

“The Fix”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on August 29th 2010 (14th after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 2: 4-13

If you were to ask me...if you were to ask me...which prophetic book (which prophetic *book*) played the most significant role in shaping Christian faith, without hesitation I would answer by naming the book of the prophet Isaiah. The *book* Isaiah! If, however, you were to ask me...if you were to ask me which prophet—which prophetic *figure*—played the most significant role in shaping Christian faith, then I would answer by pointing to Jeremiah. By pointing to this remarkable, tormented forerunner of Christ’s; a prophet who lived some 600 years before Christ, whose life was lived against the backdrop of a turbulent era even by ancient Israel’s rather turbulent standards, a prophet whose passion truly prefigures Christ’s own passion.

He began his prophetic work, did Jeremiah, he began his prophetic ministry under the good King Josiah—a King whose life was tragically cut short as a very young man. Subsequently, Jeremiah found himself under the authority of rulers who regarded him as a nuisance (at best) and (at worst) a threat to the stability of the Kingdom: in short, rulers who regarded him as a traitor. And then—at the culmination of this awful period in Judah’s history (when the Babylonians, destroyed Jerusalem), Jeremiah experienced every agonizing moment of his people’s travails and then—to add insult to injury—found himself kidnapped into Egyptian exile where, presumably, he ended his days. Not the happiest of stories...not by any means.

And it is fitting that the Biblical book that bears Jeremiah’s name is filled with much of the anguish that marked his life and the life of his people. For while there are certainly moments of uplift to be found among Jeremiah’s prophecies, for the most part they contain testimonies of his own pain, set against the backdrop of his reproach of a people who have betrayed their unique vocation...their unique vocation as a people set apart to serve their God.

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This morning’s reading is typical of much that is found within the pages of Jeremiah. As a matter of fact, there is a sense in which this morning’s passage—near the start of the book—announces the overarching theme (certainly one of the key overarching themes) which unifies Jeremiah’s big, unwieldy book. After all, the first chapter of the book tells of Jeremiah’s call to the prophetic office; the passage we just heard follows almost immediately, the first of a series of oracles in which God—speaking through the prophet—accuses Judah of betrayal. And it’s worth nothing that Jeremiah—like most of the prophets—brings two basic charges against his people. On the one hand, Jeremiah (in other parts of the book) will go on to decry—much like the prophet Amos—what might best be described as a failure of justice. A failure of justice.

Like the prophets before him, Jeremiah bemoans the disparity between rich and poor, the extent to which those in power exercise that power ruthlessly, the extent to which extremes of wealth and poverty pervert the execution of justice. Jeremiah, no less than any other prophet, is appalled by such inequity and such iniquity. But for Jeremiah, as for the others, that is only a part of the indictment he comes to deliver.

No less importantly and perhaps more foundationally, Jeremiah is repelled by the idolatry he has witnessed amongst his people. Having been brought into a good and fertile land by the God of their forebears—the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Miriam and of Moses—Jeremiah is aghast when he sees that his people have chosen to ignore their God, preferring to sacrifice at the shrines of local deities: gods of harvest, gods of fertility, gods who—in Jeremiah’s judgment—are no gods, merely idols.

*Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.
Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are **no** gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.*

Not injustice but idolatry! That is the initial charge Jeremiah brings, the opening salvo Jeremiah fires, when he lays his case against his people. And therein lies a challenge for the likes of you and me!!

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As United Church people—indeed, as part of the broader movement we generally refer to as mainline Protestantism—the prophets (including Jeremiah) tend to speak to us with greatest immediacy when they speak of justice, when they cry out against *injustice*. When they speak of idolatry? When they speak of false gods? When they speak of those who offer sacrifice at the wrong shrines? Perhaps here we have greater difficulty putting ourselves in Jeremiah’s shoes. Isn’t Jeremiah guilty of the very exclusivism we fight against? Isn’t his rigid intolerance the very thing we find so intolerable in those we tend to label as fundamentalists? What possible word—what possible life-giving word—is there for us to hear in Jeremiah’s ancient lament?

Those of you with an eye for sermon titles may have been struck by the two word title with which I have adorned these thoughts. The fix. By which I am not referring to the sort of older house that can be politely described as a real fixer-upper. Nor, in this morning’s context, does “the fix” refer to what happens when an influential bookie arranges things so that you—and countless other betters—lose your shirt on what should have been a sure-fire bet. No! By fix I mean the fix a junkie craves when he or she needs one more hit, one more dose, one more fix of their drug of choice.

And it's the powerful words with which Jeremiah concludes this oracle that demand our attention.

*My people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

That's God speaking...speaking through the prophet. Reminding ancient Israel—and yes, reminding us—of the endless cycle that sees human beings (of every time and every place) saying no to the One who can quench our thirst, only to find themselves digging wells of themselves: cracked and parched though they be. The point being (and I can claim no originality here)...the point being that what Jeremiah speaks of as idolatry, we might best comprehend if we approach it under the rubric of addiction. Addiction!

And I am reminded...as I have been reminded all week long...I am reminded of the opening chapter of Genesis—the Bible's first book—in which we are told that human beings are made in God's image, enjoy a special affinity with God, a unique likeness to God, a profound connection with God: a connection which can alone render our lives truly meaningful. And I am reminded of John Calvin—the great theologian—who began his master-work by insisting that knowledge of God and knowledge of humanity go hand-in-hand. I am reminded, as well, of St. Augustine's most famous prayer: the one in which he speaks of our hearts being restless until they find their rest in God. Above all, above all, I am reminded of the great French polymath, Blaise Pascal, who insisted that there is a God-shaped vacuum—a God shaped hole—in the heart of every human person, a God shaped vacuum that can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, only by God although...

...in truth, we keep trying to fill it with all sorts of other things: alcohol or sex, gambling or drugs, power or wealth. Things that can provide quite a buzz—let's not kid ourselves on that score—things which can provide quite the buzz but which (once placed at the *centre* of our lives) are guaranteed to betray us in the end.

My people have committed two evils:
is the prophet's cry!

*they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

There is indeed, from Jeremiah's perspective, a God shaped vacuum—a God shaped hole—at the heart of every human being: hearts that are restless...hearts that *remain* restless...until they find their rest in God.

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This is one of those moments in a sermon...this is one of those moments in the life of faith...in which a wee bit of caution is warranted.

It's tempting at this point...it's tempting (and, to be honest, I nearly succumbed to the temptation)...it's tempting at this point to haul out a model atheist, preferably some otherwise brilliant individual whose axe grind against God has rendered them a falling down drunk, a hopelessly addicted wretch, or simply a miserably bitter and twisted human being. We can label them exhibit "A", and imagine that we've proven our point about that God-shaped vacuum in every human heart. And trust me: for present purposes there are no shortage of examples from which I might have chosen. However!!!!

There are also no shortage of people of faith—including clergy—who wrestle with all kinds of addictions. Faith, you see, is not an insurance plan...not a sure-fire one-size-fits-all way of guaranteeing ourselves the life of Riley let alone a life of perfect peace and contentment. Indeed, from where I stand, I continue to believe that there is grave danger when we adopt the sort of put-on-a-happy-face style of Christianity that regards every wart and worry as a sign of disloyalty to God. That way leads to madness! I don't want to go there...not for a minute. And yet! And yet!

What we're being invited to contemplate, this morning, isn't a master key to round-the-clock happiness. Not a magic wand to make life's troubles disappear. Not a sure-fire formula to place us at the head of the class or the head of the pack. No! What we're looking for this morning—at the invitation of an ancient prophet—isn't a better "fix" but rather a better "fit": that piece of life's puzzle which, when fitted into place, can lend to life a divine perspective which alone can help us to see our lives for what they really and truly are. *For what they really and truly might be!* Let's not kid ourselves. Human life--in all its violence and pettiness—it's danger and daily brush with utter pointlessness—human life, short and brutal as it can so often be presents a sorry spectacle more often than most of us care to acknowledge *when life is viewed apart from some larger spiritual frame of reference.* But when viewed in connection to something deeper and truer and richer and fuller: in short, when viewed in connection to our journey with God and God's journey with us, our lives take on a depth, a dignity—to use Jeremiah's word they take on a radiant glory(!)—that nothing can erase.

And I'll let you in on a little secret!

From where I stand, that restlessness—the "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee" restlessness of which Augustine speaks; the God-shaped vacuum in the human heart sort of restlessness of which Pascal speaks....I'm convinced that such restlessness, at the end of the day, far from being a burden, far from being a "curse", is a wonderful gift: an amazing blessing. God help us if we ever lose that restlessness because that's God's fire planted in our hearts: a fire that reminds us never to relinquish—never to relinquish—the stubborn crazy hope that Jeremiah's God...

...the God who came to us in Jesus...

...will find a way to meet us in our restlessness, fill us in our emptiness, mend us in our brokenness, quench us in our deepest thirst and yes...yes...yes: restore to us the fullness of the glory, the human glory, that is our shared destiny.

May it be so! Through Jesus the Christ! Amen!!

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