

Sermon September 1, 2019

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

Rejoice out loud to God, our strength! Shout for joy to Jacob's God! I am the LORD your God, who brought you up from Egypt's land. Open your mouth wide—I will fill it up! But my people wouldn't listen to my voice. Israel simply wasn't agreeable toward me. So, I sent them off to follow their willful hearts; they followed their own advice. How I wish my people would listen to me! How I wish Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would subdue their enemies in a second; I would turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the LORD would grovel before me, and their doom would last forever! But I would feed you with the finest wheat. I would satisfy you with honey from the rock."

Holy and Generous God, we humbly bring our gifts to your altar, conscious of how unwilling we are to let go of money to help others, but how easily we can spend on ourselves. When God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah that the Israelites of old "had gone after worthless things" many of us can see ourselves on the receiving end of that critique. Help us to learn better to invest what we have in that which has lasting value: love, hope, compassion, redemption, and reconciliation. We pray in the name of the one who was all these things made flesh, Jesus the Christ. Amen. (Jeremiah 2:4-13)

Dear God, this morning we hear your voice speaking to us through the scripture, the music and each other. We are grateful to hear your call, for on many mornings we hear other voices— voices urging us to care only about ourselves; voices urging us to serve other gods: our work, our bank accounts, our egos, our peer groups, our ideologies. By the end of the week, we feel trapped in our anxiety, our work, our spending, our need for control, and our excuses. We need to hear your voice again, calling us back to your healing care, and to your freeing love. As we listen to your voice speaking to us, you also hear the prayers we raise for ourselves and others. We give our joys and our concerns into your care. Show us how to respond to the needs of the world, in your name. Amen

For several years there has been an ecumenical movement to celebrate the month of September as a season of creation.

Our readings this morning focus on what happens when we turn away from God. Abuse of nature, which is often committed in pursuit of short-term personal profit rather than the common good, treats what God has called good as if it were worthless. Our worship of the almighty dollar and self-importance exploits the poor and vulnerable and results in damage to God's good and irreplaceable creation. When we pursue those things and actions that hurt others, we have turned from the Creator to false gods.

This is what is happening in the Amazon, as the rainforests are being burned in order to clear the land for farming and ranching. Yes, it provides profit. People need income. And yet the long-term damage done to the earth is devastating on a global scale. Damage done to the ecology of the region is also devastating. The trees that are being burned are a vital part of the water cycle that brings rain to the region. The crops that are planned may not thrive as there will not be the amount of rain this region is used to. Is there healing for the damage we've done? In our next scripture, the prophet Jeremiah brings warning to people who have turned away from God and put their trust in worthless things.

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Listen to the LORD's word, people of Judah, all you families of the Israelite household. This is what the LORD says: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that made them wander so far? They pursued what was worthless and became worthless. They didn't ask, "Where's the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us through the wilderness, in a land of deserts and ravines, in a land of drought and darkness, in a land of no return, where no one survives?" I brought you into a land of plenty, to enjoy

its gifts and goodness, but you ruined my land; you disgraced my heritage. The priests didn't ask, "Where's the LORD?" Those responsible for the Instruction didn't know me; the leaders rebelled against me; the prophets spoke in the name of Baal, going after what has no value. That is why I will take you to court and charge even your descendants, declares the LORD. Look to the west as far as the shores of Cyprus and to the east as far as the land of Kedar. Ask anyone there: Has anything this odd ever taken place? Has a nation switched gods, though they aren't really gods at all? Yet my people have exchanged their glory for what has no value. Be stunned at such a thing, your heavens; shudder and quake, declares the LORD. My people have committed two crimes: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water. And they have dug (cisterns) wells, broken (cisterns) wells that can't hold water.

Hear what the scripture says to God's people

This reading from Jeremiah has many levels to it. The people have turned away from God. They have turned to other Gods, and to things that are no god at all. Their leaders have rebelled, and their priests have turned to Baal. They are not teaching about the one true God. And they have put their trust in manmade things. To put this passage in context, Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians soon because the cisterns are cracked and not able to hold water. Without water, there is no hope. The deeper reality is that the people have forsaken the spring of living water. The people have turned away from God.

As I researched this passage, I remembered my visit to Jerusalem a few years ago. I was able to go into the ancient water system, built in the time of Hezekiah, under the old city, the part of Jerusalem called the city of David. It at one time provided water for the city, but we were able to walk through most of it without getting our feet wet. It no longer provides water to the city. It is a cracked cistern. The area around Jerusalem, like most of Israel, is desert. I was there in October, and they were praying for rain. It does not rain at all in the summer months. The only rain they get in the late fall, winter, and early spring so by October it was very dry. The rainwater, stored in cisterns from the previous rainy season, was getting low. They know the value of water.

I also remembered the one time that I visited my grandparents when they lived on the island of Criehaven. An island surrounded by saltwater. They were dependent on rainwater, collected in a cistern, to provide fresh water. They were very careful with how they used water. It was not something that I was used to. Growing up in the suburbs, water was always available. We did not think about it, we were not appreciative, and we certainly did not conserve water. We took it for granted. Or you could say that we put our trust in the water system: the reservoirs and the pipes that ran under the street and into the house. Water is necessary for life. That is why it makes such a good metaphor. We cannot exist without water. We cannot live fully without the living water that God provides.

If we put our trust in cisterns that are cracked and don't hold water, we will die. If we put our trust in false gods, rather than God, the living water, we cannot have abundant life. What are some of the false gods that we put our trust in? Governments, institutions, power, wealth, military might, investments, political alliances, and chemicals. Putting our trust in these things is short sighted. It is like burning the rainforest to provide short term profit while destroying the ecology.

When we put our trust in the one true God, we put our trust in love. We trust that loving God and loving others will lead us to abundant life in a way that nothing else can. We find joy in caring for the poor and marginalized. We enjoy caring for creation, and not exploiting it. We appreciate God's care for us in creating the world in a way that everything is interconnected. We are thankful for what we have, the things that money can't buy, and power cannot provide.

An important part of trusting God is remembering that God is and always has been active in history. It is God who led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and through the desert. It was God who provided water and food for the people as they wandered for 40 years, learning to be God's people. We often take for granted or fail

to notice all the ways that God has provided for all humanity. We have failed to care for God's creation and the results are devastating. Our descendants are going to pay for what we and our ancestors have done. Just as Jeremiah said that God will take us to court and charge even our descendants. It is time to take notice of all the ways we have gone astray. It is time to turn back to the God of all creation, and to start taking care of what God has given to us. If we don't, the results are going to be devastating for us, for all people, and for future generations.

Let us pray. Somewhere along the way, God, we started taking things for granted. We forgot what a gift you have given to us in this beautiful world. We failed to appreciate the way that everything is connected and failed to acknowledge everything we do does makes a difference, either for good or for devastation. We have put our trust in false Gods and cracked cisterns.

Turn us around, God, before it is too late. Help us to truly appreciate what you have given us and show us how to care for it as the treasure that it is. For it is not only our own future at stake, but our children's and grandchildren's future too. We start today, by saying thank you. Thank you for the sunshine and the rain, for the oceans and forests and mountains. Thank you for the stars and moon, for sunrises and sunsets, and for all the growing things. We cannot thank you enough. Amen