

PENTECOST 18

Proper 20 - Year B

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Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Jeremiah 11:18-20

¹⁸ It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I
knew;
then you showed me their deeds.
¹⁹ But I was like a gentle lamb
led to the slaughter.
And I did not know it was against me
that they devised schemes, saying,
“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit;
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
so that his name will no longer be
remembered!”
²⁰ But you, O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously,
who try the heart and the mind,
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

Jeremiah has sometimes been called “the weeping prophet,” and it’s clear from a passage like this why the label might have some merit. Today’s excerpt is from the first of Jeremiah’s “complaints” (see commentary in the New Oxford Annotated Bible). The words establish Jeremiah as a prophet who has suffered wrong. And not only has Jeremiah suffered – he has suffered at the hands of his own people: as a verse later in the same chapter confirms, people from Jeremiah’s own hometown, Anathoth, are seeking to kill him. Thus it is all the more poignant when Jeremiah describes being betrayed like “a gentle lamb” led in ignorance “to the slaughter” (vs. 19). His own people have forsaken him. Jeremiah thus condemns the sin of God’s People as one who has been harmed by the very sin in question. His condemnation is not abstract or impersonal; it is testimonial. Jeremiah is a witness through his own suffering to the wickedness he condemns—and that is precisely why his prophetic voice is so important. The preacher should ask, “Can God’s people hear the voice of Jeremiah in the lamentations of those suffering today? Who have we hurt from among our own people? Which prophetic voices have we attempted to silence?”

Discussion Questions

Who in the church might identify with the lamenting prophet Jeremiah? Who speaks out against the church about harm caused by the church? Can we, as people of Biblical faith, hear the legacy of Jeremiah in those critiques? Can we hear God speaking to us in the words of those who call us out?

Psalm 54

- ¹ Save me, O God, by your Name; *
in your might, defend my cause.
- ² Hear my prayer, O God; *
give ear to the words of my mouth.
- ³ For the arrogant have risen up against me,
and the ruthless have sought my life, *
those who have no regard for God.
- ⁴ Behold, God is my helper; *
it is the Lord who sustains my life.
- ⁵ Render evil to those who spy on me; *
in your faithfulness, destroy them.
- ⁶ I will offer you a freewill sacrifice *
and praise your Name, O Lord, for it is good.
- ⁷ For you have rescued me from every trouble, *
and my eye has seen the ruin of my foes.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

The psalms are replete with some of the most beautiful images in all of Christian Scripture. They give us words to voice our deepest desires and metaphors by which to express our longings to God. But not all the desires in the psalms are self-evidently godly. Some may strike us as very strange, very uncouth, or even very *ungodly*. Take, for instance, the fifth verse of today's psalm, *Psalm 54: Render evil to those who spy on me; in your faithfulness, destroy them*. In our tradition, it is not common to pray for violence to be done to our foes. And yet here is a prayer for precisely that. And not only that, but the psalmist actually asks *God* to do evil. "Render evil to them!" he writes. This likely runs counter to the embedded theologies of many modern Christians. The notion that the God of Righteousness might act evilly, especially in response to our prayers, is not commonly upheld in the church.

What I might suggest is that this psalm offers us not so much a theology of divine evil as it does a theology of prayer and emotion. That this strange prayer for the Good God to "render evil" is in our Bible is not necessarily a moral endorsement of the aim of the prayer itself, or a promise that God will answer that prayer in the way that the psalmist (in his indignance at his enemies) might expect. But the presence of such a prayer in our Bible does indicate that God is capable of hearing even our ugliest prayers, of holding even our ugliest and most violent feelings. The God who "sustains [our lives]" will always be there to hear our most hateful prayers. The same God can transform our violence and violent thoughts—and in this transformation, we can be "rescued from trouble" indeed.

Discussion Questions

Can we see ourselves reflected in the more violent sentiments of this psalm? What enemies do we perceive in our life of faith? How do we pray to God about those enemies? And how has God responded to our prayers about the people we most hate?

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

¹³ Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth. ¹⁵ This is not wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

⁴ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

According to today's reading from the Letter of James, there are two kinds of wisdom. There is wisdom that is "earthly, unspiritual, devilish," and there is wisdom "from above," which is "pure," "peaceable," "gentle," merciful, and full of other such good traits. The latter is, of course, preferable by far to the former. James further suggests that the sort of wisdom we cultivate is indexed directly to the sort of character we cultivate within ourselves. There is thus a correlation between the happenings of our outer, social lives and the quality of our inmost being. Therefore, James writes: *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?* In short, what happens *among* us arises from what is alive *inside* us. If what is alive inside us is bad, then what arises among us will be bad, also.

The solution? For James, it's simple (if abstract): submit to God and resist Satan; draw near to God, and let God draw near in return. Straightforward enough, but the quandary is in figuring out what it actually means to do these things. James certainly describes the problem: the ravages of earthly wisdom, leading to sin, violence, and unhealthy pride. James at least names the solution: intimacy with God and resistance to the devil. The task of the preacher is to flesh out what it actually means to live into that solution. What does it actually *mean* to submit to God? There are of course many answers to that question. One approach might be found in today's Gospel reading, involving embracing humility and childlike openness. But of course, there are other answers, and it is the task of the church to discover and embody those answers together.

Discussion Questions

What sort of cravings afflict the modern church? How do the desires of our inner lives impact the events of our outer lives here and now? And what does wisdom from above look like embodied in our modern context?

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

In today’s passage, we only have seven verses, but in Mark’s Gospel, so much can happen in seven verses! First, we have Jesus traveling through Galilee and keeping his journey a secret. Why a secret? Well, Jesus is secretive throughout Mark’s Gospel. There’s even a scholarly term for the privacy with which Jesus operates: the *Messianic Secret*. It’s not always clear exactly why Jesus opts to be so quiet about his presence and ministry. But in this case, the secrecy is related explicitly to the content of Jesus’ teaching. Crucially, Jesus is teaching his disciples that the Son of Man must be killed and then rise again. The disciples are confounded by this teaching. It might be hard for modern Christians to sympathize with their confusion, since, after all, we know the end of the story. The notion of Jesus’ redemptive death is very familiar to us. But they didn’t yet understand the full breadth of Christ’s work. We should remember, then, just how astounding and frightening this teaching would have been *in the moment*: The disciples are being told that their teacher and friend will be murdered! And resurrection? An absurdity! Presumably, Jesus knew the shock his prophecy would cause. It therefore makes sense that he might not have wanted to be super public about the trajectory of his ministry.

From here we transition rather quickly to a discourse on humility. By the time they arrive in Capernaum, the disciples have been embroiled in a competitive debate about who is the best of the bunch. Jesus does not so much rebuke their argument as he does redirect it with teaching. In contradistinction to the disciples’ emphasis on greatness and authority, Jesus asserts that servanthood and childlike diminution are a source of Godliness.

How do we connect these two aspects? Jesus’ proclamation of his own death is hardly a proclamation of his own *greatness*. To his disciples, it must have seemed like a prediction of failure. Yet as Jesus says, it is those who come last, those who seem to be small and weak and failures, that are first after all. The second half of today’s story can thus help us to approach the first half with the eyes of a child, with wonder and openness to the fundamental humility and ridiculousness of Jesus’ self-sacrificial ministry on the Cross.

Discussion Questions

How can modern readers relate to the confusion and ego-angst of Jesus’ disciples? Are debates about greatness still happening in the church? What do they look like?