

**October 9, 2016**

**Tim Hughes**

**New Testament Lesson: Luke 17:11-19**

<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, <sup>13</sup>they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" <sup>14</sup>When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.<sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup>Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup>Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

**Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 29:1-7**

<sup>29</sup>These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup>This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

## **Sermon: We Fell In Love In A Hopeless Place**

This past May I was riding in the passenger seat of a battered old Volkswagon, rumbling through the streets of Bethlehem. My eyes were as wide as saucers. I just couldn't believe I was in Bethlehem.

Perry and I had jumped on an opportunity to travel to Israel with a group from his school, and then through a friend of a friend I had connected with a couple of young Palestinian men who teach music in the refugee camps on the outskirts of town.

Since Palestine was not really included on our group agenda, we split from our group for two days to spend time with Alber, who promised to show us "the real Bethlehem." For him, that meant getting away from the Church of the Nativity, with its long line of pilgrims and tourists. It meant barreling through neighborhoods filled with regular people, tenement apartments, children chasing each other around the corner.

"Bethlehem is way bigger than I expected," I said.

"Oh yeah?" said Alber. "This is not a big city." He whipped around another corner. "This is no Jerusalem."

"Sure," I said. "It's just – you know – I had a different idea from the song."

"What song?" he asked. I instantly felt foolish.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem..." I started to sing.

Alber's face was blank. "Never heard of it," he said.

"Sure you have," I said.

"No, I haven't," he said.

Well, of course he hasn't heard of it. After a little Googling, I found out that "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written by an Episcopal priest from Philadelphia in the mid-nineteenth century.

Why, upon reflection, had I expected Alber – a Palestinian man in his twenties - to know a Christmas song written in my own country, more than a hundred years ago, only a few hours from my own front door? I had to further wonder how many of my images of God were supplied by Victorian England and the American songbook?

Later, in one of the music classrooms of his non-profit, Alber and his young students played a song for me that *I* had never heard – a beautiful percussive Arabic song. The children laughed and smiled shyly when we clapped at the end. “Fantastic!” we said, although they did not understand a word of English.

Today, the lectionary gifts us with two texts about foreigners crossing international borders. In the case of the Old Testament reading, Jeremiah offers advice to Israelite young people who find themselves trapped in a pagan land against their will. In the New Testament reading, Jesus has an encounter with a Samaritan leper. Following worship today, there is an opportunity to hear from a group of our own young people who crossed borders this past summer to visit our sister parish in El Salvador. It’s part of a larger Global Mission series that will share about our relationships around the world.

What wisdom will be gleaned from all these travels and travelers? What new songs will we learn? What old songs will fade away?

Let us pray.

\*\*\*

Let’s just say that you are a nation.

I know, you are an individual, but use your imagination, ok? Imagine you are a small but proud nation with a storied history. Your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were noble men and women. You know their stories by heart.

In addition to the story of your families, there is the Story of your God. The Story of your Scriptures. There is a Story, captured in scrolls of

papyrus, that helps make sense of the long and winding road that brought you to this place.

The Story, which you have studied since you were a child, which you have internalized, reminds you that there has been danger every step of the way. There were the waters of the flood. There were the chains of the Egyptians. The perils of the wilderness. The betrayal of evil kings.

So yes, there was always danger. And just as reliably, there was always God. If there has been one central takeaway from the Story, it is this: be faithful to God, and God will be faithful to you. That's why we wear the promise on our wrists, just a skin's distance from the blood pulsing through our veins: Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart, and All Your Soul, and All Your Might. We carry that promise like a talisman, and God's own promise reverberates in our ears – you will be my chosen people, with as many children as there are stars in the sky.

And the Story also tells us that we will have a home. For generations it was out in front of us, just a rumor, just a promise. When it became our home, it seemed too good to be true, a land flowing with milk and honey. We built the city we had always dreamed of: Jerusalem. We moved the tabernacle of our God into its proper home: the Temple. We were a people – finally - with a promise and a land and a home.

I will admit this: over the generations, we became accustomed to the stability of stone walls. We could easily trace the boundaries of our territory. We knew God's mailing address. We knew the measured weight of a proper sacrifice, the exact expense of forgiveness. We got comfortable.

And then: the unthinkable. The Babylonians. Godless, power-hungry, ruthless. They mocked our nation. They mocked our God. So we armed our soldiers. We lit candles and said prayers. We waited for fire to fall from heaven.

The fire never came. Instead, our walls were breached. Stone set on stone by our ancestors came tumbling to the ground. They carried our king away in disgrace. They profaned the temple. They stole away our

most promising sons and daughters to Babylon and gave them pagan names. They left us naked and afraid.

So let's say you are one of these exiled sons and daughters. You wander the streets of Babylon in a daze. You repeat the prayer silently to yourself, "Love the Lord Your God With All Your Heart, All Your Soul, All Your Might." Because here is the truth: the one thread of hope that helps you get out of bed in the morning is the Story. The notion that God will be faithful. God has a plan. God will not stand for this indignity.

In this time of crisis, like so many crises before, a nation turns to its prophets. It has never been more important to listen to those touched and anointed women and men who speak God's truth. And so, you cry out to the prophets for their wisdom, "What do we do? How now shall we live?"

\*\*\*

The prophets shuffle into your presence and you cannot help but think that they are a freak show. Everyone wants a prophet in a crisis but nobody wants a prophet at a cocktail party because they are no fun. They are severe. They are socially awkward. They curse under their breath. They don't write thank you notes.

Everyone loves a dead prophet, known for speaking truth to ancient enemies. No one loves a living prophet, who might call you on your own stuff at any moment.

But let's just say that you are a member of this nation of exiles, a chosen people with a Story that is your only remaining hope. So you are listening, and listening carefully.

\*\*\*

Enter the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was first called into ministry in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, BCE, and his very first act was to predict the eventual destruction of Jerusalem.

The people had been worshipping other gods, and thus the city would be destroyed.

Jeremiah took no pleasure in delivering these messages – as a matter of fact, it more or less ruined his life. He is known as the Weeping Prophet, because his messages brought him so much hardship.

Despite his unpopular messages, Jeremiah also had an annoying habit of being correct. His prophecies spanned the careers of five different kings, each of whose fortunes rose and eventually fell. So if you are the nation of Israel, when Jeremiah starts to offer his perspective on the present Babylonian exile, you listen.

“Thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah croaks in a humorless tone. You lean in, anxious to hear how the exile will return to Jerusalem.

“<sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.”

It’s a nice enough speech, but has a prophet’s fire ever been so...domestic? The Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and Jeremiah prescribes a new garden. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and Jeremiah suggests a home renovation. It’s like the Old Testament has been remixed by HGTV.

The people are astonished. They turned to the prophets for the “How” and “When” of returning to Jerusalem. They never expected to be instructed to stay in exile.

The idea was more than disappointing. To a demoralized people, it felt like giving up.

\*\*\*

In his excellent book, *How (Not) To Speak of God*, Peter Rollins talks about the difference between aesthetic and conceptual idolatry. <sup>1</sup> An

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Rollins, “How (Not) To Speak Of God,” Paraclete Press, 2006.

idol, he writes, is “anything that would render the essence of God accessible, bringing God into either aesthetic visibility (in the form of a physical structure, such as a statue) or conceptual visibility (in the form of a concept, such as a theological system).”

While the most notorious idols of the Scriptures are physical statues, there is no reason to believe that the Israelite people could not fall prey to conceptual idols – that they might find themselves worshipping a city, or a Temple, or a system of rules, rather than the God who dwells in the city, the temple, or the system.

The very idea of conceptual idolatry is hard for us to get our heads around because it so often comes to us in the guise of our most cherished traditions and values. It comes to us disguised as the way we’ve always celebrated communion, the songs we deeply associate with Christmas, the language we’ve always used to talk about salvation.

The loss of those precious, familiar forms – what Richard Rohr has called “the shattering” – can feel utterly devastating. It can feel like the loss of God’s self. Ask the first-year seminarian who discovers she can no longer read the Bible literally. Ask the congregation whose pastor is arrested for embezzling funds. Ask the Christian family who struggles to open their home to their brand new Muslim daughter-in-law. When the forms of our faith fall away, it can be tempting to think we have lost the thing itself. But Jeremiah’s prophecy to the Babylonian exiles would suggest that exactly the opposite might be true.

To be stripped of the physical and conceptual forms that define our faith can feel like stepping away from God. But it also has the potential to open us up to extraordinary spiritual wisdom. Shed of our idols and systems, we are vulnerable, but we are also able to dwell in what Rohr calls the “Naked Now.” He elaborates:

“Jesus’ primary metaphor for this new consciousness was ‘the kingdom of God.’ He is not talking about a place, or an afterlife, but a way of seeing and thinking now. The kingdom of God is the naked now – the

world without human kingdoms, ethnic communities, national boundaries, or social identifications...”<sup>2</sup>

To the Israelites, Jeremiah’s instructions were an invitation to give up on God. But what, truly, is more hopeful than planting a garden? What is more hopeful than planning a wedding or bringing a baby into the world? Jeremiah is inviting them to let go of their assumptions about what God is doing and become available to what is happening right in front of them. But even more profound is the notion that God’s presence will be revealed, not by making Israel great again, but by being deeply present to their foreign neighbors. Praying for them, loving them, even marrying them. That, to me, is a profound and risky insight.

\*\*\*

It’s interesting to reflect on Jesus’ short encounter with the ten lepers in light of Jeremiah’s instructions. The group of lepers approach Jesus, keeping the required distance, given their contagious illness.

“Jesus, have mercy on us!” they cry out. Jesus replies with a very religious, ritualized response: “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” Any good Jew would have done that already. Nonetheless, the men do as he says, and Luke tells us that in the process of following Jesus’ directions, the men were healed. *Before* they reach the priests.

Only one of the men returns to thank Jesus for his healing, and Jesus notes that the only person to recognize the true source of the healing was a foreigner.

“Where are the others?” Jesus asks. Presumably, the other men continued on their way to the priest. Why not? The priest was the center of religious life. They may very well have assumed that the power of their healing lay in the institution they had known their entire lives.

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, “The Naked Now: Learning To See As The Mystics See,” The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009.



Only the foreigner, only the one who traveled a disoriented distance, only the one who negotiated the shattering of all that was familiar. Only the foreigner was able to recognize what was happening right before his face, in the naked now.

\*\*\*

These texts come to us from the lectionary. I didn't choose them to align with the El Salvador presentation after worship today or the Global Mission series in general. But I believe it's a profound commentary on why we develop and sustain these cross-cultural relationships, or at least why we should.

We tend to use the language of social justice to explain our mission partnerships. It's not hard to talk about the deep poverty and violence of El Salvador, or the suicide epidemic on the Native American reservations, or the health crises of places like Cameroon. We are a community committed to justice in the name of Jesus and that is as it should be. But I think we should be honest that this framework is also our comfort zone.

We talk less easily, I think, about what any delegate on these trips understands in their gut. We return again and again to these places because Jesus appears again and again in exile. We return because we need to learn, we need to be healed, we need to be restored to God's presence.

We can do those things here, but it's not surprising to me that it happens more reliably on the margins, across boundaries, in the hopeless place. It's right there in Jeremiah's text: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Why? Because in their welfare *you will find your welfare.*"

We need to start being honest about the fact that we need mission because we are spiritually poor. We are spiritually poor – in part – because we are materially comfortable. We need to experience the shattering that makes us available to what Jesus is doing in our midst. The shattering, by the way, doesn't really happen on a short-term

mission trip. The shattering happens when we really dig into long-term relationship across boundaries. Mission-marriage, if you will.

It might feel crude to you, to speak so openly of our own neediness, our own self-interest. But truthfully it is a necessary early step in the process of building real relationship. And building real relationship, friends, is what the prophet Jeremiah is calling us to do.

\*\*\*

I could give you ten examples of ways that happened in El Salvador this summer but I prefer to let the young people tell you themselves. It was a blessing to have two Muslim teenagers from Sandtown-Winchester in our group, another reminder of the layers of faithful difference that are right here under our noses.

They'll tell their own stories over lunch today, after worship, about what the trip was like. But I will leave you with this image of one of our evening devotionals, a time of prayer and reflection at the end of each day.

Picture our delegation from Brown Memorial, spanning generations of this churches history, gathered in quiet prayer around a single flickering candle. In another room of Maria Madre, two Muslim youth are simultaneously offering the evening prayers of Ramadan, talking to Allah about the things they have seen. Across another cinderblock wall, Padre Luis is preparing his homily for the morning mass, encouraging the people of La Chacra to be brave under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. All around the parish, a thundering rain storm is filling my ears with the sound of rushing water, and I cannot help but hear in the rhythm of those raindrops the rhythm of the drums of Palestine, the rhythm of my heart beat, the unmistakable sensation that we are experiencing another chapter of the Story of God's astonishing faithfulness. The Story not lost in the incredible diversity of our human experience. It's amplified. It's revealed. It comes into focus. It is as vast as a world of difference we can scarcely comprehend. It is as close and as intimate as the beating of our own heart, reminding us to pay attention to our greatest love, right here in our midst, in God's presence, in the Naked Now.