

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 16, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 1:4–10 (track one)

Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”
But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.” (ESV)

Isaiah 58:9b–14 (track two)

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 12:18–29

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have

been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 13:10–17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (ESV)

Questions and Comments for Discussion

First Reading (Jeremiah)

At the end of our reading from Jeremiah this week, God says to him,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Stop for a moment to consider just how powerful the prophetic word is. God doesn’t say that Jeremiah will predict the fall and the rise of nations, but that he himself will pull them down, raise them up. We tend to think of prophets as something like fortune tellers, reading our tea leaves and telling us what will happen, but this is not how they functioned, how they were viewed.

Prophets released or created future realities with their words. Once they'd stated something it was already accomplished. I've mentioned in other "Divergences" the way that future tense works in Hebrew. I'm no Hebrew scholar, but people who are have told me that there's no real future tense. In Hebrew, if you want to say something will happen, you say it in the perfect tense, and context sets it in the future. In other words, if I want to say, "This city will fall," I say "This city has fallen." The prophetic word is a done deal.

And God has put His words into Jeremiah's mouth, to release them and to release the building up and the tearing down of nations.

When you and I see God's future and speak it out, we release the same potential for that thing to come about. We may not see as clearly as Jeremiah, but in some ways we may see more clearly because of the veil that is taken away in Christ Jesus. We have the power to release healing, restoration, wholeness, with just our words. If we dare to dream with God, we can find His words spilling out of our mouths in a way that holds up the weary arms of those around us and gives courage to those whose hearts have been ground down.

I don't want to dwell too much on the "tearing down" aspect of that prophetic word, but when we name those things that are built on sand for what they are, then we also set in motion the storm that will wash them away. But too much "prophetic" speech seems to focus on that. Building the city of God, brick by brick, with words of hope grounded in God's future, these things destabilize evil systems just as surely. Words that bring down, if they are not cloaked in compassion, are worthless, in my opinion.

But words have power. To build up, to tear down, to heal and to wound.

What dream of God's have you dared to speak into being lately?

Isaiah Reading

The portion of Isaiah 58 that is appointed for this Sunday (if you're on track two) is also the latter portion of the second option for a Hebrew Scriptures reading for Ash Wednesday. What is omitted this week are the earlier verses about fasting, and so lose the context of "the fast that I choose." I'd like to keep in mind what I learned back on Ash Wednesday, that "fasting" in the Hebrew Scriptures was almost never about repentance or expressing grief, but rather an attempt to get God's attention. "See how miserable we are!" (Here's a link to that portion of Ash Wednesday's Divergence.)

Given that, this is what I find interesting. God is saying, “If you want my attention, do these things!” And then we get that wonderful litany of behaviors that will draw God’s gaze and God’s favor.

Set in its historical context, this is even more powerful, because it is a prophecy given to God’s people in the wake of the Babylonian captivity, when they have returned from exile to find their land a waste, their city rubble. Surely there were religious leaders in that day who called for a fast, for sack cloth and ashes, but through the prophet God says, “No, instead, quit pointing fingers at each other. Quit ignoring the poor, the hungry, the naked. Do justice and just look at what I will do for you. I will cause you to shine, I will make you strong, fruitful.”

Our reading ends on a beautiful image of hope that begins among the ruins of what had once been, had once existed at the expense of the poor, the powerless. God’s people are crying out to be seen and God’s response is, “Do what I do, raise up the lowly, and I will see you.”

Second Reading

“This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.”

Things that have been made will be shaken. Everything that can be shaken will be shaken, in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

This brings to mind that old law of physics, that entropy increases over time. Even created matter gradually degrades into chaos.

But for me in a more immediate time frame, it makes a certain sense of the way that civic order seems to be sliding steadily towards chaos as well. And it cries out to me to say that only those things that are truly grounded in the Goodness and Mercy of God made manifest in Jesus Christ will withstand this dissolution. All our systems that are “made” aren’t stable, or permanent enough, to stand up over time.

I’m old enough to be able to look back on a time that some would call the “good old days” when things were “better.” People were more civil, the nation wasn’t so divided, everyone knew their place in the system and it ran rather smoothly.

That is, it ran smoothly for those who enjoyed the benefits of their gender, or skin color, or socio-economic status, or nation of origin, or.. Well, you see what I'm getting it. It was a system that claimed it was based on Biblical standards and yet heaped injustice on injustice. But it worked. In a way.

But it collapsed. Some would say because we abandoned the Bible. I would say it collapsed of the weight of its own injustice and the lack of true knowledge of God and God's ways. And because certain prophets spoke destabilizing words into that system that also helped bring them down.

And we tried to create new systems, more just systems, but they were still "made" and incapable of standing. Now those systems are threatening to fall apart. Those things that can be shaken will be shaken. And so (when I remember this passage) I am less dismayed than some at the way that civic discourse has gone the way of demagoguery and divisiveness. I ache for the pain that it causes, for the fear in which so many find themselves, but I find myself trying to inject that which cannot be shaken into the mix rather than try to shore up bulkheads that will only fall a little later than sooner by my efforts.

Faith, Hope, and Love. These things abide. And the greatest of these is Love.

What can you add to the world in which you find yourself that is unshakeable?

Gospel Text

Systems have their place. Rules have their place. Without them I can't get through a day without having to make a new decision about what I'll do next in every moment. I can't predict what that driver in the oncoming lane will do, or whether or not it's safe to cross the street. I can focus my energies elsewhere, on things that are more creative and life-giving when I can lay aside many decisions to the rules under which I live.

The Sabbath has its place. Not that many of us keep a true Sabbath any more. But setting aside time to focus on God and God's Goodness and Mercy, and on my place in God's family, all those things are good. And setting aside work of any sort to allow for that is good. (Which is why I'd encourage any of you out there to make sure that your rectors/pastors have a day of Sabbath each week other than Sunday, because that's work!)

But compassion supercedes every system. It trumps every rule. Any system that has no place for compassion becomes rigid, and eventually brittle. And when things start to shake (see the section above) things that are brittle will shatter.

I once had a man who was working to renovate part of the rectory where I would soon live cut off a part of his thumb while I was working in another part of the building. (He didn't know the difference between a ripping blade and a cross-cut blade on a table saw, or how to use them.) I heard the scream, loaded him into my car and drove him to the hospital down the Meadowbrook Parkway at nearly 100 miles per hour to our tier three trauma center. Sometimes compassion trumps the rules.

Keeping a system open to the work of compassion isn't easy. It means that I have to be more thoughtful. I can't fall back on my system quite as automatically as I might like. But if I don't, my system won't stand up over time, and a lot of people will suffer needlessly.

What's a rule that you think we need to hold open to the influence of compassion sometimes?