

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16.**

**Jeremiah 2:4-13** is part of an unusual coupling of both male and female themes to express the rejection of Yahweh and of Yahweh's social order by both Israel and Judah. This section (2:1—3:25) deals with the alienation that has occurred between God and God's people, initiated by the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah (not of God) that has resulted in the breaking of covenant between God and God's people. That alienation is put in the terms of a wife being unfaithful to her husband and of a husband betraying his wife and breaking intimate relationship with her. Thus, God is both male and female in this segment, paired in opposites to Israel and Judah (that is, if Israel is male in one portion of the prophecy, then God is female in that portion, and vice versa). By using a device like this, Jeremiah shames both Hebrew males and females. Thus, Jeremiah shames male Israel and Judah at being not only unfaithful to God, but also by betraying God in the most intimate ways (2:4-16). Likewise, female Israel and Judah is shamed for acting adulterously toward God, desiring a relationship with other gods rather than a relationship with Yahweh (2:1-3; 3:20-25).

The text that is the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday is one of Jeremiah's passages built around a male interpretation of Israel and Judah. To truly appreciate this text, therefore, requires one to recognize in it that God is a woman, while Israel and Judah are both described as men – her two husbands. This means that – in order to be consistent with the text -- we must use female pronouns to refer to God and male pronouns to refer to Israel and Judah.

This passage is built on the premise that Yahweh has twice been a bride. She was first married to Israel; then, after his death (i.e., the destruction of Israel in 722 BCE by Assyria), the bereft wife has now married Judah. But now, she discovers that both Israel and Judah had betrayed her, each doing so by taking a lover. God's immediate reaction, of course, is that of rage and betrayal (vv. 4-8). But that sense of rage and betrayal expresses itself in a rather intriguing way.

In this account, the spurned wife (God) first looks at herself to see whether her actions have contributed to the unfaithfulness of both of her husbands. That is, she begins by blaming herself! She thinks that Israel's and Judah's betrayal must, in some way, be her fault.

“What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? They did not say, “Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives” (vv. 4b-6)? God's automatic initial response is that there is something wrong with her that caused her two husbands to so outrageously betray her. But upon reflection, she realizes that such is not the case.

“I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination” (vs. 7). What had God done but to act as a faithful and loving wife? She provided for her family and her husband the abundance that they needed to live life with meaning, purpose and joy (see Proverbs 31:10-28 on the ancient Israelite understanding of the characteristics of a “good” wife). But her husbands (Israel and

Judah), out of their own individual darkness and innate evil, chose to act to “defile” her by consorting with another woman (later identified as Ba’al – vs. 8b) and thus rejecting her bed. And by such defiling acts, over and over again, Israel and Judah had made the rich heritage their wife potentially offered to them of abundance, joy and purpose “an abomination”.

How had Israel and Judah acted to betray their wife, Yahweh? Here, Jeremiah reaches brilliance in his social analysis.

“Your priests did not say, “Where is the Lord?” Those who handle the law did not know me. The rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Ba’al, and went after things that do not profit” (v. 8). Israel and Judah betrayed Yahweh through the corrupt actions and intentions of their political and economic (rulers, those who handle the law), and religious (priests and prophets) leaders. The structures and leaders of Israelite society embraced by the people gave up God’s values of justice, equitable sharing of wealth and a trusting, loving relationship with God and each other. Instead, they opted for the values of personal power (“transgressed against me”), the accumulation of personal wealth (“profit”) and domination of all the people (“did not know me”). They settled for the values of “Ba’al”, rather than the values of “Yahweh” and thus betrayed God’s trust and loving devotion to them.

Yahweh expresses deep indignation at such betrayal by her first and her second husbands. “Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit” (vss. 10-11).

Yahweh concludes her articulated anguish with some of the most poignant words in scripture, welling up from the breast of a broken-hearted woman. “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says Yahweh, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (vss. 12-13).

This is the utter tragedy of it all. In Yahweh, and in the love and security of marriage to her, both Israel and Judah could have embraced for their lives and their marriage “the fountain of living water” – fecundity, wealth, contentment for themselves, their descendants, and for the entire life of their nation – and even the world. And instead, because of their own commitment to greed, the lust for power, and the need to control even God, they “have committed two evils”. They have forsaken God, thus tragically ending their marriage. And they have settled on “cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water”. What they have chosen for themselves will bring them only oppression, exploitation, poverty, marginalization from God and the most profound loneliness. What they have chosen for themselves will bring them nothing but rejection! Stupid, stupid Israel! Witless, witless Judah!

**Psalm 81:1, 10-16.** Psalm 81 was likely intentionally placed in the Psalter at this point in order to act as a corrective to Psalm 80. Psalm 80 seems blind to Israel’s continued national sin that brought about God’s punishment of the nation. Rather, Psalm 80 sees its national disgrace as being an unjustified and arbitrary abandonment of it by God, devoid of any explanation. Psalm

81, on the other hand, sees such abandonment as the inevitable consequence of the nation's rejection of God and of the national lifestyle expected of it if it is authentically following God.

The psalm is, in essence, a "covenant lawsuit" brought by God against Israel, accusing the nation of being unfaithful to the covenant made between itself and God. It divides into three parts. Verses 1-5a is the summons of the suit, calling Israel to covenant accountability. That suit is brought against Israel during the Feast of Tabernacles ("Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day" [vs. 3]), for that feast concludes a ten-day celebration beginning with the celebration of Israel's New Year observance ("new moon"), the Day of Atonement ("full moon") and ending with the Feast of Tabernacles ("our festal day"). The accusation of the suit is clearly stated: "For it is a statute, O Israel, an ordinance from the God of Jacob" (vs. 4).<sup>1</sup> You are expected to obey the covenant between Israel and the nation (as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments), yet here, at the high festival of the Jewish Year, God accuses you of unfaithfulness to that covenant. Thus, the suit now moves into its second part.

In verses 5b-10, the Psalmist reviews how Yahweh has been faithful in fulfilling God's part of the covenant made between God and Israel. "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder, I tested you at the waters of Meribah. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it" (vss. 6-7, 10). All of these statements are references to the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt. God freed the Israelite slaves from Egypt oppression ("relieved your shoulder of the burden"). He miraculously delivered Israel from certain death of their firstborn at the Passover and from certain annihilation at the Red Sea ("In distress you called, and I rescued you"). God met with Israel and gave them the Law at Mount Sinai ("I answered you in the secret place of thunder"). God "tested you at the waters of Meribah" when Israel cried out to Moses in thirsty distress and God miraculously brought water out of the rock (Num. 20:2-13). God gave them the Ten Commandments when they were liberated from Egyptian slavery ("I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" – the opening lines of the Decalogue). And, finally, God provided adequate food and care for Israel during their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness ("Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it" – Num. 11:31-34). All this, God did to rescue Israel from their bondage, to mold them into God's people in the wilderness and then to faithfully bring them as his chosen ones into the Promised Land.

The Psalm then moves to its conclusion in its third part, verses 11-16. "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their doom would last forever. I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you".

In this psalm it is stated quite clearly. If you face defeat, persecution and destruction as a nation, it is only because you brought it upon yourselves. Both your national policy as a nation and your

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<sup>1</sup> The NRSV translates this passage "For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob". However, the Hebrew is better translated as a direct confrontation of Israel ("It is a statute, O Israel, an ordinance from the God of Jacob" ["therefore, you ought to know better than to ignore it" implied]).

personal living out of that policy brought upon you the abandonment of God. And that abandonment brought about your defeat.

Your sin, Israel, is idolatry! The commandment was that Yahweh was to be your God. You were to walk as a nation in his ways, centering yourselves as a nation in him and each other, doing justice in your political life and economically being stewards of the nation's commonwealth, thus minimizing poverty. That was what you were supposed to be about. But what you were really all about was to "make yourselves like all the nations of the world", building power in the hands of a few, hoarding wealth in the mighty and creating great poverty. You gave lip-service to the worship of Yahweh, but in reality, your actions revealed that you worshipped other gods – greed, power, domination. You rejected me. So I was required to reject you. And the defeat and destruction that you now face was the inevitable result of your rejection of me.

Therefore, do not beg me to restore your fortunes, God in essence declares. Your begging falls on deaf ears. Repent! Return to the covenant! Begin doing justice! Redistribute your wealth! Observe the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee! Relinquish your power through your actions! And then, you will discover that it is still not too late, Israel. God can change your fate. God will redeem you and your land! But he will redeem you only if you will choose to re-embrace his covenant and will build a national life of justice, a sharing of wealth, and devotion to God!

**Luke 14:1, 7-14** is clearly a story about greatness in the kingdom of God. But it is not easily understood unless we appreciate the dining customs of that day, which is its context.

When a formal dinner or banquet – that is, a public celebration or festival – was being given by a person, it was customary for the guests to sit in order of importance, with the "guest of honor" at the right hand of the host, the second most important person (e.g., the local rabbi, a high government official) on his left, and then in descending order of importance on both sides of the table, the guests would sit with the most insignificant guest sitting at the foot of the table. The host had the responsibility of choosing the appropriate sitting arrangement (some of this custom is preserved today in there being a "guest of honor" at a dinner and the host designating the sitting pattern).

The story begins with Luke telling us that Jesus was invited "to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath" (14:1). This statement places Jesus' comments in context, for we know that this was a formal meal, that it was an important meal (for it is occurring on the Sabbath), and that consequently the custom of appropriate seating was to be observed. The text also tells us that there was likely not a guest of honor at this dinner, because Jesus observes that "he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor" (vs. 7). There is also an implied snub occurring here, because if the host ("a leader of the Pharisees") had produced a guest list and was following protocol, Jesus should have been the guest of honor as the visiting rabbi with a national following.

Seeing the jockeying occurring among the guests for stations of importance, Jesus captures the attention of all the guests, and in essence tells them "I see you are all trying to sit in the highest

positions at the table, thus claiming rank. That is not wise, for if you sit high on the table and the host perceives there is an unseated guest who ranks higher than you, you will have the ignominy of forcing the host to tell you to move down the table to make way for that higher ranking person. On the other hand, if you pick a low place on the table and the host notices it, you will get the positive attention of being publicly called to sit higher on the table.” Jesus then turns this strategy he is proposing into a principle of spirituality for those who embrace the kingdom of God: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11).

Having reproofed the guests for their clear commitment to self-promotion, Jesus then reproofs the host himself for creating the conditions for such egoism. He says to this “leader of the Pharisees”, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous” (vss. 12-14).

What is particularly strategic in this reproof is the person of the one to whom Jesus is giving that reproof. This dinner host is “a leader of the Pharisees” – not simply a rabbi or even a leader of a local synagogue, but a man recognized as a leader of the entire movement of Pharisaism in Israel – the movement to bring Israel under the authority of the “Law of Moses”. Pharisaism was an alternative movement to the Jewish clergy hierarchy that would someday actually replace that hierarchy and would become the dominant religious movement throughout worldwide Jewry. They were concerned about building an alternative Jewish state within the limitations of Roman society that would use “the Law” to order and prioritize their life together. That law was interpreted by them to maintain two bodies of people: (1) the scrupulous who were highly educated, obeyed the minutia of the Law (e.g., the dietary law), who provided guidance and leadership to all of society and received the largess of that society as their reward, and (2) the peasants who had neither the learning nor the luxury of fully understanding and obeying the Law but who were, politically, economically and spiritually, the serfs or servants of the scrupulous who would provide the rule over them.

In his reproof of this “leader of the Pharisees”, Jesus is doing more than giving a lesson on manners – or even humility. What he is presenting here is “the Upside-Down Kingdom” that God wishes for all humanity. Rather than the peasants serving the powerful, the Pharisees should serve the peasants, Jesus is teaching. If you are truly an authentic follower of Yahweh, then you will center your commitment to the support, strengthening and service of those “who cannot repay you”, rather than on those who can benefit you and strengthen your prestige, power, position or plenty! What Jesus is doing here in reproofing both those who wish to heighten their importance by sitting higher at the table and those who would seek to strengthen their position by “giving a banquet” rather than to have compassion for the poor is to reveal to them the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom. For the kingdom Jesus is working to bring to reality on the earth is one where those who “exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”!

**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16** makes practical presentation of the kind of life God wants God's people to live. This is the style of life that will be true to God and will not betray (Jer. 2:4-13). It is a way of life that creates, by its very living, the "Upside-Down Kingdom" to which Jesus calls even Pharisees to embrace (Luke 14:1, 7-14). What is that way of life?

"Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you". Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:1-5, 7, 16).

There it is, stated as simply as possible. It is easy to talk theoretically about lifestyle, and to envision a community or even a society living with justice for all, equitable sharing of wealth, elimination of poverty, and living in trusting and loving relationship with each other and with God. But how is that actually done? What are the specifics of such a kingdom life style? Here, the author of Hebrews describes that lifestyle with a directness and simplicity found rarely elsewhere in the Bible.

- ? Care about each other;
- ? Practice hospitality to everyone – but especially strangers and the lowly;
- ? Care for those in prison (in the New Testament era, the state didn't provide food, health care, bedding, or sanitation to people in prison; to "remember" those in prison meant to provide such necessities for them);
- ? Don't be either ascetic or immoral in your sexual conduct, but have sex only within the bounds of marriage;
- ? Don't become greedy or love money;
- ? Be content with your level of wealth, status and position, and don't lust for more;
- ? Be encouraging of and supportive to your leaders; be discerning of them, as well, imitating that which seems faithful within them;
- ? Share what you have with those in need; be generous with your money and not tight-fisted.

And why should Christians embrace such an "Upside-Down Kingdom"? The author of Hebrews proclaims, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (vss. 8, 15).

Why would the statement, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow" suddenly appear in the midst of a seeming "grocery list" of how Christians should act? Of course, that grocery list is not simply a list, but is the practical, concrete statement of the primary emphasis throughout scripture that God has intentions for this world, and that we are meant to live within and seek to implement those intentions. Thus, this list from Hebrews is an attempt to concretize God's intentions and make them specific.

It is within that context that the author of Hebrews reminds us that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow”. That is, Christ will not change; his character is permanent, as is his intentions for the world. Those standards of seeking shalom, of working for justice, elimination of poverty, sharing of wealth and living relationally with God and others will not change or alter, no matter what culture or condition in which one might find oneself. We can depend on Jesus to be the Rock. And so we can firmly build our life together and our interaction with all society on the principles and practices He holds dear.

Therefore, the author of Hebrews concludes, the way we choose to live, the actions we choose to practice, the ways we seek to be God’s presence, the means by which we use the relational power God gives to us as God’s community are all an act of worship. They are not simply good deeds. They are not even solely a life style. They are an act of worship – “a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of our lips that confess his name” as Lord of all the world!

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