

Not In Kansas Any More

Cooke's-Portsmouth

June 25

Jeremiah 20:7-13

The Hebrew text for this morning is a succinct rendering of what it can be like to live the life of faith. The decision to follow the tenets of a religion and to put these tenets into practice in our daily living is not always easy. For as much as we want to believe that our life will be blest and easy with God on our side, no one's life is perfect. In tandem with the glory there is also the challenge of unanswered prayer; or being labeled naïve because of our affiliation; coping with change as theology changes when influenced by culture and the ups and downs of life and living. There are moments where we find ourselves where we would rather not be: unemployed; in a doctor's office or hospital; in a vehicular accident; or beaten down by life and feeling hopeless. Such was the case for the prophet Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah had the misfortune of living in a time of great social upheaval. It is his unpleasant task to warn the people of Jerusalem that their city will be destroyed; a message that does not make him popular among those that he preaches to. In this passage Jeremiah expresses his grief and anger at the task. While still in his mother's womb he was set apart by God to be the lips of God in a time of transition, change and destruction. The text for this morning informs that God has seduced Jeremiah into a life of submission. He laments "O Lord you have enticed me and I was enticed; you have overpowered me and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me." The implication here is that Jeremiah has found himself helpless before God's powers of persuasion and is now suffering the consequences as he delivers a message that people do not want to hear.

He has become an object of contempt and ridicule. He finds himself in a no win situation. He is compelled to deliver the message that God has laid upon his lips, speaking about doom and destruction and he encounters hostility. He is speaking a message that people simply do not want to hear. But when he decides that the response to his harsh reality is loneliness, ostracism and being the target of gossip and derision he decides to stop the prophetic utterance. But when he ceases to preach the word of God verily burns within him.

He finds no peace in remaining mute, and to add insult to his injury, it seems to him that God appears to be absent- both when he speaks the divine word and when he remains silent. His friends plot against him, inferring that the word that he speaks is his own seduction: he is a false prophet; let us denounce him! So we have this image of the chosen and elected prophet of God, feeling abandoned by both God and the constituency with whom he must live and to whom he is intended to preach. What a predicament! And yet what begins in lament ends in praise!

The passage begins in anger and disappointment directed towards God. It includes confession of his own anguish and confusion but then acquiesces to an expression of confidence in God and culminates in praise. “But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed for they will not succeed... Sing to the Lord; praise to the Lord for God has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of the evildoers.”

This passage is not simply the prophet railing against God; neither is it a pity party where Jeremiah laments his lonely lot and his vocation of having to speak a message that his hearers would rather not hear. His accusation against God is not the antithesis to faith but is an expression of faith. Lament and anger are not the opposite of faith, but are a very real part of the

life of faith. There is room for struggle in the life of faith and if God is indeed God, then God is both big enough and compassionate sufficient to understand our confusion and disappointment.

Who knows what disservice we may do to the suffering face of God when we dismiss one's disappointment in God? If God is truly omnipotent and omniscient then surely Providence will not crack under the pressure of a little disappointment or cries for support in the face of struggle.

Who knows? Maybe God prefers those who strive to understand and better come to know the nature and being of God through wrestling through a crises of faith or expectation. Stepping aside from the status quo of the familiar and unchallenged.

How easy it is to suffer a crisis when things do not go our way. Or to simply accept everything without question, assuming that this is the paragon of faithful behaviour. Even Christ stole away from time to time to be alone with God. We may assume that these retreats into the wilderness were for spiritual reflection and empowerment. That may well be the case because we are not informed of what transpired between his exit and his re-emergence. Might he too not have had some questioning moments as he confessed how challenging the task before him was? I prefer to think that his prayers were peppered with lament, anger and frustration in tandem with thanks, praise and supplication.

Like Jeremiah his message called the status quo to accountability and not all of his words were pastoral. Case in point the companion text for this morning from Matthew. There is a harshness to the message that seems to be contrary to the preferred message of love, acceptance and forgiveness that we so readily apply to the name and teaching of Jesus. In the gospel for this morning it is written: Do not think that I have come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter in law against her mother in law and one's foes will be members of one's household. Whoever loves father or

mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Do we not hear the harshness of the gospel and want to respond, undoubtedly like those who listened to Jeremiah and say, “Give me a break!” Temper the harshness with a little nurturing; tone down the talk of doom and destruction and lay a little hope on me, or else we will turn our backs on you. And yet the life of faith as we all know is not always serene.

It is a life of struggle: the struggle to sense God’s nearness when we are in the valley of the shadow; to continue to believe in an all -powerful God when common sense dictates that we might be playing the fool; the struggle to find peace in the wake of turmoil, uncertainty and fear. The desperate attempt to find meaning in the wake of tragedy and violence. Indeed to believe that the agenda of God for the world will triumph over bigotry, hatred and misinterpretation of scripture. We too need to continue to believe despite the seeming silence of God and the lack of divine intervention!

When Jeremiah is engaged in his rant God does not allay his fears from a burning bush, or send an angel to give him food and drink, or appear in a pillar of fire or a cloud. God does not seem to respond to the prophet at all. But that notwithstanding, Jeremiah’s lament transforms to praise: despite the seeming silence of God and the ostracism of his hearers and neighbours. It is a powerful text and perhaps a metaphor for the life of faith.

We are compelled to let people know that we stand for something; this may emerge in a situation where we try to temper inappropriate language in a public place; telling someone to watch their tongues and choice of words. If we opt to take the easy route and keep our offence to ourselves we often experience regret in the wake; beating ourselves up with I should have and I could

have. We have a message on our lips and if we do not deliver it we burn with regret. It is not easy to be Jeremiah. Purveyor of gloom and doom; lonely, ostracized, misunderstood.

When the Scarecrow, Tin Woodsmen, Cowardly Lion, Dorothy and Toto arrive in The Emerald City the second time they expose the Great and Powerful Oz as a fraud. Initially he has put them off; telling them that their requests will only be granted after they have performed a seemingly impossible task; retrieve the broom of the wicked witch of the west. Having procured the broom after much fear and turmoil they return to the Emerald City to have their requests met. When they are told a second time to come back another day, Toto begins pulling at a curtain that hides a mortal man. Realizing that this is the presumed powerful wizard, who is in reality a small, unassuming individual Dorothy says accusingly, "Oh - You're a very bad man!" To which the man from behind the curtain responds, "Oh, no my dear. On the contrary I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad Wizard."

In these days of increased threat and violence, when our prayers for tolerance, peace and understanding seem to be falling on unresponsive ears; when we find ourselves living outside of the metaphorical Kansas of familiarity, faith, steadfastness and where each day unfolds in like repetition of the day before; when we are silenced by the derision of a public who decry that our message of peace, hope and love is naïve and irrelevant; when we feel as though we have been seduced by God and the seeming impotent message of grace and understanding such that we become convinced that remaining silent and mute in its wake is the correct form of action, may we recall the message and person of Jeremiah.

Set apart to proclaim a harsh message that some may not want to hear; feeling both seduced and abandoned by Grace; ostracized, lonely and confused may our lips find a message of praise. In the darkness of uncertainty, the fear of abandonment; the challenges to our faith and hope; when

we are no longer Kansas and want only to return to the familiar, the routine and the easy, may our voices be heard above the din of point, counterpoint and rebuttal: Hallelujah anyway! And to God be the glory. Amen.