

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Jer 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING: Psalm 139:1-6,13-18

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.

“Being Reshaped by the Potter’s Hand”

“I have gone down to the potter’s house this morning. God told me to go. No one else is here, which surprises me since the potter’s house is always a gathering place. People come here just to marvel at the way the potter works the clay, dropping an ugly, good for nothing lump of it onto the wheel to get the air pockets out of it, then wetting it down so that it is pliable and soft, and then, as his foot spins the wheel, shaping it into whatever beautiful and useful form he is desiring to fashion...a bowl, a pitcher, a plate, a vase, a figurine, the uses are endless. I’m watching the Potter’s face. He is really concentrating. His eyes beam bright with love for his craft.¹ If the end result is not to his satisfaction, he, will once again fold it into a lump of clay and start reshaping it until it does. It’s quite obvious that the potter has complete control of the clay. “He can do anything he wants with it,”² and people are fascinated by his artistry.

Ok, so where is everyone? It’s just me and the potter here. HmMMM, oh, I get it, I think it’s because of me. No one wants to be around me. They don’t like what I have to say. I’m the Lord’s prophet. Jeremiah is my name. I have been the Lord’s prophet since I was very young, and a prophet says what the Lord tells him to say, even if it is a hard and harsh message...which it has been for a long time....doom & gloom, trouble, destruction, ruin!

My people, you see, the Israelites, were once a people who clung closely to God, but now...now we have gone astray and are no longer good for anything. God has been asking me to call the people to change, to repent....to be ones who care for the poor, the orphans and the widows, who give shelter to the strangers in the land. He’s asked me to tell my people that it’s what’s in their hearts that is important. They cannot just break the commandments...stealing, committing adultery, murdering, lying, worshiping idols (worship idols!) and then come to the Temple, trusting that because we have it, that alone will save us. They cannot come to offer their burnt offerings and go merrily on their ways unchanged. Their hearts must be for the Lord.

Oh, so much violence, so much dishonesty, so much power hoarding, and disregard for each other, such a godless people...it’s awful really, but yet they, the ones who would have usually

¹ John Wurster. *“Have you Seen the Potter Lately?”* In: What if what they Say is True? (Lima, OH; CSS Publishing Co, Inc: 2000), 51-55

² John Wurster.

been here this morning, think that I should give them some reassuring, light-hearted message, or just shut up completely. But I can't. And I wouldn't right now, even if I could, for our Just Judge, the One more pure and holy than we can perceive, the Sovereign Almighty God who has control of all things, is saying that we will be punished soon if we do not repent!

In fact, today the Lord has spoken to me through this potter. *“Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel,”* God says, *“At one moment...I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.... Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings”!*

Ok, brothers and sisters, let's leave Jeremiah at the potter's house for a moment and think about what God has said to him. God has said that we are the clay and God is Potter. If we are flawed...if we have impurities, if we are too firm or too thin, if we have defects...our integrity is compromised... well, we may not be helpful to God's purposes in the world and we will not be helpful to ourselves. Our sin, that's what we're talking about here, deeply grieves God...DEEPLY grieves God. As Paul Duke says, “It is a desecration of ourselves and of creation and is an affront to the One who has created, blessed, entrusted, called and moved among us with fearsome self-giving love.³ And for this reason, God will judge us, God can/will fold us back up into a lump of clay. God, the Master Potter, is free to do so, after all. And the consequence of all of this can be very painful. *(pause)* That is a hard message to hear. It's a hard message to preach.

Case in point: spoiled by generations of godlessness, the people of Jeremiah's time soon suffered the Babylonian invasion. They were ultimately taken captive, thousands died, the remainder made slaves, and exiled to a foreign land. Livelihoods were taken away. Homes were lost. Families were broken up. Everything they had vanished, smashed down, rocked by

³ KC Ptomey quoting Rev Paul Duke, Co-Pastor, FBC-Ann Arbor, MI; Ash Wednesday service, 2/22/12 PTS.

the traumatic dislocation and horrible treatment. Even their holy Temple, which for them signified God's presence, was destroyed. Ah...yes, the consequence of sin can be very painful . (long pause) HOWEVER, in this Scripture, we see something else too. We see, we see that our sovereign God is also free to change his mind about us. God can be influenced to plant and build up, even if God's intended plan was to pluck up and destroy.⁴ This was very good news for the Israelites as they were allowed to come back to Jerusalem and start afresh. It is good news for us too. God can start over with us. A new pot or bowl or pitcher or plate can be pulled forth from the lump. God can reshape us and remake us. There is no sin that will daunt God. No thing will separate us from him. Afterall, he's experienced it all for us in Jesus Christ. As the psalmist so wisely sang so long ago, *"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."* (Ps 139:7-9) God can reshape us into anything God desires for good, because God never stops loving us and his world. (Long Pause)

You know, as a people, we have, over the last several years, seen our world become more violent, more hateful, more power hungry, divided, greedy, racist, and individualistic. The false gods to which we so quickly bow down have seemingly been unmasked, the stones turned over. It is easy to imagine that God, the Potter, might be very frustrated and displeased, as displeased as God was with the Israelites so long ago. And rightly so. Rightly so.

Yet, I am hopeful, I am so hopeful that once again we can listen to God, rend our hearts and be transformed to live with each other as humans differently,⁵ reorienting our vision to do and be as God has commanded, concerned for the common good. This transformation can start with us as individuals today. For that is how a whole people changes. The change will allow to become more pliable and able for God to easily mold us into that which will be useful to bringing God's Kingdom to earth.

⁴ Shannon Kirshner. "Jeremiah: A Prophet of Loss and Hope". <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2021/061321.html?printtrue>. (accessed 9-2-22).

⁵ Tippett and Patel. "Why We Belong to Each Other." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTsdCglNERQ>. (accessed 9-2-22).

We can be hopeful. For that is who our God is. We have a God who has promised to never abandon us, but instead to be with us ‘til to close of the age. We have a God who is ready and eager to take: what is broken and fix it, what is wounded and heal it, what is defiled and cleanse it, what is bitter and sweeten it, what is impure and purify it, what is incomplete and make it whole, what is purposeless and give it direction, and what is ugly and turn it into something that is beautiful.⁶

Show video

“I am still here, at the Potter’s house. I’ve watched as he has reworked the vessel that he’d previously folded into a lump. “I’ve been mesmerized by the wonderful way he’s crafted it. It WAS seemingly done. But as he held it and looked at it, a frown appeared on his face. His eyes narrowed. He was frustrated. It was not right. Then he folded it up. “No,” he cried. “No, *that is not it. No.*” As he yelled, he threw that lump of clay against the wall. I was quiet as was he. For a long time, we were both quiet. Then, the potter picked up the clay. It was again in his hands. I saw tears in his eyes and his shoulders shaking as he sobbed over it. I began weeping too. But now, now I see....I see the Potter’s fingers working that clay once again”.⁷ Amen

⁶ Anon. Sermon: “No Waste” <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93000014#> (accessed 9-2-22)

⁷ John Wurster