

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 23, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7 (track one)

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 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. 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. (ESV)

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c (omitted verses in italics) (track two)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, “Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” *So Naaman went in and told his lord, “Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.” And the king of Syria said, “Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel.”*

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.”

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.” So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha’s house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.” But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.” (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 17:11–19

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Jeremiah text (track one)

I wish that the lectionary choosers had assigned Psalm 137 to this week rather than last. It really feels to me as though it fits better here than with the reading from Lamentations. Last week it echoed or amplified the lament over the “lonely widow” Jerusalem, but here it would lend much greater context to the reading from Jeremiah. Oh, it begins well enough, with the well known verses, “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,” and “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” But it concludes with some verses that will make most of us cringe.

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare,
down to its foundations!”
O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you
with what you have done to us!
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!

Into that sentiment Jeremiah is called to send a word of correction. “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.” On second thought, perhaps that word of correction is better heard at a week’s remove from the bitterness of last week’s psalm. It might not be heard at all in the midst of that spirit of vengeance.

Because that is what it is. What it was. As beautiful as the opening phrases of psalm 137 are, they are misunderstood if taken out of context (as they often are) and the thirst for bloody revenge is excised from them. I probably should have written on Psalm 137 last week, but I haven’t made a pattern of including the psalms for each Sunday, and I skipped an important one.

Still, the discussion of Psalm 137 fits better alongside our study of Jeremiah 29, this week, so maybe not too much is lost.

Because the prophet speaks to the spirit of the people in Babylon, to the spirit of vengeance. Before he can remind them of the hope of return that the Lord has already sent (back in chapter 24) he must confront their desire to see vengeance on the Babylonians. In this pattern I can see some of the progress of the bereaved I have been given to counsel over the years. In the first moments you are given words of comfort in the face of the sense of shock and dislocation the bereaved feels (hope in chapter 24) but at some point as the shock wears off anger arises. The other driver, the doctors, the person who caused this somehow, they must be punished. And the counselor is given the delicate task of turning aside that spirit of vengeance. This isn’t to say that no one would be held accountable, but that is not really what this spirit cries out for. It wants pain for pain.

And the Lord speaks through Jeremiah and says, “seek their welfare” and “pray on their behalf.”

I am reminded of Jesus, reading from Isaiah 61, in Luke 4, and how ill received His words were.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18–19, ESV)

You remember. After that sermon the people of Nazareth were ready to throw Him down a hill. Probably a very steep one. And why? Because He left off the last verse, “The day of vengeance of our God.”

I’ll confess that I have occasionally found myself wishing for terrible things to happen to some who have done harm or who continue to do harm to others. I am almost never one of those who suffers such harm, I fall into too many of the dominant social groups myself. Still, I find myself daydreaming of such vengeance on behalf of others from time to time. And this week I am reminded that this is not of God.

I recall, 39 years later as if it were yesterday, my first time being confronted by this truth. It was shortly after two Russian fighter pilots had shot down a Korean Air Lines passenger plane that had inadvertently wandered into Russian airspace. I was sitting alone in our living room, stewing over the whole thing and wishing unimaginable ill on those two pilots and those who’d given them the order to fire the missiles. Sitting there on the couch, staring bleakly ahead I heard the Lord speak more clearly and decisively than I have ever heard, before or since. “Jeff, those men are my children too.” Those gentle words hit like a thunderbolt and they still bring tears of repentance to my eyes.

These weren’t Jeremiah’s first words to the exiles. His first words were words of hope and comfort. But at a time of God’s choosing came the caution against that spirit of vengeance. It isn’t often a welcome word, but it is of God.

How does this caution ring discordantly in your ears? Or perhaps cordantly? (I’m sure that’s not a word, but it sounded fun.)

2 Kings text (track two)

I wonder what it is about this reading that our “Lectoneers” (Thank you reader, for that funny appellation.) think it’s important enough to include twice, not only in the same year, (Year C) but only 14 weeks apart from one another? Yes, we had this reading, with only minor changes in the verses included, back in Proper 9, though in track one instead of track two. In that lection, they left off the next verse, which is the real point of the story, wherein Naaman returns to Elisha to declare that, indeed, there is no other god in the world but Elisha’s God. A strange choice of verse to leave off.

This week, we get the proper ending, but they left out the verses that tell us of the Syrian king’s letter to the king of Israel (and the gifts he sent with it) which, read without them, leaves us asking, “Wait? What letter? Why is the king so upset?” Honestly. This is one of those times my daughter would be texting me, “smh”. (Shaking My Head.)

Now that I have that bit of whining out of my system, I have to admit that, having thought and prayed about this text for a while, I just don't have anything better to say about it than I did 14 weeks ago, so, with your kind indulgence, I'll just copy and paste the comments from Proper 9 in here, rather than link them and send you off somewhere else.

(Copied from Proper 9)

When I first wrote about this story of Naaman and Elisha, I was focused, perhaps too much, on the cure and its simplicity. Now that I've studied this narrative more closely, there are many things about it I missed first time around.

The first thing to mention is that the text we have as part of the lectionary isn't the whole story. It misses Naaman's response to his healing, which seems like the real point of the story, and it overlooks the actions of Gehazi, Elisha's faithless servant, which set both Elisha's and Naaman's actions in sharp contrast.

The change in Naaman's attitude from the opening of the story to its conclusion is stark. He is a great man, a "man of substance" at the beginning. The narrator goes to considerable lengths to describe his fame and the reasons for it. The writer contrasts his renown with the person who leads him to his healing, a lowly servant girl. The king who sends Naaman to Samaria assumes that the prophet of whom he has heard is somehow beholden to the king of Samaria, for in his letter he doesn't even mention the prophet, just asks the king to heal his military leader.

When finally Naaman finds his way to Elishah, the prophet refuses to see him, dealing with him only through a messenger, an intermediary. Elisha does not acknowledge the elevated position of Naaman, but he does send instructions on how he must be cured. Naaman, the elevated general of Syria's armies, is offended. He had expected to receive his healing "at the prophet's hand." He goes on to disparage the waters of Israel, of the Jordan.

When his servants talk him into trying what was instructed, and when he is healed, having "flesh like a young boy" (a link to the young girl servant whose word set all this in motion), Naaman returns to Elisha, his heart changed as thoroughly as his skin. He comes without pomp or retinue, he offers a gift (which Elisha declines to accept) and declares his devotion to Yahweh, asking forgiveness in advance for pretending to worship his master's God, which Elisha grants. It's really regrettable that we don't get to hear this part of the story in church on Sunday.

The tale goes on to speak of Gehazi, who goes off after Naaman to try to claim some of the "gift" that Elisha had refused. Naaman treats him with deference (getting down out

of his chariot to speak to him) and gives him this gift. Gehazi's behavior serves as a foil to that of Naaman, the faithless Israelite against the faithful foreigner and proselyte. Elisha's response is to curse him with the same disease from which Naaman had been delivered.

It is unfortunate that our Sunday lection truncates all of this, as it turns a story of redemption into something else entirely.

Second Reading

Oh, how easy it would be to take those verses that Paul appears to quote in today's text from Timothy as a simple description of what heaven holds for those who believe (and for those who don't!). Goodness knows I've heard it done too often. Certain Christians are much too fond of quoting the verse that says He will deny those who deny Him.

And yet it's not too hard to understand why folks would turn to that interpretation when all the benefits of trusting in Jesus and the Gospel He brought have been pushed off into a distant afterlife by most Christian thinking.

But that isn't how Paul thinks at all. For him and for most of the Christians he knew in the first century all those things that he named as the results of dying and enduring are present realities. Yes, he speaks them in the future tense so as to make the cause/result relationship clear, but the future result is for him instantaneous.

Remember, this is the same Paul who wrote:

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:8–10, ESV)

Dying with Jesus yields resurrection life, but in the here and now.

Enduring with Jesus places us even now in positions of heavenly authority, positions that allow us to declare healing and restoration and forgiveness.

So yes, if we deny Jesus, if we deny the power of His death and resurrection, we are denied that authority. We cannot, in the here and now, live resurrection life. The two halves are inextricably entangled. But this has nothing to do with one's eternal salvation. It has to do with living joyfully and powerfully the life we have today. Paul believed that, and he knew that Timothy did too. He didn't know he had to be cautious about later Christians turning his words into a litmus test for admission into heaven.

The questions that leaves with us are, “How are we experiencing resurrection life? How are we reigning with Him? Where are we seeing power and authority in our walk?”

Gospel Text

There is so much more to being “made well” than just having the illness go away.

First of all, the verb used for being made well is “saved.” That’s how it’s often translated. But because the meaning of “saved” has been so distorted by so many Christians for so long, we get “made well” instead. They could have said, “made whole,” too. All of those are correct and none is really adequate apart from the others.

The point here is that the one who came back, the Samaritan, had already been healed. It says that in the verses above, but the law requires something more. That someone declare that he has been saved/made well/made whole. That was the role of the priests if someone had recovered from leprosy. But this man no longer needed that declaration to know he’d been restored. He came back and offered praise at Jesus’ feet because he knew, he *knew* that he was whole. His faith that this was true was all that was necessary.

One other quick note on this passage before I sermonize for a moment. Jesus told the ten to go and show themselves to the priests, and they went. It wasn’t until they were on the way that they discovered they’d been healed. There was faith in the leaving before there was evidence of the healing. The healing accompanied that faith. But the other nine did not have the faith to know that they were also “whole” apart from the priests’ declarations.

This passage feels so much like Sunday mornings to me. We jointly, like the ten, stand before God and cry out, “Lord, have mercy!” And I stand before them and say, “You are whole! Go your way!” The world around us is dying for lack of voices that can say with faith, “You are whole! Go your way!” I am set aside for the purpose of saying that in the church, in a liturgical context, but the rest of the congregation is sent out to say it to the rest of the world.

I have said this before and I’ll say it again and again until I die. The main reason that the world can’t deal honestly with its failings is that it, the world, doesn’t really believe in forgiveness, in their own forgiveness. And so they/we go on carrying around loads of condemnation, mostly hidden, and that burden turns us bitter and hard and causes us to harm one another even more, only adding to the guilt.

We have many healers among us. Doctors, nurses, therapists, all sorts. But few of them feel empowered to also declare, “You are saved, go your way.” And so, going back to our reading from 2 Timothy this week, too many, even too many Christians fail to grasp the enormity of Who He is and what He’s done and they’re denied the enormity of the resurrection life and authority that are theirs.