

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Tumbleweeds and Ancient Trees
Jeremiah 17.5-10
February 13, 2022

Choose you this day.

With those words, the people of ancient Israel faced a monumental decision: whether they would trust God or rely solely on their own strength. It was a left or right decision, an in or out. It's the legendary line at the Alamo. Are you in or are you out?

In one way or another, that point of decision surfaces again and again in the scriptures. Choose. God gives a choice—are you with me or are you not. Abraham, choose whether you'll follow in the direction I'm leading you. Moses, choose whether you will take on the mission I have called you to. Paul, choose whether you'll continue persecuting or if you'll follow me and follow Christ. The people Jeremiah is talking to were about to be invaded when they faced that same kind of choice. Scary times when you everything that was certain about your life is about to become uncertain.

Choose you this day whom you will serve. I think most of us hear that and are like, "Ok, I'll choose, but does it have to be today? Couldn't it be tomorrow? I have a lot to do today."

What we find is that in all kinds of ways, the point of decision isn't a point at all, but a daily discipline. What can come dramatically as a big single question about your life most often comes as a million small questions about the way you live in relation to God every day. It's always a question of trust. Will you, can you, trust God even in the face of great challenge, even when it causes you some suffering? Will you heed the teachings you read in the scripture, even if you don't fully understand? Will you listen to the nudge of the Spirit to guide you even when the thing you feel you must do goes against your normal way of doing things? Can you trust the ways of a God who says, my ways are not your ways, and trust the thoughts of God who says my thoughts not your thoughts?

Jeremiah paints two images of the way away from God and the way with God. Two pictures that couldn't be more different: a scrub bush in the desert and a tree planted by streams of water.

The desert shrub in Jeremiah is the person who only trusts what he can see, what he can solve, what he can accomplish. His heart is turned away from the Lord. This is life lived materially. There is no spirituality here, no sense of God's presence; no seeking after God's will. There's no belief that anything that has happened is because of God or anything that will happen is a sign of providence or divine grace. This is life lived on the material plane. And as ancient as this story is, it's also a thoroughly modern story.

It's quite possible to be a very religious person and be a person whose heart is turned away from the Lord. It's been said that some Christians live like functional atheists. And that's true, I think. And it's really not that hard to live that way. I can do religious things sometimes, even a lot of time, while actually moving through the world as if God has no demands on me, no calling on me, and as if I can just be and do whatever I think is best, which usually is whatever serves me physical and emotional needs. I think this is the kind of person Jesus has in mind when he says, "Woe to those who are rich for you have already received your reward, and woe to those who are full for you will be hungry." In a material life, there is no room for prayer which is wasted time; no room for mystery, which is just emotivism; no room for responding to prompts from the Spirit, if they do not self-serve. In this way of living, anything that will be will be because of me. This is a very easy way to live, it is for us, and it must have at least been a temptation for them.

The people had a long, long history of being reminded of God's provision in time of need. They said things like, "Some trust in chariots and horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." But then they went out and got chariots and horses. They said things like, "The eyes of the Lord roam to and fro throughout the whole earth searching for hearts that are completely his," but they didn't look for God in their midst. They had a long history with this God, a God who makes a way, who parts the sea and makes water flow from dry rock, who provides manna in the desert when there's no food.

The person who trusts only in themselves misses all of this, misses the character of God revealed as provider, and can't even see grace when it comes. That's the judgment of the scrub brush in the desert. Not that it's in a desert. Sometimes our lives end up in very hard places for a very long time. It's that the bush cannot see the good when it comes. Some translations of verse 6 of Jeremiah 17 make it sound like no good ever comes to the scrub bush in the desert person, but that's not what it says. What it says is, "when the good comes..." The premise is the good will come. The premise is God has not abandoned you. The premise is you are not alone. The Scripture says when the good comes, he cannot see it. When God's grace comes, he can't see it as God's grace.

This is the curse of life lived only on the material plane, when the rains fall on the hard packed dirt, when goodness comes in time of trouble, when grace shows up to make a way, the heart is so hardened it cannot even see it. Hard hearts, hard dirt.

I'm sure I know something about having a hard heart. I know I know something about having hard dirt. Hard pan, we called it. When I decided to plant my first garden it was on a small plot at our parsonage in North Carolina, a state known for rich soil. But I, a dummy, decided to plant on a small plot where we and the previous occupants of the house had been parking our car, a barren hard pan plot of ground. I guess that's where the sun shone through the trees and where my water hose could reach. But also, to be fair, is kind of how I do life sometimes. Oh, that's the hardest thing I could do in this situation. Bring it on. That's the thing I'll do.

I went out to turn over the soil to plant, but I couldn't even get the shovel in the ground. So, I got my pick ax, but I couldn't make much progress there either. But I was not going to let this thing beat me or give up. So, I rented a gas-powered auger, which is a very big, very heavy tool

with a long bit on the bottom that drills a hole. It's usually used for setting fence posts. Or, I figured, for planting a garden. I fired it up, held on, and with bones and teeth rattling I punched holes as deep as I could in the ground. I had to punch through the hardpan to get to any loose soil. And it worked, I punched holes all over that plot, loosed the soil, and planted a little veggie garden, which my dog then trampled later on. But that's another parable.

Is that what it takes to get through to us? Some kind of trauma that pierces our exteriors, some kind of incursion, to bust through our hardpan spirits to loosen our soul soil for the seed of the Gospel? Maybe. Jesus tells a parable about how people some people hard soil and some are good soil. Maybe that's true for a lot of us, and maybe we have stories of trauma and failure and God's dramatic intervention in our lives that busts through our cynicism and our pain that has caused the rough exterior shell on us.

If I could go back in time, I'd do something different. I've since learned that you don't have to do that to the dirt, not even hardpan. As hard as dirt can be on top, dirt wants to be soil, and it wants to grow things. If you just give it a chance, a little water, some time, and the right conditions. Soil can be improved from above rather than from below. I would've brought in some compost to lay on top. I would've spread a layer of soil on top of that, and mulch on top of that. I would've put down some cardboard. And then I would've been patient, to let God's Creation restore itself to good soil. I wouldn't have taken charge on my own strength and my own wisdom, such as it was. I would've let God be in charge and just be part of the process of redemption that God had already provided for.

I'd like to think that's a way to live a life, too. To be a person who trusts in the Lord. Healing can come from above and go down deep.

This is Jeremiah's contrast. the fault line running through persons and communities and maybe running through each of us is about trust. Do you trust in God or not? What it doesn't mean is that everything is always going to be good, and there will be no suffering in life for those who trust God. That's just not true. Jesus calls blessed those who are poor, who are hungry and thirsty, even those who are persecuted. In the way of Jesus, life happens, sometimes exactly because you're following him. How many stories in the world today and in the history of the world are there of suffering exactly because of faithfulness to Jesus.

To trust in God in the face of whatever challenges is a beautiful, risky thing. Jeremiah goes even farther. Blessed is the one who trusts *in* God, whose trust *is* God. Do you hear the difference? The subtle, slight difference in the two phrases? Blessed is the one who trusts *in* God, whose trust *is* God. In my translation, the sentence uses *trust* twice. Blessed is the one who trusts in God, whose trust is God. But trust isn't exactly the best translation of the 2nd word. It's more like confidence or hope. Blessed are you when your confidence is God, when your hope is God. This is where we're supposed to be living.

We see now that Jeremiah doesn't just picture a choice between two ways, but now we see a progression from one to second to a third.

First, there's a heart that is turned away from God, living only a material plane. This is hard pan dirt. A person who can't see the good, the grace, when it comes.

Then, there's a person who trusts in God, and that's good. This is the person of good soil, whose heart is turned to God. This person is thankful, open to receive God's gifts into life.

But finally, there's a person whose hope and confidence is God. This is like immersion, like baptism. This is the full meaning of trust, the picture of a life of a person totally submitted to God. Not just trust in God, but to be a person whose very trust is God. I've found it difficult to fully translate this to English for us here, maybe because it's a mystery; it's life in what mystics call the cloud of unknowing, a full submission to God. It's perhaps telling that our English language doesn't have a word for this.

One way to get closer is through the Latin translation. The Latin for this Hebrew word is *fidere*, which sounds like faith or faithfulness, which helps. That's like trust. But *fidere* eventually in history comes into English through the field of law and finances as *fiduciary*, which is a legal term for a special kind of relationship. A person who has fiduciary responsibilities for another person has total responsibility for them, and the responsibility to look out for their best interests in everything they do. A person who has given *fidere*, or fiduciary responsibility has entrusted themselves, given rights to another person to make those important decisions.

I think that helps us get a little clearer picture of this. There are three levels of relationship. The first is turned away from God. The second is turned toward God. The third gives their lives over to God trusting that God has their best interests at heart and will always be faithful. The difference, put another way, is between a contract and covenant. This is an image of friendship, of marriage, of total trust in the other, no matter what happens.

I think this is what Jeremiah has in mind when he paints the picture of a tree planted in deep and good soil by streams of water. That tree is not moving. The total contrast to the scrub bush in the desert which will become tumbleweed in the next hard wind. This is not fantasy about life always being easy if you just God. Quite the opposite. Even for the tree by the stream, the heat will come, even a long drought will come, but the tree will be able to keep on producing green leaves and fruit for others. Even in times of long drought, anxiety is swallowed in the relationship of trust. What a gift that is.

For most of us, I imagine, this level of spirituality is aspirational. We hope to become this person; we'd like to grow into this kind of strong tree planted by living waters. This is who we say we are and sometimes, on some good days, maybe we are, even a little bit. And for that, thanks be to God.

I'm not sure it's a one-time decision as much as it is a lifetime of trusting in good times and hard times, more and more of our lives open to divine grace, giving thanks, and offering the fruit of grace and love to others as often as possible. One preacher I know used to say, "Faith is giving as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you know." And then he would say, "it's also about risking something big for something good."

There was wisdom in that. And the wisdom is this: we don't grow in trust in times of abundance. That's when we can grow in gratitude and in generosity. We grow in trust in times of poverty, in hunger, in thirst, in weeping. If there is any blessing there, it is this: if you've ever been in a desperate situation and seen God provide when there seemed no way; if you're ever been back against the wall, and seen a way out present itself; if you've ever been so down, and received a reassuring word that you knew was just for you, then you know this about God already.

That's the blessing in life's droughts and deserts and lonely wildernesses and sufferings. It is then we come to see, in a way that only those experiences can teach: you are not alone. There is more light in this world than we can see; more manna than we can gather on a single day, a hope beyond what we can muster from our own strength. And good soil is deep within every person. You, too.

Holy One, God of grace and light, give us eyes to see your grace; let us taste and see God's goodness here even now.

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