

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Epiphany 6C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
February 13, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

The New Normal

Do you remember a couple of weeks ago, hearing the story of Jeremiah's call? God called Jeremiah, an ill-equipped child – to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah didn't want that call, but because God promised to be with him and give him the words he needed, Jeremiah reluctantly said "yes." I wonder if he would have said that, had he known what was coming. When we hear from Jeremiah today, the temple had been destroyed, God's people had been exiled and Jeremiah was prophesying from Egypt. He'd seen the destruction coming, he'd even warned the people to surrender. But they did not, and so they were living in exile with no end in sight. Exile was their new normal.

Today we hear Jeremiah reminding God's people of the choice they had – would they trust in mere mortals, or would they trust in God? Yes, they were living in exile, but they still had that choice. The choice to trust in mortals whose hearts had turned away from God was to choose a parched and barren life, a life that was cursed. To trust in God was to live a fruitful life, a life without fear of emptiness, a life that was blessed. Would they be faithful even in exile, or not? After living through two years of the Covid pandemic, we know about a "new normal." We know about it, but we don't exactly know what it will be. We're pretty sure life will be forever changed; we just don't know how or how much. We've spent a lot of time thinking about that, worrying about that, wondering about that. And if you read my note in Friday's enews, you know that I'm really tired of all that. For me, all the thinking and worrying and wondering about what will happen or even happen next, has pretty much sucked the life out of me. As I said, I'm tired of being tired of Covid, and I'm really grateful Jeremiah came along with these words today.

I'm pretty sure it's time to stop all that thinking and worrying and wondering about when we'll be able to do whatever it is you're missing, again, or when we'll get to travel to wherever you want to go, again, or when life will return to "normal" again. I'm pretty sure it's time to start thinking about how we want to live, today. Today, when the hellebores are popping up through the dirt, today, when the light is changing and the air smells of spring, today when we're healthy and could be happy, today, when we have a day we will never, ever have again. How do I want to live this one precious today?

The inconveniences and even the tragedies of Covid have no bearing on what Jeremiah was talking about, and neither did the Babylonian exile his people endured. The question of whether we turn toward or away from God permeates every moment of our lives, regardless of circumstances, be they personal or global, old normal or new normal. Because when we look at our lives and our circumstances with a God's eye view – through the lens of being God's beloved, of loving our neighbor as ourselves, of being the face of love in the world... when we turn toward God, our lives are grounded and guided by love. And that, my dears, changes everything because God's love is greater than any worry, greater than any malaise, greater than

any weariness, greater than any fear. God's love is greater than all of that and offers us a life that is not anxious, as Jeremiah says, and does not cease to bear fruit.

The new normal, the God's eye view, the life that bears fruit? – those are all things Jesus was talking about in the gospel passage we heard today. I imagine you recognize it, though it's not as familiar as Matthew's version of the beatitudes. Luke's beatitudes are grittier and starker – and they come with woes that are warnings about being blinded by our own privilege. There's no escaping into squishy spirituality with Luke's beatitudes. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke's gospel he says "Blessed are the poor." In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." In Luke's gospel, he says "Blessed are the hungry."

Luke knows Jesus has a "preferential option for the poor." His is the gospel of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the marginalized. Luke's gospel, more than any other, insists that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth are to work for justice by upending the structures that maintain the vast chasm between the rich and the poor, the hungry and the full, the ones who appear to be blessed and everyone God actually blesses. This upside-down world Jesus proclaims as the Kingdom of Heaven, is what the "new normal" is supposed to be, though it isn't the world Luke lived in and it isn't our world either. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed is not a place where some people have plenty and some have not nearly enough. Do we really get that?

In God's upside-down kingdom, roles really are reversed - the first are truly last and the last are truly first. In God's upside-down kingdom, there is blessing in being emptied of everything and woe in being filled to the brim. In God's upside-down kingdom, being out of options is the blessed place. The poor, hungry, bereft and marginalized people Jesus was talking to that day didn't have many options. They didn't have full refrigerators, big, beautiful houses, important jobs or impressive titles. They had God's promises, that's what they had. They had a savior who assured them they were beloved and blessed.

For most of us, it's only when something goes terribly wrong, that we imagine God to be our only option. When there is a horrible diagnosis, then we turn to God. When the stock market crashes, then we turn to God. When our partner is unfaithful, then we turn to God. Oh yes, we pray to God and thank God and think of God in other times, maybe even every day. But how often do we experience God as our ONLY option? What would our lives be like if God really was our only option, if God was our everything?

For many of the people Jesus was talking to, God really was their only option. And for the poor, hungry, marginalized people in the world today, God may still be their only option. It wasn't God's will that those people were poor or sad or hungry or marginalized. It wasn't God's will then and it isn't God's will now. There is more than enough food to feed everyone on the planet, and still over three million children die each year because they don't get the nourishment they need. It is our will, not God's will that people are poor and hungry and in dire need. God's will is justice and mercy and peace. It is our will that keeps the justice and mercy and peace of God's kingdom from coming, and that is very hard for us to accept. I certainly don't want people to

starve or be homeless or not cared for and I know you don't either. But God works through us, and where things are wrong, we are the ones who need to get them right. *Thy kingdom come, O God, thy will be done.*

As it turns out, the ones who are willing to sacrifice so that God's kingdom actually can come, and God's will actually will be done - those are the ones Jesus calls blessed. Christianity, and especially if you get your Christianity on TV, has long and rightly been criticized for perpetuating the notion that God's blessings consist of health and wealth and if you have those things you're blessed and if you don't, you're not. I'm so blessed! is the cry of many who have what they want and attribute it to God's favor. This "prosperity gospel" has millions of followers in America. Everyone from Pentecostal healers to the power of positive thinkers to old school revivalists to that smiling preacher who has 7 million TV followers, have those followers because the message they hear is that God wants to bless THEM with health and wealth. Who wouldn't want that? The only problem is, that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says the cost of discipleship is high. The cost of justice for all is sacrifice by many. The cost of the Kingdom is being with the ones who are cold and hungry and marginalized.

The prophet Jeremiah said it so well... Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and blessed are those who trust in the Lord. The woes of Luke's beatitudes are not curses, but they are warnings about what happens when we turn away from God and God's people, warnings about being focused on the world of agreement, warnings about the perils of being complacent and self-satisfied. Among the many gifts of Luke's beatitudes for those of us who are full and rich and happy and well-liked, is the understanding that we have so much to learn about discipleship from the ones who are hungry and poor, bereft, and marginalized. Those are not circumstances we're likely to find ourselves in, which means our own life experience isn't enough to truly understand what it means to have the fullness of God's blessing. Sometimes our riches blind us to our poverty. It's the upside-down nature of God's kingdom.

I'll leave you with something a favorite writer Frederick Buechner had to say about the upside-down nature of God's kingdom...

IF THE WORLD IS sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business.

The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified.

The world says, Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own—and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get ... and Jesus says, Give.¹

What would the world be like if THAT were the new normal? Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*. Simon and Schuster, NY. 2006

