

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 19, Year C (track one)

First Reading

Jeremiah 4:11–12, 22-28

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, “A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse, a wind too full for this comes for me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them.”

*Behold, he comes up like clouds;
his chariots like the whirlwind;
his horses are swifter than eagles—
woe to us, for we are ruined!
O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil,
that you may be saved.
How long shall your wicked thoughts
lodge within you?
For a voice declares from Dan
and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim.
Warn the nations that he is coming;
announce to Jerusalem,
“Besiegers come from a distant land;
they shout against the cities of Judah.
Like keepers of a field are they against her all around,
because she has rebelled against me,
declares the LORD.
Your ways and your deeds
have brought this upon you.
This is your doom, and it is bitter;
it has reached your very heart.”*

*My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent,
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war.
Crash follows hard on crash;
the whole land is laid waste.
Suddenly my tents are laid waste,*

my curtains in a moment.
How long must I see the standard
and hear the sound of the trumpet?

“For my people are foolish;
they know me not;
they are stupid children;
they have no understanding.
They are ‘wise’—in doing evil!
But how to do good they know not.”

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and behold, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

For thus says the LORD, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

“For this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above be dark;
for I have spoken; I have purposed;
I have not relented, nor will I turn back.” (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Timothy 1:12–17

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ

Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 15:1–10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

Sometimes the things that our lectionary choosers leave out are of little import. But all too often, they are not. This is one of those times that I would scold them. If you are one of the people in your congregation that chooses what to read on Sunday mornings, and if you choose track one, I implore you to include those verses that were left out, those that I included in italics. Yes, it makes for a longer reading, but without those verses the ones we have are nearly impossible to read correctly. We are permitted, at least in the Episcopal church to *add to* the verses given us in the lectionary, but not *omit from* them. Please add.

The omitted verses begin with Jeremiah's vision of the invading general and his army. They are as massive as a cloud, as swift as eagles, they leave ruin in their wake. Jerusalem's doom is sure, and they have brought this on their own heads. If we were to stop there, we might emerge from this reading with an image of God who is as heartless as that of the invaders.

But then Jeremiah shifts to speaking in the first person. In verse 19 he cries out, "My anguish! My anguish!" Scholars through the ages have disagreed about who the first person speaker really is. Is it the prophet, crying out in anticipation of the pain of his people? Experiencing in advance the horror that is to come? Is Jeremiah echoing the cries he knows that will rise from the people in an attempt to get their attention. (Can one echo a sound that hasn't sounded yet?) Or is he still speaking on behalf of God. Surely that is the only conclusion we can draw from the phrases "my people are foolish, they know me not." Or does the prophet just shift from one voice fluidly to another?

There is another possibility, and one that makes better sense of it all. And that is that Jeremiah speaks in all three voices all at the same time. He knows the heart of God. (At least as well as one might without having the witness of the Cross.) And God does not just observe the anguish of His people from without. God experiences our suffering from within. And, as all things, including the future, are present to God, Jerusalem's future pain is God's own, the fear, the tumult in their ears, the desolation. So Jeremiah speaks in the first person from the heart of the God who huddles in the city against the siege, covering her ears against the sound of the trumpet, announcing another charge. Jeremiah's own heart resonates with the heart of the One whose love is being sundered by the Babylonians. I don't think that God inspires Jeremiah to share an image of the horrors to come in order to get their attention, but in hopes that His compassion will draw them back to Him as no warning has succeeded in doing. It just won't do to try to separate them all out. They're all one for the prophet. (I did say last week that it wasn't an easy thing, being Jeremiah!)

And to read the closing verses of our passage today without having heard God's own anguish over His people's destruction is to do both Jeremiah and the God for whom he spoke a grave injustice.

I'm tempted to launch into another bit on the inevitability of the desolation of the closing verses, but I think this is enough to chew on for one week. Maybe I'll expand on it when we come back around to these verses in three years.

Second Reading

What to say about 1st Timothy. First of all, I have to admit that I am among those who do not believe that this letter comes to us from the pen of Paul himself. The spirit and the tone of the letter are fundamentally different from the authentic letters of Paul, and it betrays an awareness of church structure (most especially “overseers” or “bishops”) that is foreign to the church of Paul’s era. But does that mean that the letter has nothing to teach us? To that I would say, “No.” But this letter must be sifted to separate the chaff from the wheat.

I don’t want to get into a Bible study on 1 Timothy here, though I think that doing so might be instructive, in particular on how we might “sift.” But this is a reflection on the weekly readings, so I’ll confine myself to our selection from chapter one for the time being.

In our eucharistic Rite One there remain some old gems from the 1928 BCP called the “comfortable words.” They come after the confession and absolution, and they’re scriptural tidbits designed, I suppose, to amplify and undergird the absolution the priest has just pronounced. They go like this:

Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

The third of those Scriptural excerpts came from our reading from 1 Timothy this week. I’ll confess here that I’d forgotten that Cranmer, when including these words, left off the rest of that sentence, “of whom I am the foremost.” I don’t suppose it would do to have the priest stand up before the congregation every week and claim to be the foremost of the sinners in the building (though that might do something for our humility) but it does make for an interesting edit.

I have said above that I don’t think Paul wrote the letter. But I do think that Paul likely said this or something very like it, and that the author of the letter knows this. Paul said

something very similar in 1 Corinthians 15:9. “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (ESV)

The point I’d like to make here is that there’s a principle embedded here that we find throughout Scripture. God chooses the most unlikely, the most “unworthy” to accomplish His work in order that we might give glory to the Giver, not to the doer.

Which scenario do you think is the more likely to sway someone’s heart?

I speak from a place of righteous confidence, explaining to you the error of your ways,

or,

I explain to you the mess God dragged me out of, and suggest that if God can do that for me, He can surely do that for you?

Our weakness God makes into our source of greatest strength. Without my weakness I have no testimony that can accomplish much. (That’s part of why I included some of “my story” on the website.) It’s a hard thing, at least it was for me, to learn to see my sin converted to gold, but that’s what God does.

What “disqualification” has God been wanting to turn into your greatest strength?

Gospel Text

Have you ever wondered about those other ninety-nine sheep? I mean, the shepherd goes off and abandons them. Then, when he finds the one lost one he goes and throws a party. Who’s looking after the sheep during the party? I have. And I missed the point, of course.

I don’t suppose it does any harm to feel sorry for the ninety-nine, in the same way that we might feel sorry for the prodigal son’s older brother, pouting out in the field while the party goes on. But the point I’m stuck on this week is the celebration, the “joy before the angels.” As much as we’ve made a mess of things here on earth, there must be one insane party going on with the angels if they celebrate every time one of us turns and chooses to trust in the love and forgiveness of the Father. I’m not talking about a brief, end-zone celebration that wanes with the next kickoff, but a serious party. Over you. And me.

For me, there are two elements to this celebration. The first is that the heavenly host celebrates that I have come home. They are truly overjoyed to see the Father’s family

restored to Him. But the second is less obvious. I think that the angels celebrate when I “repent” (turn, or change my thinking) because in that they see the Son receiving the reward for His suffering. That was/is, after all, the point of it all. And His reward is seeing us return to and enjoy fellowship with God.

Even now I find it difficult sometimes to think of myself as worthy of that celebration. And the more I force myself to swallow that reality, the better I am at walking out the Kingdom realities that opens up to me. So it does me good to be reminded of that celebration and to look to see how my life is, and isn't, reflecting it.