

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Lent 5-B-2021
“At the End of Human Striving, God”
Rev. Randy Smith

It was a **moment** -- a **terrible, wrenching** moment -- *outside* of anyone's living memory. The people's **capital**, for now centuries, was under attack. What the people had believed was *impossible* -- the capital being overrun by attackers -- was now taking place before their very eyes. Not only did the attackers wreak **havoc** on the *capital*, but they also wreaked havoc on the people's **faith**: if the capital itself can come under such assault, then maybe their faith in their whole way of life has been **mis-founded, mis-guided**.

Now, you may think I am speaking here of the January 6 attack on the Capitol building in our nation's capital of Washington DC, which was, I think, for almost **all** Americans, a *terrible, wrenching* moment, outside of anyone's living memory (the *last* such assault on the Capitol made by a foreign enemy, the forces of Great Britain, on August 24, 1814). What surely *most* Americans believed to be *impossible* -- a mob of more than 800 rioters *violently* entering the Capitol building, its offices and deliberative chambers, threatening our lawmakers, mocking the symbols of our national government -- was now taking place before their very eyes, and causing, *at least me*, to wonder about the overall health of our American way of life in view of the reality of a level of discontent of this magnitude.

But what I was actually referencing was the people's experience of the almost **indescribably devastating** fall of Jerusalem, the capital city of Judea (Southern Kingdom of Israel), in the year 587 BC, to the forces of the Babylonia Empire. The entire city was leveled, including the 400-year-old Temple of Solomon, and the king and people taken away into Exile to Babylon for the next 60 years.

And -- just like in the aftermath of the assault on the US Capitol in January - - but to a **much deeper and more profound** degree -- following the destruction of the Judean capital *burdensome* **questions** were raised: How could this have happened? Where and how did we go wrong? And then the most painful questions: Where was God -- our Covenant God -- in all of this? Has God now rejected and abandoned us?

It was at this point that prophets, such as Jeremiah stepped in to offer an answer: what happened was the **culmination** of *centuries* of your **unfaithfulness** to the covenant -- in religious, but also in your social, political and economic life --

and of your turning a **deaf ear** to the long parade of prophets who continually pointed this out to you. In the days before the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah himself had cited how, e.g., the Judeans ignored the plight of orphans and the needy (Jer. 5:28), and depended on cheap labor and unjust wages to (Jer. 22:13).

Essentially, the Covenant People of God fell into **the trap** of trying to carry out the **mission** given them by God (Gen. 12, Isa. 46) while at the same time adopting all the ways of the peoples around them, including a monarchy, a standing army, and a State Department which was continually crafting alliances with Judah's neighbors in order to ward off attack (cf. 1 Sam. 8:20). An integral part of Israel's adopting of the way of life of the neighboring peoples was their adoption of the same kind of economic systems, which *avored* the wealthy and powerful, and *disavored* everyone else.

And it was this **structurally unjust** way of life-together against which the prophets preached against most *frequently* and most *fiercely*. Why? Because such economic arrangements effectively **precluded** the Covenant People of God keeping one of their **oldest** and **most basic** laws, namely "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) -- which you will know to have been the second part of what Jesus identified as the "Greatest Commandment" (Mt. 22:39).

Understand that few of the leaders of Israel intentionally, explicitly, rebelled against, and dishonored the Covenant relationship with God ("did evil in the sight of the Lord"). If you had asked most of them in their own time, most of them would have told you that they were -- as the kings and priests were meant to do -- leading the people in living rightly before God and with one another and, perhaps, even in relation to the neighboring peoples (which was almost certainly the bigger challenge).

And yet, they were **not**. They were wrong. They **looked** at what was going on around them, but could not **see** it. They **heard** what was being said all around them, but would not **listen** to it. And so -- somehow, through the unfathomably deep power of their own **self-deception** (cf. Jer. 17:9: "the **heart** is **deceitful** above all things") -- they led the Covenant People into a previously **unimaginably destructive**, and **seemingly hopeless** situation.

Is there *any* good thing humans cannot take and mess up? Governmental systems (USPS)? Government offices (official corruption/abuse of power, greed, bribery, sexual harassment)? Church offices (sexual and financial misconduct on the part of clergy); The covenant (versus contract) of marriage? Businesses (balking at a living wage, embezzlement/misuse of company funds, partners cheating one another)? Our -- amazing ("fearfully and wonderfully made", Ps. 139:14) -- human bodies (inadequate attention to our physical and mental health)? And the life-giving and life-sustaining environmental systems and processes of our home planet (freshwater "Rivers and lakes are [now] the most degraded

ecosystems in the world. Can we save them?" -- *National Geographic*, March 1, 2021).

There are so many arenas in life in which we -- absolutely -- **know** the right thing to do, but we -- far too often -- simply **cannot do it**. Cf. Paul's frank confession of this (Rom. 7:15ff.):

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

This very famous passage ends with Paul throwing up his hands in **desperation** (7:24-25):

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The only help for his "wretched" condition, Paul says, is Jesus, as the literal **embodiment** of God's **forgiveness**.

Which is *essentially* what Jeremiah also announces to the **desperate** people of 6th-c. Judah, in the midst of their *own* seemingly **hopeless** situation, namely an utterly **surprising**, completely **inexplicable** move on God's part: the same God who has allowed the Covenant People to suffer the **full, crushing consequences** of their covenant infidelity now declares that he will *not only* **forgive** their wickedness but also **forget** it (31:34):

I will **forgive** their iniquity, and *remember* their sin **no more**.

This is what Paul saw in Jesus when, in 2 Cor. 5:19, he says, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, **not counting** their trespasses against them..."

Critically important for us as the Church is that we understand that God's forgiveness is **not** some kind of declaration of "Not guilty", as though we were hearing a *jury's* verdict in a *courtroom* setting. It is *rather* **the model** for us, as God's New, *all-inclusive* Covenant People, to **live into, within our own life-together** (cf. "light on a hill"), **and to live into within the common life we share with all others** ("salt of the earth").

It is this forgiving and forgetting that creates is the possibility of **newness** -- of a "new covenant" between God and God's people, and also between people. As long as we are all committed, in our relationships with others, to getting our "pound of flesh", all that results is that we devour one another. God, says Jeremiah, is finally **not** some kind of moral accountant, intent on keeping score of our merits and demerits. No, God is the One who is always looking, **not behind** but **ahead**, toward **new** possibilities for us humans to **treasure** our relationship with God, such that **this relationship** -- above any and everything else -- **forms**, and **in-forms**, our vision for how it is we are to live and relate with one another in this life.

It is when we come **treasure above all else** what God wants for our lives, and for human life, that we know God's ways have been "written on our hearts"

(31:33) or, i.e., **embedded** within our very being, and so as **natural as breathing**. It will be the end of Cari Treece's DCE profession ("No longer shall they **teach** one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord' -- v. 34)! No further training will be needed! This *is*, in fact, **why** we are here in the world **as the Church**: to be those people in the life of the world capable of demonstrating -- *first* among *ourselves*, and *then* before others -- how it is that God has *designed*, and *desires*, and will finally *demand* that his human creation live in the world.

From December 1940 to September 1944, the residents of the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, and nearby villages -- led by their Protestant (Huguenot) pastor, Andre Trocme' -- provided **refuge** for an estimated 5,000 people, including some 3,500 Jews, who were fleeing from the Vichy authorities and the Germans. Their doing this led to their recognition in 1990 by the state of Israel as "Righteous Among the Nations" (Gentiles).

When asked after the war why they **chose** to do this dangerous work, they explained that they actually **had no choice**: it was just their way of life, going back hundreds of years, to welcome and care for those fleeing persecution, just as they, as Protestants, had had to do once. The law, the ways of God, had come to be written -- **unforgettably, instinctively, beautifully** -- on their hearts.