
Our Old Testament reading finds Jeremiah in the middle of what could be considered an argument with God. That’s not unusual for Jeremiah. He never wanted to be a prophet in the first place. He is horrified by the visions he is given — by his knowledge of the coming fate of Jerusalem. The king and the people hate Jeremiah and refuse to listen to his warnings. And, he hates his own gift — his own life — filled with anguish for the city and kingdom he loves. He is the Lord’s voice — but he is powerless to change the coming disaster. … And now, the biggest storm of all is gathering — Babylon. It’s not named in today’s reading, but during Jeremiah’s career as a prophet, Babylon lays waste to Jerusalem with fire and the sword. They take most of the Jews into exile — forcing them to abandon their beloved Promised Land, to make a new home in Babylon itself. That’s the storm Jeremiah sees gathering in our reading — and he is afraid — he’s angry — and he’s arguing with God about it. +++ In fact, in the verse right before our reading, the prophet cries out, “Ah, Lord God, how utterly you have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ even while the sword is at the throat!” +++ But the Lord doubles down as our reading begins::, “Well, you tell them from me I’ll be sending a hot wind off the desert — and it’s not going to be the kind of wind that winnows and cleans the land, either — it will be much stronger than that.” +++ So, Jeremiah tries reasoning: “But the people are foolish … they are stupid children … they don’t know how to do good.” ++++++ [(And it’s true, somehow — they don’t know how to do good. But they should. They were sent into the Promised Land with the Law — with moral authority — as servants of the Lord. The had built a unified nation — a small empire… They’ve forgotten because of their own pettiness, their own selfishness, their infidelity to the rule of law, their abuse of the land and water that had been given to them, their indifference to the poor, … their attraction to other gods.)] ++++++ So when Jeremiah’s pleas don’t make a difference… the conversation is over. Jerusalem’s fate is sealed. —+++ They’ve Pushed themselves to the Edge of the Void. ++++++ And the Lord opens the prophet’s mind to share God’s own anguish at the coming holocaust::::: His vision begins:: “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;… and to the heavens, and they had no light,”… Jeremiah’s words transport us back to the waste and void before creation::: The mountains quake — there are no birds or animals. The fall of God’s People will be so thorough, it will be as though creation itself has been reversed. — … Chaotic darkness will reign… The Void.

What are we supposed to do with this — this horror, this anguish, … this fear?? Is there anything about it that tracks with us… now? … One thing I’d say is that as a people, like Israel, we should know how to do good. Especially in this great nation – this wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world – blessed with so many advantages – where there is plenty to go around if we have the will to make it happen. +++ Do we show the pettiness, the selfishness, the disrespect for the rule of law, the abuse of creation, the indifference to the poor, the attraction to other gods — do we exhibit the same sins that Pushed Israel to the Void? +++ Well — yeah, in a lot of ways I think we do… … We’ve abused our resources to the point that temperatures are rising, storms are more devastating than ever, extinctions are accelerating, and plastics are choking the oceans. We turn our backs on refugees, blame victims of violent crime, stand by as hate groups surge without consequences. Our states are sliced and diced into gerrymandered districts, while long-time citizens find their voter registrations invalidated on some contrived technicality. Misinformation and lies are so commonplace that people have stopped believing anything they read or hear. … Any remaining sense of community — of mutual responsibility — of decency… – often seems outdated… – or quaint… – or naive. ++++++ Like Jeremiah, we have a sense of foreboding… What is this all leading to?... It feels like we are Pushing our way towards a time of reckoning — when a hot wind will come blow in from the desert and everything we take for granted — everything we rely on — will come tumbling to the ground. +++ Have we, like Israel, Pushed ourselves to the Edge of the Void?

+++++++ ++++ This is tough stuff. Where’s the Good News in this? +++ Let’s look closely, back into the text… back to see if there’s a ray of hope amid the darkness. In verse 27, the Lord says, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet… I will not make… a full end.” +++ However far the fall — however sure and well-deserved the reckoning — it’s not the end of the story. +++ Our God is a god of reconciliation — a God who doesn’t forget — a God suffers with us when we suffer — a God who comes back. +++ Yes, Jerusalem did fall — the land was laid bare in desolation — but
a generation later, they came back. They rebuilt the Temple. +++ It wasn’t the same, exactly – something new was built on the ashes of what had been. But they rediscovered their hope in the Lord – they found their way again – ||| and in a generation yet to come – from those ashes, came the Savior of the World. +++ +++ ++++ Whether from our own personal failings – (and we have many) – or the ones we share collectively… we all Push to the Void – and peer into dark chaos as though our world has been unmade. +++ Now, we don’t know what the future holds – but we are not promised an escape from that chaos – from the consequences of our sins. … As I said, Israel did fall – Jerusalem was destroyed. +++ But,… the one thing we CAN be sure of:: our God does not forget us… our God comes back – restores us – and carries us back into the Lord’s fold.

+++ +++ ++++

Our Epistle reading is a case in point. If anyone deserved to be shut off from the Lord, it was Paul. He had been “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” He had pulled Christians from their homes and committed them to prison. He rejected Jesus Christ’s example of love and compassion – he had forgotten how to do good. +++ And he suffered for it… But God did not make a full end for him. +++ No, instead, Christ came back for him – found him on the road to Damascus – and called Paul into faithful service. +++ Jesus Christ leaves no one behind – he comes back…and offers his hand in peace and healing. – He offers to restore us… … each one of us…

+++++++ ++++

That is the word of grace that Jesus offers in our gospel reading. Notice, he’s not talking to his disciples – to people who have already committed themselves to following him. Jesus is not “preaching to the choir,” so to speak. +++ No, that day “tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.” And, of course, the Pharisees and scribes are scandalized that Jesus would dirty himself by speaking and eating with such people – with such sinners. +++ +++ But they don’t realize that it was sinners Jesus had come for – Jesus is God… coming back …to save those who have been lost along the way. +++ So, he tells the parable of the Good Shepherd and the Lost Sheep. And he rocks their world. +++ Not only are the Lost included in his flock – but they get preferential treatment. +++ Christ, the Good Shepherd, will leave the others behind, if necessary, to find you – to lift you up on his shoulders – and carry you back to safety. +++ What can you do to separate yourself from the love of Christ?: Nothing! +++ If you are in his flock, he will find you – and find you again – and again. +++ Even when we Push to the Void, God will not make a full end for us… NO… Our God comes back for us – and brings us home. +++ That’s how the free, irresistible, grace of God works.

+++++++++++++++++++++

But it’s important to know who we are in the story. +++ Are we meant to identify with the shepherd, and assure ourselves: “Would I go back for the one lost sheep? Of course I would!” +++ Or, perhaps, are we among the 99 sheep who follow the shepherd the first time – the ones who wait patiently while the shepherd goes to retrieve the one – that one sheep that keeps wandering away, getting into trouble, and having to be rescued. +++ No. +++ To understand the grace that’s being offered – we have to see that each of us – is the one who wanders away. +++ YOU are important enough – eternally loved by your shepherd enough – that Christ comes to find you when you stray. +++ +++

+++++++ ++++

And so… … Jeremiah was right – our failures, – our sins, – they do separate us from God. We drive ourselves into exile. Push to the Void. … We deserve a place outside the pasture – away from the care of the Shepherd. +++ But our God comes back for us anyway. +++ +++ This morning, I want you to know:: Wherever you are in your journey… whatever mistakes you have hanging over your head, that you can’t quite put behind you… whatever shortcomings make you believe you may not be following Christ the way you should… whatever is making you feel like a lost sheep who can’t keep up with the herd… know that the Good Shepherd has arrived to lift you from the storm and to lay you on his shoulders. Rejoice with him – Your time of exile is at an end.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.