

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 24, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 31:27–34 (track one)

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say:

“‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

But everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (ESV)

Genesis 32:22–31 (track two)

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed

him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 18:1–8

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Jeremiah text (track one)

This is surely one of the most well known of the passages from Jeremiah. Through the prophet God speaks of restoration, but even more encouragingly, of a New Covenant. After chapter upon chapter of devastation with only a hint here and there of hope, in the midst of that desolation, Jeremiah's heart is fully attuned to the God Who Saves. What was not founded on God's goodness has collapsed and the task of rebuilding begins.

As a side note, it is worth our attention that we are not promised that we will be spared the consequences of our actions. Those who eat sour grapes will still have their teeth set on edge. The difference is that this is no longer to be understood as punishment, as a curse that passes from generation to generation. Still, actions still have their consequences.

But the real focus here is the New Covenant. The Law will no longer be an external thing, under which we labor, but it will be graven on our hearts, it will spring up from within. Paul spoke of this when he taught that we were no longer imprisoned under the law, the guardian until Christ came. Under the New Covenant we will "know the Lord" and God's commandments will live and breathe as part of us, they will flow from us like living water to thirsty souls.

And here is the part that I hope takes your breath away as it does mine. We will know the Lord because of this one thing. Because God forgives our iniquity and remembers our sin no more. That - that one thing - that is the key to knowing the Lord and discovering God's law writ in our hearts.

I love the study of the Bible. I'm not all that great at memorizing it, but I know a lot of it. And yet there is only one thing out of it that I absolutely need to know in order to know the Lord. That I am forgiven. That my sins are less real to God than a fleeting memory. If I know that, if that reality is truly etched into my heart, then the love of God and neighbor that is the first commandment will come pouring through. I will have the courage to see my failings and bring them before the Cross as well as the grace to cast my crowns at Jesus' feet.

But it boils down to the one thing. Forgiveness. To the Cross. To the Blood of the New Covenant shed for us, the Blood which cleanses us of all unrighteousness. This radical, inescapable forgiveness reveals the very heart of God. Everything else is footnotes. It is so absurd that Paul described this truth as as “a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Greeks.”

We could spend our lives contemplating the enormity of the Cross and never fully plumb its meaning. Even so, I do well to return to it again and again, to stumble over its truth and laugh with God at its foolishness, and in so doing, know God. And know God’s ways.

Thank you God, for Jeremiah.

Genesis text (track two)

Our text for track two this week is also well known, the story of Jacob wrestling with the “man” at the ford of Jabbok. He is returning after having fled his brother Esau. When he becomes aware that Esau is approaching with his retainers, Jacob sends all that are his away to keep them safe and sleeps alone, at which point the “man” comes to wrestle with him. This story is known in part for the many “origins” that spring from it. Jacob’s new name (Israel), his well known limp, the injunction against eating the meat of the thigh, the place name, Peniel.

A question that has occupied students of this text for some time is the identity of the person with whom Jacob wrestles. Is he an “angel” as many ancient interpreters decided? Is he some other supernatural creature? Is it God? Some have suggested that it is Esau, come to confront his brother. Another I read about thought that this was Jacob wrestling with himself, confronting his old, “trickster” self, his dishonest self, as he begins to take up his new, patriarchal identity.

Of those possible identities, the last is the most intriguing to me this week. It is the one I’d never heard before, the one I’d never considered. And yet it makes a great deal of sense to me when I consider the great shift in direction that Jacob’s life takes from this moment. If I had not read it, I would probably be focused here on the value of being persistent in seeking our own blessings. I know that’s what I’ve written or preached before. And there is still some value to be seen here in doggedness. But doggedness is wrestling with who we’ve been, allowing ourselves to be wounded by the reality of what we’ve done and still hanging on to find the new life, the blessing that this confrontation contains.

Of all the possible identities for the man in this story, this suggestion has the greatest potential to bring me to repentance, I think. Repentance and the blessings it offers.

Second Reading

Well, how do I move from “everything else is footnotes” (Jeremiah Divergence) to “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Indeed. If the New Covenant is written on my heart, why study the Scriptures at all?

Well, first of all, it’s because in the Scriptures, in that passage from Jeremiah above, that I find the key to all the others. That same key can be found again and again in both the Old and New Testaments. The more we learn to read with our redemption through Jesus as our lexicon, the more easily we come to discover the riches that the rest of Scripture holds.

Secondly, the study of, the contemplation of Scripture becomes a place of meeting for us. A place wherein God can speak to our hearts in a more direct way. As we study the texts they begin to resonate with both the music and the discord in our own lives and make them easier to discern and to understand. This is the great value of *Lectio Divina*. This method of reading a relatively short passage over and over, and allowing ourselves to hear God speaking directly to us through it, this method draws us into ever greater intimacy with our Divine Lover and makes us better representatives, better “re-presenters” of Them.

I hear many things, reading Scripture. I test them all against the truth revealed in this week’s reading from Jeremiah. If they ring harmoniously with that truth, I know them to be of God. If they don’t, they still teach me, but they teach me about myself. This is the “reproof” of which Paul speaks. Not condemnation, just learning a new place in myself that isn’t yet in concord with Who God Is. (Revealing the “one” with whom I must wrestle?)

As to the second half of our reading from 2 Timothy, well, that’s why I write this each week. I have that call on my own life, to keep pointing back to the first Truth, to try to peel away the accretions that have become attached to the Gospel over the centuries and reveal its glory and majesty again in my own small way.

It is far too easy to look at the radical simplicity of the Gospel, of the Cross, and say, “Well, yes, but...” Our ears itch for conditions to put upon it, for limits with which to fence it in. But we, we who have felt our hearts burn as Jesus opened to us the Scriptures, we have one task, to continue in “the work of the evangelist,” and proclaim a stumbling block and foolishness.

Gospel Text

Understanding this parable of Jesus, at least as I believe He meant us to understand it, requires such a shift in point of view that I had to get up and walk away from the keyboard for a good while before coming back to it. Even after years of having this other viewpoint as part of my spiritual tool box, it still takes effort to find it and put it into use. It's clear that I need to take it out more often.

The difficulty I have is that, along with many too many Christians, I have years and years of reading this parable of "The Persistent Widow" (that's what it's entitled in my ESV) as though it had anything at all to do with persistence, of striving, in prayer. It's an awful habit and even after preaching on this passage every three years for my whole career I still have to find my way out of that quagmire before I can get to real Gospel.

I know I'm not alone in this. I've been in services and meetings time and again during which we were encouraged to "storm heaven" with our prayers as though some assault on the Kingdom could somehow force a change in God's mind. Be like the widow. Be better than the widow! Pray with faith! Don't give up!

Trying to find Gospel in that is like trying to drive a finishing nail with the ball end of a ball peen hammer. I need that other tool.

Gospel turns our old ways of doing things and thinking things on their heads, and the reading of this parable is no different. This is not about "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Well, it almost is, but what we're to try is absolutely opposite of what the widow tries.

The first mistake we make most of the time with this parable is assume that Jesus intends us to think that our relationship to God is remotely like the widow's to the unjust judge, one who will hear her petitions if she just pesters him long enough. Once we fall into that ditch, it's very difficult to see beyond its edge to the Gospel.

The key to avoiding that ditch is the widow's cry, "Vindicate me!" Perhaps more revealing is another way to translate that, "Declare me righteous!" And that is where the new tool's handle begins to show in the tool box. Because God has already declared us righteous. The Cross is the court order declaring God's victory over my unrighteousness. It is finished. The battle won. The court case is concluded.

So I am no longer a petitioner asking to be vindicated. I am empowered to take my vindication to the streets and minister in the full assurance that my vindication, and that of every person I meet, is already accomplished. I hold up the document declaring it and command that the enemy release his hold on me and anyone else whom he tries to cheat. Is there disease? I take authority over it and speak vindication over the one who suffers. Is there oppression? I declare the vindication of the oppressed to the oppressor. I declare release. I declare what is already true in the eyes of heaven and command the brokenness of the world to conform to that truth.

I don't pray *for* vindication, I pray *from* a place of vindication. I don't pray *for* victory, I pray *from* a place of victory.

And that's where I have failed, perhaps more of late, and why I struggled to get a handle on this text again. It is hard for me to continue to pray as though victory is already mine when what I see around me doesn't look like that. I get discouraged, I feel foolish, I quit. I still do pray the way I know I can from time to time. And I see the power of that sort of prayer, the prayer of real faith. But I don't always, and I don't often enough that I find myself going back to my trusty ball peen hammer and crying out, "Vindicate me!" again, or "Vindicate them!" as though it weren't already true. Sticking to that truth, praying from that truth, that's the faith that the Son of Man hopes to find in me when He comes.

And that's the reproof that Paul talks about to Timothy in the lesson above. No condemnation, just Jesus pointing out to me a place in my life that I can bring more closely into alignment with Him and His purposes for me.