



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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A Story about God and Us

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 22, 2015
The Fifth Sunday in Lent: Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33*

Though written 2700 years ago, the little piece we heard from the book of the prophet Jeremiah tells a story about God and us. It is amazing how that can be true, but it is. Humankind has forever engaged in a complicated dance of not only trying to understand God but to please God. The storied history of our faith consists of a mixture of God's desire to be in relationship with us, our genuine inclination—perhaps inherent in our creation—to know and follow God, set alongside and in some opposition to our apparently inevitable desires to live not in God's heart but somehow unto ourselves. The result is an age-old cycle of knowing God, failing to follow the ways of God, falling into disasters of one sort or another (often understood as God's retribution), and then returning to God—a return which immediately commences yet another round of the same process. Though an outsider might conclude that it hasn't worked very well, it hasn't been for the lack of trying on anyone's part.

The setting to which Jeremiah referred was a moment of such reckoning. They had had many of these, of what we, though certainly not they, might call "come to Jesus moments," moments when they were dramatically called back to covenant with God. Although there is no agreement on the precise date of this writing, there is full assent that the context of it is the fall of Israel to the Babylonians. For many years the people of God had lived as a vassal to one overlord or another. The first Babylonian invasion had occurred in 598; it was completed with the destruction of the Temple and the removal of most Israelites to Babylon in 587 BCE. Sometime in the midst of these events, even though without a doubt knowing that there was no improvement in sight, that exilic living was a certainty, Jeremiah poetically assured his people, attributing to God these words, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Today we are presented this story alongside a gospel lesson, which moves us ever closer to Jerusalem, the setting for the events we shall recall during Holy Week, beginning just a week from today. These approaching events, so close to the heart of what we understand as the culmination of the Jesus story, are thematically part of this very old narrative described by Jeremiah, one which is in fact reflective of the eternal search within us as humans to know what it means to be moral and good people. If we read the story only as an account of God's desire to live in covenant with God's people as understood by ourselves or if we read the narrative of Jesus' completion of the story only as a path of salvation for those who follow Jesus, we shall miss the larger story and thereby settle, albeit somewhat satisfyingly at the moment, for a sectarian view of what is in fact a call for all people everywhere to flourish. There is nothing wrong with sectarianism, not really, not as long as it is understood as the path of a particular group's opening to the whole world. It becomes deadly, rapidly and thoroughly, only when its particularities are narrowly defined as prescriptive for all rather than understood as the vehicle to universal truths about common life and common good.

These treasured and important stories indeed define us, giving us our identity, assigning us our tribe, providing us the creedal formulations for our religious practice. But in fact they do much more than that. If we read and understand them in their richness, they provide us the heart to live fully and well in a global and pluralistic world that was unimaginable to our forebears, unimaginable to Jeremiah, even to the historical Jesus. It is this way in which our sacred scripture remains sacred—by being ever truer, deeper, wider, more universal than its own heroes could ever perceive.

Walter Brueggemann *, in my opinion our era's finest Christian scholar of Hebrew scripture, reacts to this passage from Jeremiah as an oracle about our life now in 21st century America. In the spirit of the prophets about whom he writes so convincingly, Brueggemann offends a few with his brutal assessment of where we are, particularly his comments about the state of race relations in light of the events in Ferguson, seeing them as deeply representative of the entire nation. In fact, he makes me squirm uncomfortably; and for that I thank him. He speaks of the power class's illusion of widespread well-being as a technique to justify their/our self-indulgent satisfaction with the way things are, claiming that the very good life for a very few inevitably and forever falls short of the glory of God.

Further he contends that until the powerful can admit their immoderation, there cannot be a thoroughly successful society for any of us. He reminds us that the law written on the hearts of the people of God, not rejected by Jesus but fully embraced, is a law that contains in it the ineluctable command for justice, which he defines as a "life lived toward the neighbor." He writes, "We have, like ancient Israel, been on a binge of narcissistic self-indulgence. In our realism, however, we know that a sustainable social life requires attentiveness to neighbor. Torah obedience is not a narrow moralism. It is rather realism and readiness about what is required for society to work in life-flourishing ways." Hard to hear, but I think worthy of a serious response.

To follow the theme of my sermon last week, Jesus did not come just to be our personal Lord and Savior. In my opinion, if on any level we have concluded that the events which we shall recall with painful detail over the next two weeks occurred only to make us a collection of happy Easter Christians, content with our good lives and deep convictions, insipid in our certainty and optimism, we have learned nothing through the years. The facts on the ground do not support the exceptionalism we claim about our faith or our nation. Though not a call to be filled with doom and gloom, the age-old story of our salvation is that until health, well-being, justice, and goodness are available to all, there cannot be genuine rejoicing for any of us. We don't like to hear that. It is much more comfortable to think that our religious life is personal and individual, all about our sense of interior wholeness, spiritual contentment, and freedom from anxiety. Being quite restrained, all I can say to that is that is hogwash, and we know it. Our faith is not about living in a celestial spa but in the rough and tumble reality of hard choices in the real world.

Now, unlike Jeremiah I do not believe, and I don't imagine that Walter Brueggemann does either, that God will smack us as a nation or a culture or a people back into line. That's a bit too Pat Robertson for my taste. But I do believe that until we can begin to foster and embrace a spirit of "inexplicable generosity" toward the other, other defined much more broadly than our comfort and prejudices easily invite, there can be no joy of Easter.

It is never just about us; it is always about the whole world, the generalized other. Lent calls us to get honest about that, to admit our shortcomings, individual and communal, and to turn again to a God who never fails to forgive, who never fails—not once—to welcome us home from whatever exile we have encountered. It's time—time for us to come home to the truth, for the God of the universe awaits us.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

*Taken from "Ferguson and Forgiveness," by Walter Brueggemann, ON Scripture, Odyssey Network