

Jeff's Reflection – Feb 13, 2022

Today's reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah offers a poetic, insightful and helpful images for humans' relationship with God.

Jeremiah says that when we turn away from God, something of our humanity dries up, and the world suffers.

Jeremiah says that the blessed are those who trust in God – trust, which is perhaps the best interpretation of the biblical word faith. When Jesus says to someone that their faith has healed them, he doesn't mean that their acceptance of a set of belief statements has healed them; he means that their healing is grounded in their trust, their trust that God IS, that God loves, that something is possible outside of the evidence of their circumstances.

Jeremiah says that blessing, the possibility of life birthing newness, is grounded in our trust in God.

And then comes the image: Jeremiah says this about those who trust in God:

"They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

The tree is planted by water, by a stream. The tree is not self-sufficient. The tree receives nourishment, life from another source, from water in a stream. The tree receives its life through its roots, it is rooted in the earth, in creation.

The tree exists because it has a source of life that flows into it – into its roots and into its trunk and branches and leaves and fruit. We cannot see this happening, but it is the dance of creation.

When I was in elementary school, a common assignment was the 'plant project' – to collect and identify plants. It was usually a group project. We would collect samples of plants we could find, tape the now deceased plant onto a piece of Bristol board, identify the plant and described certain aspects and characteristics of it. I have since read a critique of that type of project that noted that we don't learn about the world by learning about plants in isolation for the rest of their eco-system. Vegetation does not exist on its own, it grows where it does because of what else grows or lives there; it belongs to a web, an eco-system of relationships.

The repeated warnings from scientists about climate change and the need for humans to change our lifestyles and our relationship to the rest of creation – should tell us that humans are also interrelated to everything else – we co-exist.

The creation story in Genesis is not a description of how the world came to be but is a

poetic affirmation that all creation is grounded in God and that human beings emerge as one creature amongst all earth's creatures.

And if we want a more scientific and historic way of saying that – the cosmos came into existence 13.8 billion years ago, the earth came into existence 4.5 billion years ago, and homo sapiens showed up about 300,000 years ago. We came late to the creation dance. We exist because of all else that exists and that gave birth to us.

Faith is trusting that the creative life-force that we call God flows in and through us.

As the New Creed of The United Church of Canada says, "We are not alone. We live in God's world." We are to perceive everything in faith, from trust that everything exists within God, that God is present in everything.

I don't want it to sound as if faith is easy, just a matter of saying we 'trust' and life will always feel good. It's not like walking into a room and flicking a switch and expecting the light to go on.

It's easy to say that we trust God when life seems good, everyone we know is healthy and happy, and the weather is great and we feel in control of our life., but not so easy at other times. Faith, like that tree from Jeremiah, needs to be nurtured, to stay connected to a source of life, of hope, of presence.

The stories of the Bible are one source of faith nourishment – stories of God hearing and responding to the cries of despondency from people enslaved by Pharaoh; stories of food discovered in a wilderness; stories of welcoming and caring for the poor, the vulnerable, the ones who have no claim on our compassion other than they are here, they are there, they also live in God's world. The stories of the Bible tell us of God's presence.

For Christians, when we want to consider what this God-Presence would be like wearing sandals, we think of Jesus.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, people want to be near Jesus, to reach out to this stream of life, this water of life, to experience something rooted within them encountering hope, newness, life force and presence.

It is a story about faith, about trust that in touching Jesus they are somehow touching God.

The story tells us that this is a mixed crowd of people who gather. Some are Jewish – they come from Judea and from Jerusalem. But some are not Jewish. They come from the Roman cities of Tyre and Sidon, located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

The people come...for healing. They come because something life-enhancing, life-

affirming, life-healing flows through Jesus. The story says that power came out of Jesus. The people come to Jesus in order to be connected to that to which Jesus is connected. Rooted in God's presence, Jesus becomes a stream of life flowing into others.

The disciples watch what is happening, then Jesus speaks to them, offering them the gospel of Luke's version of the Beatitudes.

Jesus invites the disciples to perceive the world differently than the norm. I suspect that then, as now, we identify the lucky ones, the enviable ones, the ones who are living the desired life as those who are wealthy, those who have any kind of food and any amount of food whenever they want it; those who are always happy, successful, winners. I also suspect that then, as now, none of those appearances mean that those living what we might classify as desirable lives are free of personal demons, of anxieties, times of despair, feelings of failure and worthlessness.

Jesus speaks of blessed – of blessing- of being affirmed, of being approved, of receiving a share, an inheritance of this God presence, this Life in our midst.

Blessed – are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed – are the hungry, for you will be filled.

Blessed – are those who weep, for you shall laugh.

Blessed – are you when people revile you, mock you, belittle you because you are my companions, because you trust is nourished by my trust in God.

Blessed – for in some way, God is with, amongst, in those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and berated. God cares about these people.

The 'Blessed' statements are followed by the 'woe' statements. Woe to those, bad news to those, things aren't as good as they seem to those...

Woe - to the rich, you've already received what you want.

Woe - to those who are full, for there is a hunger lurking that you can't satisfy.

Woe to those who are laughing now – the only people who don't mourn or weep are those whose hearts are hardened.

Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you – you probably are saying what people want to hear but not what God wants you to say.

Our translation gives us the word 'woe', but I like to play with inserting a different 'whoa' – the directions to slow down or stop a horse that is galloping. I think Jesus says to people 'whoa', slow down, stop being so focused on being rich and full and happy and applauded. Stop so you can see the others who are blessed – the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the rejected prophets of God.

Jeremiah said that the tree and water needed to live in relationship with one

another. Perhaps Jesus offered the unexpected blessed and woe descriptions because the most significant healing was waiting for people to live in just relationship with one another, feeding, sustaining and sharing life.

The most significant healing requires those who feel their life is full of woe to trust that they are loved by God, children of blessing; and for those who consider themselves blessed to know the woe of being isolated from so many other members of God's family; for everyone to know that we are people of blessing and woe and we are still God's people.

The tree needs the water in-order-to grow. The water, the stream, needs the tree to grow and offer shade, produce fruit, allow the life that flows from the stream to the roots to manifest in new creation and another expression of God's life presence.

St. Augustine, in the male-gendered language of his day, said, "Without God, man cannot, and without man, God will not."

Desmond Tutu said that in more contemporary language, "God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot."

I suggest that this story in Luke's Gospel tells us that the healing of humanity and the healing of creation depend on both God and humanity; that we need to receive and share God's blessing; we need to trust that blessing is not a reward to be hoarded but a gift to be distributed.

Desmond Tutu also said: "God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness and for compassion."

Let us be like trees planted by water – and let the love of God flow through and amongst us for the healing of all people, the healing of all creation. AMEN