

Bible Study
Proper 19, Year C
September 11, 2016

[RCL] Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

This week's readings feature harsh words from the prophet Jeremiah, "they are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good." And the prediction of ominous consequences, "the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black..." The anguish of the prophet Jeremiah seems to mirror the anguish of God witnessing the actions of people who seem bent on self-destruction.

It would be difficult to miss the parallel to today's world as we suffer the consequences of our actions related to race, gender, the environment...the list could be quite long! In the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is that God who brings devastation down on the people. In today's world, we realize that the consequences we suffer stem from our collective actions as failing stewards of God's creation, not from a vengeful God.

- How do you react to Jeremiah's harshness in these passages? How do they make you feel?
- Do you believe that Jeremiah's prophesy is inevitable? Is there still opportunity to make things right?

Psalm 14

As if Jeremiah wasn't bleak enough, Psalm 14 starts with: "All are corrupt and commit abominable acts; there is none who does any good." However, if you read closely you will notice that "the fool" says these things – it is "the fool" who denies God's existence and acts accordingly. And it is God, despite the acts of the "faithless" - those "evildoers who eat up my people like bread" - who remains a steadfast refuge, one who stands in the company of the righteous and the oppressed. In fact, the psalmist claims that in their very acts of oppression, the fool experiences the folly of denying God and the terror of the consequences of their actions. "See how they tremble with fear, because God is in the company of the righteous." The psalm ends with a reaffirmation of the power of God, a call for deliverance, and a prayer for God to restore the fortunes of the people.

- Are the behaviors described in this psalm a description of individual behaviors or societal ones?
- When the psalmist calls for God to "restore the fortunes of his people," do you think this is a prayer for ALL people, or just those who did not deny God's existence?
- Do you think it is possible for all such "foolishness" to one day come to an end or is it human nature to act in ways apart from God?

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Into the darkness of this week's readings comes the light of 1 Timothy proclaiming that our God is merciful, that despite our former "foolishness" or denial of God, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The writer even uses himself as an example of the power of the love and grace of Christ to reform and renew a person's heart and soul.

- How have you experienced strength and renewal through Jesus?
- In what ways can you use your story to share with others the powerful message of renewal and hope?

Luke 15:1-10

Luke 15:1-10 includes one of the most well-known stories of Jesus, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, which expresses the deep joy a shepherd feels when he locates that one sheep who wandered off. The parable is rich in meaning about the importance God places on embracing those who have fallen into the ways of "foolishness" described in Psalm 14 above.

- At what times in your life have you been the lost sheep? How did your community or family welcome you back? How did God welcome you back?
- How can your community orient itself toward this ministry of finding and welcoming those who do not know God or have turned away from God?

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