

“Woes to Blessings, Anxieties to Freedom!”

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

February 17, 2019

Rerun of February 11, 2007

These are anxious times. Politicians play on our fears. It seems there isn't enough of most anything to go around and so we better get what we can as fast as we can. We pit ourselves against one another rather than lean into each other's gifts and needs. There's a lot of pressure to be right...and we're often seduced by the mistaken notion that there is only one right way to do everything. These are anxious times. The higher the anxiety, the more likely we will be lulled into a “cause and affect” world view, one that eliminates shades of gray or rainbows of colors...one that blames victims for their circumstances, while, at the same time, rarely names those who consciously, with ulterior motives, shape our “mis”-perceptions of reality....we rarely name what's going on as misguided let alone worshipfully work to counteract it. During anxious times, people hide....from themselves mostly I think...out of fear....we have lost our nerve and suffer for loss of nerve of our leaders. Where are our leaders?

I believe...deeply...you and I are the ones we've been waiting for...we are the leaders...here, at home, at work, out there in the rest of the world. Jeremiah is a leader. Jesus is a leader. And here's what these leaders have to say to us as today's leaders.....

For Jeremiah and his contemporaries, the heart was the seat of reason, not emotions, intuition, or romance. But either way you look at it, we cannot trust only our own

heads or hearts in knowing what is true and just...not for ourselves and not for others. When left to our own devices, with only our ego-driven human agendas to guide us, we often make faulty assumptions and make less than helpful choices. We often expect the worse of people rather than the best. (I bet they did that on purpose!) We take personally things that have nothing to do with us (They don't like me that's why they.....). Living from our own heads or hearts only, we are like shrubs planted in the desert...tumble weeds...easily blown all over the place! We are left to live with the consequences of our own choices, or lack of them...God does not intervene in the consequences...and yet we are always invited to make new choices that yield “better” fruits...as Jeremiah says.

When we don't root ourselves in God, and instead, root ourselves in the moment...anxious moments, we are vulnerable to damaging winds, such as the winds of prejudice, complacency, and hatred. We let our integrity get blown away and we get caught up in a whirlwind...hard to get out of even when we want to....

As much as we might like to think we can go it alone, know best, have all the answers, deep down we know better. Jeremiah urgently reminds us just how much we need God, God's perspective, to survive even the ordinary desert days let alone life's big heat waves!

The fruit your life bears...reveals where you've chosen to plant your life, how you're rooted, or not! ...how you hold life's blessings and woes. We all have them...how do you hold them?

The woes named in Luke are not threats. What kind of a God threatens! No kind I can believe in...doesn't work at home...threatening the kids or partner to get them to do something, even something you know is good for them...why would it work for God any better? God knows better. These are not threats!

Luke is simply offering a reality check. Jesus is not trying to frighten his listeners or impose his authority. He is simply naming the reality of the worlds' ways. Poverty, hunger, and oppression are not necessarily what they seem to be. Wealth, fullness, and laughter are not all they are cracked up to be! Things aren't always what they seem. There is more to life than what you see....what you perceive. Believing is seeing, not the other way around! Grounded leaders know this.

Jesus and Jeremiah make a contrast between two different kinds of living. It's not so much about what we have or don't have as it is about seeing the blessing in the life that is ours and living from it. We are not to count our blessings. We are to be a blessing....especially in anxious times. Be the blessing! Lead your life.....not react to it...hide from it!

Yet...most of us spend a life time trying to be rich not poor, full not hungry, laugh instead of weep. Talk about anxiety producing! We don't want to be one of those needy people. They are not what we want to be. And yet, each of us has some experience of being just these people. From that first time you were the last one picked on the baseball team at recess to the times when you got the call from the bill collector, to the time life was so overwhelming you were reduced to tears desperate someone help you.

Fear of being such as these, being an outcast, an outsider, drives us to want to get more, be more in the center of attention and power, hoard and guard our stuff and our status. Sometimes it even motivates us to avoid life all together or blame others for the life we have. Jesus says we fear the wrong things!

The point Jesus is making is more subtle than you think. It is not good to be poor, hungry, weeping, or hated—it is not the goal of the Christian life to be penniless, emaciated, and as miserable as possible....the suffering servant is a mistaken notion! Nor is it necessarily evil to be rich, well-fed, or laughing. There are just as many poor jerks as there are rich jerks! Jesus ate well enough to be accused of being a glutton, and his teaching is full of humor...he enjoyed laughter. But Jesus says we are more than our circumstances and through them, we can come to know something powerful about ourselves and others...hidden blessings, invitations to new freedom.

People whose lives are based on nothing more than human resources, wealth, food, mirth, other people's opinions, the latest headlines...such people are setting themselves up for pain....for all things tangible, all outward appearances are temporary....the good and the bad.

The thing is...in this life each of us will find ourselves experiencing both blessings and woes. God does not promise a rose garden...but rather to be with us...in anxious as well as good times....if this is so, how does it free your energy to see your life differently...lead it differently? ...this may be the healing God is offering.

No one knows better than Jesus hunger, pain, and sorrow. Actual and spiritual. This is not what God wants for Jesus or for any of us. Even as you ascend into the depths of the pit of such a life...into a living hell, Jesus goes after you....communities, even whole countries! The oldest Christian Creed exclaims... “He descended into hell and rose again.” He went for you and comes back with you! There’s no where Jesus won’t go to get you and bring you back and plant you in solid ground! It is amazing what hellish holes we humans fall into! Jesus comes to get you out!

In fact, I am wondering if what we are called to do is to...in the name of Jesus, go to hell! That’s where Christians should be willing to go for each other...to the hells on earth...to the actually poor, hungry and sorrowful. Go for each other, with each other, LEAD others....so the actual poor, hungry and sorrowful can be brought back to full life, so they can share with us what they know...for they have within them everything the rest of us so desperately seek to know. Now that’s two-fold leadership! Now that’s....FREEDOM!!!

So, these holy words today are truly revolutionary. They make a frontal assault on our most dearly held worldly values of happiness....challenge our anxiety levels and misperceptions of reality....and call us to lead life differently! Most of us here are somewhere in the middle of the continuums of wealth and heart break. Not wealthy, not poor. Somewhere between laughing and crying. And so we might frame the wisdom a bit differently here in our community. Today, if Jesus was on this level ground, he might say to us...

Blessed are those who are behind in their studies,  
Who find no purpose in getting out of bed in the morning,  
Who are unemployed or underemployed,  
Who are in marital turmoil,  
Who live on the streets,  
Who are empty, unsteady, and unsure,  
Who have a terminal illness,  
Who are overwhelmed by their own loneliness.

...As they stay the course of integrity and faith, their reward is great!  
They will know freedom even in these anxious times and have something powerful to share  
that can shape our perceptions differently and lower our anxiety!

They are not victims. They are not to be blamed for their circumstances.

They are blessed, for to survive they have had to plant themselves deep into holy ground  
near living streams of water.

They already have exactly what the world needs most.

Reach out to them! Lead your life, don't react to it!

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These are anxious times. Don't be afraid! Find your freedom!

Lead yourself to the life you long to live and in doing so...you lead others!

Go...even into your private hells, for Jesus goes with you and for you!

And makes you able to go to hell for someone else...and come back together.