

First Presbyterian Ware Shoals

02.17.19

“Blessed are those...”

One of our scripture passages today is Jeremiah 17:5-10. I am reading from the Common English Bible, listen now for the Word of the Lord:

Jeremiah 17:5-10

**5** The Lord proclaims:

Cursed are those who trust in mere humans,  
who depend on human strength  
and turn their hearts from the Lord.

**6** They will be like a desert shrub

that doesn't know when relief comes.

They will live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in a barren land where no one survives.

**7** Happy are those who trust in the Lord,  
who rely on the Lord.

**8** They will be like trees planted by the streams,  
whose roots reach down to the water.

They won't fear drought when it comes;  
their leaves will remain green.

They won't be stressed in the time of drought  
or fail to bear fruit.

**9** The most cunning heart—  
it's beyond help.

Who can figure it out?

**10** I, the Lord, probe the heart  
and discern hidden motives,  
to give everyone what they deserve,  
the consequences of their deeds.

Our second passage is Psalm 1, again from the Common English Bible:

- 1** The truly happy person  
doesn't follow wicked advice,  
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,  
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.
- 2** Instead of doing those things,  
these persons love the Lord's Instruction,  
and they recite God's Instruction day and night!
- 3** They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,  
which bears fruit at just the right time  
and whose leaves don't fade.  
Whatever they do succeeds.
- 4** That's not true for the wicked!  
They are like dust that the wind blows away.
- 5** And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—  
neither will sinners  
in the assembly of the righteous.
- 6** The Lord is intimately acquainted  
with the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God.))

It doesn't feel great to start a sermon straight off the bat with a curse from God. It doesn't feel warm and fuzzy to be called out like this or to have to sit with the hard questions this passage makes us confront within ourselves and our lives. But then again, these questions are important for us to look through, and we must spend time sitting in the discomfort of them.

This passage is stating clearly that we must not simply trust in humanity to bring us our joy, or our blessings: "Cursed are those who trust in mere humans, who depend on human strength and turn their hearts from the Lord" we have been asked to turn

away from humans and focus completely on God. That could even include turning away from our own selves and instead focusing on what God's call is and how we can best do that call within our lives.

This concept may not make a whole lot of sense. We, as people, are being asked to be "anti-people" to be closer to "pro-God." This is a difficult call to follow because it seems like there is a distinct human need to trust other people, and believe in the good within them. We are being asked to not trust ourselves but also being pressed by the Church to give our full selves in service and work for God's kingdom. Jeremiah seems to be focused on the important difference in this passage, that we must think about our actions and our calls *in terms of God*. Asking ourselves "is this about me, or is this about God?" Are we acting in a way that is towards God's call or is it about following what we want our own call to be?

Jeremiah was working in a time of transition. He works through the transition of Israel into exile. We know this because of the history not only in the book of Jeremiah itself but also in Kings and Chronicles. We know there was deep political unrest while Jeremiah was working as a prophet. And while all the prophets took their calls seriously, and spoke the word of God to humanity, Jeremiah may be one that took it the most seriously.

This time of transition was important to Jeremiah, and to the call of this passage because people within the time of his prophecy were leaning on their own understanding and their own call instead of focusing their hearts and minds on God.

We also are in a time of political and social unrest. We must see the calls from the prophets as statements to our current society as well. That's how the prophets worked. Their own work within their time was believed to remain relevant even after the prophecies had been spoken. It was important to remain aware of the prophecies and continue to learn from them. Therefore, we can still learn from them today. And Jeremiah seems to be speaking clearly to us.

The call to trust God over ourselves is explained clearly in our passage. As well as the consequences if we are unable to complete the call as asked of us. Verse 6 of our passage states,

“They will be like a desert shrub  
that doesn’t know when relief comes.

They will live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in a barren land where no one survives.”

This is, of course, a very bleak future for us. It’s meant to be incredibly unnerving to us, and it is meant to be upsetting. If the consequences don’t seem so harsh, there is no reason to follow the directions of God.

However, in opposition to that, we hear the goal of following God’s call and Jeremiah’s prophecy. The outcome, if we follow this call, is even greater than we can imagine. As verses 7 and 8 states,

**7** Happy are those who trust in the Lord,  
who rely on the Lord.

**8** They will be like trees planted by the streams,  
whose roots reach down to the water.

They won’t fear drought when it comes;  
their leaves will remain green.

They won’t be stressed in the time of drought  
or fail to bear fruit.

This reward, should we follow God’s call, is the most wonderful of rewards. We are to be like trees planted by the stream. If we follow God’s call, we will have no fear, or stress when drought comes, for our leaves will remain green and we will bear fruit. This is echoed in the Psalms passage today. Verse 3 of Psalms chapter 1 says,

“They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,  
which bears fruit at just the right time  
and whose leaves don’t fade.

Whatever they do succeeds.”

If you notice, these statements are very similar. They speak of a tree planted by streams of water. Both verses explain that the trees don't fade, and they succeed.

The image of a tree planted by water is one that is incredibly important in Israel. A tree meant that there was water near you, and it gave you a goal of what to strive for. When I visited Israel during the year I spent in an internship, we learned more about what these trees meant. As our group walked through a desert, we were getting tired, we didn't see what we were walking toward, and we were getting quite cranky. Suddenly, as we crossed over the crest of a hill, suddenly we were looking at the most beautiful oasis in the middle of the desert of Israel.

We were finally able to take a moment of rest, we took off our shoes and played in the cool water that was falling from a waterfall, into a pool. This sight was absolutely incredible. It was at that moment that I finally understood the importance of being like a tree planted by streams of water. These trees mean that there is cool, running water nearby. These trees meant that you weren't going to be lost in the desert any longer. It seems like these trees never die, because they are constantly being fed by the streams.

To trust in God's call is to be a tree planted by the streams. Happy are those who trust in the word of the Lord. They will be like trees planted by the streams. We hear these words twice in our scriptures today. It is our call to become trees that trust in God's Word, to become beacons for others to move toward, to point toward God's call in other's lives.

Within this call to become like trees planted by the streams of water, there is the note that the Lord searches our hearts. Verses 9 and 10 say,

**9** The most cunning heart—

it's beyond help.

Who can figure it out?

**10** I, the Lord, probe the heart

and discern hidden motives,

to give everyone what they deserve,

the consequences of their deeds.

This word “cunning” can mean “tricky” or “fickle”. Humanity has a “cunning heart” and that heart is beyond help as Jeremiah has stated. But we also discover God will search our hearts, discern our hidden motives and give rewards or consequences as we deserve.

So, we come full circle back to the fact that we can't hide from God's call and we can't hide our motives from God. If we are doing things for our own gain, and our own benefit, God will see those motives, we can not hide them. Equally, if we work for God, and fight to do God's work in the world, God will see those motives and reward us for our work.

You may be asking how we accomplish this call from God. We must work within the Body of the Church to complete these tasks. That way, we will have entire communities that can check and balance each other in making sure we are following God's call rather than our own. Today, we both install an Elder, and we participate in Communion. These acts are incredibly important in the Body of the Church and in the lives of the members of this church. We can not do the work of God alone. Each time we feel the need to work alone in the kingdom of God, we must ask if we are focusing on God's call, rather than on humanity's call. No tree stands alone in an oasis in Israel. Likewise, we can not stand alone to be the Body of the Church. Today, we connect ourselves to the universal church by participating in Communion, we set our sights on God's call of our lives. Take a moment to remind yourself that you must search your heart and check your motivations as the Lord is also searching your heart and your motivations. None of us can stand alone, which is why there is a need for communities to stand with. We have the entire Body of the Church behind us as we make sure we are seeking God instead of solely trusting in humanity. We have people standing with us as we all stand as the “blessed” people of God.

Please pray with me.

God, you have searched our hearts and you know our motives. You have asked us to follow your call instead of the call of our own minds. We strive to glorify you rather than glorify ourselves through our actions. Walk with us and lead us as we discern where you would have us walk, and do your work.

In your most holy name, Amen