

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
Centerville, Utah

March 29, 2009
The Rev. Steven C. Andersen

YEAR B, LENT 05 (RCL)

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, Hebrews 5:5-10. John 12:20-33

Among the books that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, are the four Major Prophets and the twelve Minor Prophets. Jeremiah, from whom we had our first reading this morning, is one of the majors, along with Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Jesus would say some 650 years later, that a prophet has no honor in their own hometown, among their relatives or even in their own house. Too bad he wasn't around to warn Jeremiah. But I doubt that it would have made much difference. It just seems to be the way things are, that in every generation, we revile those who dare to point out our sins: our gluttony in the middle of poverty, indifference in the face of suffering, choosing revenge in the place of mercy, anger and hatred in a world desperate for love.

Jeremiah's time came at the end of a long, golden age for the Israelites. In about 1500 BCE, God delivered the Israelites from their bitter bondage as slaves in Egypt. God, through Moses, led the Hebrews to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And there God planned to live, so very close to his chosen people. But in 587 BCE, Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonians, and the last autonomous Jews were forced into captivity. They were once again enslaved, some 900 years since being delivered from their bondage in Egypt. It was the bitter end of an era. Jeremiah lived and ministered during the tumult of

the last years before Israel's Babylonian captivity. He started his ministry in 627 BCE, and died in Egypt sometime after Jerusalem fell. He was completely rejected by his own people. They avoided even listening to him. He was put into stocks, put behind bars, and was once thrown down a nearly empty cistern. He lived out his last days, and died, under house arrest in a foreign country.

Jeremiah was a prophet. I don't know that prophets actually see specific events that will occur at specific times in the future. Rather, I think that they can see where a life apart from God leads. It is sort of like seeing someone who is a heavy drinker, and prophesying that they will die of alcoholism. What prophets do have, is a relationship with God. They are tuned into God, and it centers and guides their life. They know the fulfillment and ultimate meaning that life can have, lived close to God. They are also able to see what's wrong in the world around them, and where that path will lead.

Jeremiah saw that the end was coming for the Israelites. They had been given this land, and their independence, as a gift from God. God fulfilled his covenant that he had made with Abraham, and with Moses. He had delivered them, He had provided for them, and He had cared for them. He loved them so very deeply. In return, God wanted only one thing. That they return the love that He had shown to them.

To his horror, Jeremiah could see that disaster was near. How it must have anguished him to see that his people were choosing to divorce themselves

from the love of God. Time and time again, the people had left God, returning when they had suffered enough from the consequences. But this time their behavior was so grievous, that they would lose their independence. After 900 years, the nation of Israel would cease to exist. It's once proud people of God, would be in slavery or scattered throughout the world.

In Jeremiah, we see two things. We see him intensely trying to get his people's attention. He got in their faces, he was scathing, and he was relentless. But what we see also, is that he was driven by his love and affection for his people who were headed off the cliff. In addition to the harsh castigations, Jeremiah records deep, sorrowful laments.

I am no Jeremiah, but I often see our world, much the way Jeremiah did in his day. It would be hard to make the case that we are collectively any better than we have ever been. Many are at war all over the planet. There have never been more poor, amidst resources rich enough and vast enough to make it all go away. Greed and corruption have reached new mountainous heights, bringing us now to the brink of a global economic collapse.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the vast, spectacular wonder that is the whole of created order. And humankind was lovingly placed at the center of it all, to flourish as God's beloved children. It has always been our destiny to find our unique place in creation, and to fulfill the potential for our lives. So here we are today, some 2700 years after Jeremiah,

and more than 2000 years after Jesus. And it doesn't appear that we have learned a thing about living into the profound possibilities for our lives. You know, they say that we only use about ten percent of our brains. That may be optimistic. Worse, I would be surprised if we used that much of our spirit, our God given soulfulness, as we live out our lives.

Sadly - prophetically, Jeremiah was right. God didn't punish the Israelites, any more than he punishes you and I. But their choices, about how they lived their lives, was the path to their ultimate destination. Jeremiah uses the term husband for God's relationship with Israel, to show the deep intimacy of the covenant between God and his people. A covenant that the people broke. And God's response? He will pick up the pieces, and try again. No judgment, no retribution. God's response to rejection was, and is, steadfast love. But this time, instead of trying to teach with laws and rules and teachers, it will be a more direct approach. The only law will be God himself living in their hearts. There is no textbook required for that. There will be no need to teach about God, for God will dwell within each of them. On the other side of the fall and the troubles that were to beset the Israelites, would be a homecoming to God. This is how Jeremiah describes it elsewhere in chapter 31: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I shall build you, and you shall be built." "O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall

plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.” With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back. I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” “Their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.”

The good news, the really good news, is that God makes this very same promise to us. The deep angst of our lives, is in direct proportion to the distance that WE have put between ourselves and God. In the depths of our souls, in our heart of hearts, we long to be God’s people. Inside each of us, our souls tug at us. We wonder about our purpose, and the meaning of our lives. We have this vague, but haunting sense, that there is something more – something deep and profound that is calling to us. That things can surely be much better than what we see in front of us. That is a homing signal of sorts. You see, our souls, that deep essence of who we really are, was always meant to reside in God. Apart from God, we will always be anxious, unsettled and unfulfilled. Like the ancient Hebrews, we have the freedom to choose how we live our lives. The obvious consequence is that when we choose a path, we are also choosing a destination.

In a way, we can all be prophets. We know where our paths have taken us in the past, and we have a pretty good idea of where our choices are likely to lead us. Every single day, until we run out of days, we can choose in which direction to go. Better choices will take us to better paths, which will provide for better outcomes.

Jeremiah speaks so eloquently, about God writing upon our hearts. But for God to do so, our hearts must be open for Him to write upon. If we wish to be nourished by the living waters of God's spirit, we must seek the spring from which it comes. If our spirits long to dwell in the cool, watered garden, if we want our souls to dance like the merry-makers – we need to seek the God that is the source of it all. Amen.