that question, I have to seek God out.

Where was God when we were shut down due to the pandemic? God was in those little plastic communion packets that we used while watching the service on the livestream. God was in the musicians and streamers who came to church faithfully each week to make sure that when we turned on our computers at home there was a way to worship. God was in phone calls and cards and talks outside our homes in heat while sweat trickled down our backs.

Where was God in my cancer? God was in my family in Arizona all buzzing their hair when I underwent chemo, even though mine never fell out. God was in the vestry as they met much more often than usual to ensure that things stayed as open as they could.

Where is God now? God is in the new babies that have recently been born. God is in the backpacks the kids brought to be blessed. God is on the pumpkin vine outside. God is in people showing up to weed and mow the lawn and read the Bible and sing.

Maybe you don't agree with me that God is in the things that I mention. According to Jeremiah, asking "Where is God" when we aren't sure is a faithful question. Where are you looking for God these days? What are you finding?