

Humanity on Trial

(Jeremiah 2:4-13)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2019

May our ears, our minds and our hearts be touched by the truth of your word, O God, our creator, our sustainer, and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1979 the late-Auschwitz survivor, Boston University professor and author Elie Wiesel published a play entitled *The Trial of God*. The story is set in a small village in the Ukraine in 1649, following a period of violence brought against a population of ethnic Jews by Cossacks. In the aftermath of this tragic time, the innkeeper in the play – a survivor of the violence – demands that some actors who are in town for a performance instead stage a trial in which God is put in the dock. His crime? Being absent and silent in the midst of this time of horror. The innkeeper serves as the prosecutor; a stranger in town serves as God's defense attorney.

If you haven't read the play, I strongly encourage you to do so. The mere fact that Wiesel's writing is so extraordinarily powerful and emotional is reason enough to find a copy. The incredible plot twist that occurs in the last few lines of the final page (a twist that I'm not going to share!) also might be incentive to read it. And I feel it should be read by anyone struggling with the questions that Wiesel tackles: How can a loving God let horrible things happen in the world? Where is God in the midst of suffering?

Now while the premise of an absent God in the midst of suffering is not at the center of this morning's passage from Jeremiah, there are some lines spoken by the character Sam in Wiesel's play that came to mind as I considered the words of the prophet. As Sam says in response to the question, "How can you choose God?" he responds, "I must. I'm His servant. He created the world and me without asking for my opinion. He may do with both whatever He wishes. Our task is to glorify Him, to praise Him, to love Him – in spite of ourselves."¹

In Wiesel's writing we hear echo of God's hope for humanity; in Jeremiah we find the reality. God gave much for His people, and the people turned their backs on him. As we hear in the words shared by the prophet, God is putting his children in the dock ... laying out a case against them. These 10 verses are the central part of a three-part arc² shared by the prophet in this chapter. Just before this passage, God – through Jeremiah – reflects on the past faithfulness of His people:

*I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,*

¹ Elie Wiesel. *The Trial of God* (Schoken paperback edition), p. 157.

² Explained further in J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, pp. 166-7.

*how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to the Lord,
the first fruits of his harvest.³*

And in the verses that follow today's reading, God shares the impacts of the unfaithfulness of the people:

*Is Israel a slave? Is he a homeborn servant?
Why then has he become plunder?
The lions have roared against him,
they have roared loudly.
They have made his land a waste;
his cities are in ruins, without inhabitant.
Moreover, the people of Memphis and Tahpanhes
have broken the crown of your head.
Have you not brought this upon yourself
by forsaking the Lord your God,
while he led you in the way?
What then do you gain by going to Egypt,
to drink the waters of the Nile?
Or what do you gain by going to Assyria,
to drink the waters of the Euphrates?
Your wickedness will punish you,
and your apostasies will convict you.
Know and see that it is evil and bitter
for you to forsake the Lord your God;
the fear of me is not in you,
says the Lord God of hosts.⁴*

In the words of Shakespeare, "What's past is prologue;" what God did through all he gave to His children was to open the door for them. He set them on their journey, but as we hear they chose to go it alone rather than follow God. The door that was opened by God has been slammed shut by those walking through it. And in response ... in the words spoken by the prophet ... God seems to be saying, "What did I ever do to you?"

As you'll recall from last week's reading from Jeremiah and the sermon preached by Melanie, God responded to the concern that "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy"⁵ by reaching out and touching his mouth and saying "Now I have put my words in your mouth."⁶ Today, in laying out the case against humanity, I think Jeremiah is in a sense paying God's action

³ Jeremiah 2:2-3 (NRSV).

⁴ Jeremiah 2:14-19 (NRSV).

⁵ Jeremiah 1:6 (NRSV).

⁶ Jeremiah 1:9 (NRSV).

forward. He has taken the words placed in his mouth ... the words placed there through God's touch ... and is using them to reach out to those in exile to touch their ears, and their minds and their hearts.

Jeremiah is putting God's words before them in the same way God put His words in Jeremiah. But I think in a certain respect, Jeremiah also is touching the mouths of others ... ***to close them***. When we're doing all of the talking, we can't listen, and I think that's what the people of the prophet's day were experiencing. They were no longer able to hear God because, in the choices they made in their lives, they had chosen to talk over Him.

Last week we heard the question, "What is your call?" For any of us to discern our own answer to that question, there's a point where we have to stop talking and spend some time existing in silence. We can't think ... and we certainly can't hear God ... when we are carrying the entire conversation. You've heard me speak in the past about the amount of time it took me to acknowledge my own call to ordained ministry because I ignored God ... and questioned God about whether I was the right choice ... and spoke over God by focusing on other parts of my life and drowning out His voice.

But when my mouth was closed and my ears, and my mind and my heart were touched I found my path. When I stopped talking and asking questions, I heard God's answer. Yes, as Wiesel wrote, our task is to glorify God ... to praise God ... to love God. And as he said, we are to do it in spite of ourselves.

When we reflect on the words of Jeremiah ... when we allow his words to touch us in the way God's words touched the prophet ... we will once again ask, "Where is the Lord?" and seek Him out wherever He may be found.

When we allow these words to touch us we will be reminded once again of God's promise to our ancestors and through them, to us: a promise of a plentiful land, with fruit and good things.

When we allow these words to touch us, we will be reminded once again that regardless of the wildernesses or deserts or dark places of life, God will lead us through.

When we allow these words to touch us, we will set aside the cracked cisterns of our lives and drink from the living water of God.

And when we allow these words to touch us, we will once again hear the voice of God deep in our souls ... the voice beckoning us ... the voice propelling us ... the voice revealing the call we are each given.

Amen.