

Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

15th Sunday after Pentecost

“Drifting from Deliverance”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 2:4-13

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

28 August 2016

**“You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image
when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do”**

-- Anne Lamott.

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Hear the day’s lesson:

4 Hear the word of the Lord, O HOUSE of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 5 Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

6 They did not say, “Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?” 7 I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

8 The priests did not say, “Where is the Lord?” Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. 9 Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children’s children.

10 Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. 11 Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.

12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, 13 for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:4-13).

This lesson from Jeremiah is complicated and in some ways obscure for many of us. For this reason may we focus on verses 12 and 13 of Jeremiah 2. Do not worry—we won’t shortchange Jeremiah as he will lead us in worship the next 5 or 6 Sundays. Today our focus is on the people’s penchant for chasing after other gods. In the long history of the Jewish/Christian faith we have called this chasing or lusting after other gods “idolatry.” I am going to try and address three primary questions this morning:

What is this text about?

What difference does this lesson make or should make in my/our life?

Now, what do we do with God's claims on us with respect to Jeremiah 2?

So as we begin we ask **first**: What is this text about? It is about worshipping an idol or idolatry. But what is idolatry? Idolatry is . . . according to Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, a British pastor: “. . . anything in my life that occupies a place that should be occupied by God alone. . . . An idol is something that holds such a controlling position in my life that it moves and rouses and attracts me so easily that I give my time, attention, and money to it effortlessly.” Bluntly, an idol is whatever/whoever we surrender our life's central principles. It is that thing or person which controls our lives and hearts. Our worship or being controlled by an entity means we are at its mercy—and sometimes we know it and sometimes we do not. What dominates our adoration and worship dominates our lives.

Rebecca Pippert says, “Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by acceptance. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives.” Curiously enough idolatry is a vast human problem with a long history. So much so that the first two of the ten commandments are aimed at the human fondness for idolatry. Do you remember the principal commandment from Deuteronomy 5:6-7? It reads: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:6-7).

Jesus' parable, the “rich fool,” implies that anything that replaces God as a person's ultimate concern enters a gateway to idolatry. Although Jesus does not use the explicit words “idol” or “idolatry,” in the parable's translation we recognize that idolatry is the issue. In this parable barns become symbolic of mammon or money in Luke's telling about a rich, foolish man. Augustine once sagely said: “Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped.”

Our lesson from Jeremiah concludes with these words: “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be

shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:4-13). Jeremiah says the people have discarded God and—using the metaphor of digging our cisterns—have formed idols that can do the people no good. This lesson is about idolatry.

Second, then, what difference does this lesson make or should make in my/our life? Perhaps not beguiled by abundant false gods like the Israelites, we do in the twenty-first century nevertheless face any number of false deities. You ask, like what for example? And the answer could be—materialism, love of leisure, sensuality, worship of self, security, and many others. As pointed out a moment ago, the first and second commandments address idolatry. Maybe we are too modern to relate to this reality, that is, unless we embrace life aims which involve something other than God. What is the object of our concerns, our labors, and our devotion? Where do we spend our time? On what kinds of pursuits do we spend our resources?

James Packer (*Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986) once wrote: What other gods could we have besides the Lord? Plenty. For Israel there were the Canaanite Baals, those jolly nature gods whose worship was a rampage of gluttony, drunkenness, and ritual prostitution. For us there are still the great gods Sex, Shekels, and Stomach (an unholy trinity constituting one god: self), and the other enslaving trio, Pleasure, Possessions, and Position, whose worship is described as “The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

Football, the Firm, and Family are also gods for some. Indeed the list of other gods is endless, for anything that people allow to run their lives becomes the god and the claimants for this prerogative are legion. In the matter of life’s basic loyalty, temptation is a many-headed monster.

Finally and **third**, what do we do with God’s claims on us with respect to Jeremiah 2? The text of Jeremiah 2 warns the people not to turn away from the creator and liberator God who has given them everything. This God not only created them, but also brought them up out of the land of bondage and led them to the land of promise! Jeremiah warns that human beings can easily lose perspective, what with all of the enticing and luring temptations that lurk in the world to trip

us up. Jesus himself once said: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Consequently if we keep our perspective of who God was, is, and will be for us—then everything else will take care of itself. Perspective is the key to a balanced and godly life.

When I was a little kid, my Grandmother taught me a little saying titled, “For Want of a Nail.” This little ditty teaches folks like us the significance of small choices, which often have large outcomes.

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe reminds us: “We are shaped and fashioned by what we love.” It may seem like a small choice, but it is not. Amen.