

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Real and The Mirage

Jeremiah 17

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Jeremiah the prophet is living and greatly annoying Jerusalem's leaders at a time when the impending army of an opposing nation is bearing down on them. They are in trouble, and they know it, mostly, but don't want to admit it, certainly not publicly. There's a struggle happening between Jeremiah and the leadership about whether to look trouble straight in the eye and deal with it or keep going on as if everything's ok. That struggle belies a deeper one, one that rifts through their history and the hearts: do you trust God? Do you really trust God? When there are always pretenders and alternatives and a way that seems right to man, do you trust God and God's ways over the ways of the world, in the good times and the hard times and every time? And can you even tell the difference between the two?

Our reading this morning is one small part of a 20-plus-chapter warning against Jerusalem. In it he addresses their particular situation and more broadly, speaks to the human condition and the human heart even today. He shows a fork in the road for bad times, just like in good times: either trust the ways of men or trust the way of God.

This is the judgment against the human heart. We have a very hard time, it seems, discerning between the true, good, and beautiful and the illusion, between what's real and the mirage, between the way of God and all the shiny things. Jesus says he comes that we may have life and have it abundantly. Can we know the difference between life like that and the mirages that promise good life but leave us empty? Jeremiah thinks it's possible but he also thinks it is really hard. Here's his verdict: *The heart is deceitful above all else and desperately sick—who can understand it?* Happy Valentine's Day?

It's not just that the heart is deceitful; it's that the heart can be easily deceived. The heart in the Old Testament is the *leb*, not a seat of emotion and romance. It's the seat of discernment and wisdom. In the prophet's words, the capacity of discernment and decision-making is deceitful and sick. His two major complaints against the people that run through the whole book and bookend our reading this morning: you worship other gods instead of the one true God, and you pursue wealth but you do not do it justly, especially to the most vulnerable among you. He hammers these two things over and over and over again throughout the whole book. And he does so here on either side of our short reading. You have turned to other gods, you have served yourselves, instead of looking out for your neighbor in need. You thought all of this was going to give you a good life. How's that working out for you?

Cursed are those who trust in human ways; blessed are those who trust in God. In a certain way, it could hardly be more straightforward. The road forks, which will you take?

Hear it again:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make flesh their strength,
whose heart turns away from the Lord.

They are like shrubs in the desert
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is in the Lord.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when the heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Notice that the one who is blessed, the one who trusts God, does not avoid suffering, but endures in faith through it. The suffering—the heat, the drought--comes for all. There is little illusion in the Bible that having faith means life is without trouble. Jeremiah knows it. Exhibit A: The life of Jesus. The hard times come. It's a question of how you endure through it. Banish the thought that faith in God is only for when life is always easy. No where are we promised that. What we are promised is that God is faithful in good and hard times and that faith in God can endure even in and for the hard times. God is good soil. God is solid ground. God is living water.

Trust the way of God, not the way of man. Those who are cursed, living in a parched land, do not choose to be a shrub bush in the desert over being a fruit-bearing tree by life-giving water. It's that they confused the desert for a spring. They fell for a mirage. A mirage looks real, but it is not real; it vanishes; it's an illusion. When we fall for illusions—the things that promise goodness and life--and we stay there. We think we're drinking from fresh, deep water, but in reality there's nothing much there to keep you alive for very long. The human soul is intended to be like a big, lush, beautiful, shade-giving, fruit-bearing tree. Yet so many wither on in life like shrub bushes in the desert.

With that image in mind of life like a tree by fresh water or a shrub bush in the desert, here's a contemporary version of the old story. It's sobering, but it's not surprising. It hits home if you've ever felt like something's not quite working these days the way it's supposed to.

The New York Times recently reported on a study called The State of the Nation. "A politically diverse group of scholars—who together have advised every president since Bill Clinton and who work at many of the country's top think tanks—released a report card on American well-being. The scholars spent months debating which metrics captured the

state of the nation and ultimately agreed on 37. Then they tracked those measures since the 1990s and compared the United States with dozens of other countries on such metrics as economic performance, physical health, mental health, social trust, and more... The group's central finding: The US economy has outperformed most of its rivals in terms of productive might and innovation, but this success has not led to rapidly rising living standards for most Americans." Sobering, but not at all surprising.

We're good at money, at least for some; we're not doing so well in just about everything else. In 1990, US Gross Domestic Product was 28% higher than European countries. Today the gap is more than 80%. "Economic growth in the US has been remarkable, yet...

"This country has the lowest life expectancy of any rich country, which was not true for most of the 20th century. The US has the highest murder rate of any rich country and the world's highest rate of fatal drug overdoses. It has one of the lowest rates of trust in the federal government and among the highest rates of youth depression. When Americans are asked how satisfied they are with their own lives, the US ranks lower than it did 3 decades ago."

What are we to make of this? This all sounds so bleak. And it might feel disconnected, too. What one person experiences in life can be completely different from what another person is experiencing in life. You can't make a blanket statement about all of us under any circumstances. Furthermore, everything in the report isn't so bleak. For example: Education levels are improving compared with other countries, poverty is declining, life expectancy is improving, even if more slowly than other countries.

So for various reasons maybe this isn't worth paying much attention to. But—maybe—it teaches us something important about ourselves worth paying attention to. Something about the geography of the world we are inhabiting. It's a story, somehow, of all of us and how the way of life we share together is working for us and for our neighbors. That's something we should care about. How are we doing? How are our neighbors doing? Are we a tree planted by rivers of water or the shrub bush in the wilderness drying up?

What seems apparent from the in-depth study over all those years is that there's a huge and growing gap between what we think we should be and what we are. The fruit of national economic prosperity we are promised is a far distance from the actual lives and challenges that almost all of us are experiencing. Growth and economic prosperity and power are supposed to make us happy, secure, healthy. This is the promise, yes?

Is this the reality? Even Jeremiah didn't think so. In the same chapter as his cautions, he gives a little one-verse parable:

"Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch,
so is he who gets riches but not by justice.
In the midst of his days they will leave him,
and at his end he will be a fool."

Jeremiah 17:11

I wonder what he would say about this report card on ourselves, which reports, “Our economy is poised for continued success. This is really the only area where we are excelling.”

I can’t get out of my head, a two-sentence analysis from a participant who sounds shell-shocked, “We’re so wealthy but so unhappy. It seems like the central question of modernity.”

The central question of modernity may be put like this: How is it that a nation who are so wealthy are also at the same time so unhappy. Is it simply because money is a mirage? Are we just back at the old straw: “Money doesn’t buy happiness”? I mean, maybe. It’s what it sounds like. It also apparently doesn’t buy mental health, emotional well-being, equality in incomes, non-violence, or life satisfaction. Who are we? We become richer; we become unhappier. It’s not a picture of a tree planted by living water, drinking deeply. It’s a picture of a shrub bush, drying up in a parched land, all the while thinking it’s at an oasis—or an all-inclusive resort.

What do we make of this? It might be despairing, but it also might be something of a relief, honestly. Not that anyone celebrates the inequalities and problems that befuddle ourselves, friends, neighbors, and whole society. Not at all. But when you hear that the thing that doesn’t look real, isn’t actually real, that kind of helps. When you hear that the thing that’s not working for you isn’t working in general, that’s some kind of comfort. It’s helpful that we are reminded of the clarity we have in Christ about life and what really matters.

The wilderness expanse in which we live is apparently very large, and the mirage looks very real, enough to almost convince us that the way to fulfillment in life is through all the things that this world offers. Almost enough to convince us, but not quite. Because we know, we still know, that Jesus’ blessings are not for the rich but for those whose lives are rich in him. As strong as the pull of this world’s promises, deep down, we still know the difference between the real and the mirage. We still know how to seek the ways of God. In spite of everything, we still know where to find the living water. And we know how to come back home to it. Jeremiah offers such a prayer for such days later in this chapter:

Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed;
save me, and I shall be saved,
for you are my praise.

Jeremiah 17:14

In a world of mirage, what is real and worth giving our lives to? What actually helps us flourish and blesses our neighbors? No easy answers here. They wouldn’t do justice to real life if they were offered. But Jeremiah helps us have the courage to look at ourselves and the seek the way of God.

What is the way of God? It has something to do with learning to share generously with others; the pleasure of good work done well; the delight of good food grown and passed around the table; slow conversations with neighbors and family; looking out for the vulnerable; more than looking out for the vulnerable—prioritizing their well-being. Loving someone and receiving love. Breathing fresh air and paying close attention to what pollutes it; giving thanks and being the kind of person who pauses to be thankful. Praying for others; praying without ceasing. Enduring suffering with courage and grace. Resisting the very loud voices that say, “Life is measured by what you are worth, by what you produce, or by what you consume;” and listening to the voice of God which says, “Life is measured by the fruit on your tree, the shade of your branches, the depths of your roots, and the life you share with others.”

This is the way of blessing. And it is still yours. The wilderness is vast, and your heart can get lost in it. Your life purpose is to drink as deeply as you are able from the living water. Bring others under the shade of your branches and help them root in good soil. God is a fountain of flowing, life-giving water that rolls through even these days like an ever-flowing stream. We continue to have faith. With our eyes on God, we will endure, we will thrive, we will see the truth and life and we will know the truth. The truth sets us free. And in that truth, we live and move and have our being.

May it be so this day and all the days to come. Thanks be to God.

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