

When We Lose Sight of God

14th Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - 09/15/2019

Psalm Reading: 14

1st Reading: 1 Tim. 1:12-17, 2nd: Jeremiah 4:11, 12, 14, 18, 22-28

This has been a very difficult sermon to write, because the theme of it is: what happens to us when we try to live without God in our lives. I find it a dark and serious subject. It is a proposition that is hard to contemplate and therefore hard to talk about.

What prompted me to choose this subject was immersing myself in the imagery presented from our lectionary offering from Jeremiah 4:23-26. Listen to the words and see if they do not make you feel empty and hollow and sad and even a bit queasy ...

"I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking, all the hills were swaying. I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger."

To me, this is an image of a land without God. It is a metaphor for a soul that does not know the comfort, love, and support of God. I think it is where we ultimately end up when we forsake the Lord.

Now you know me, I am naturally an optimist. So it is hard for me accept that the kind of wasteland described here could be the fate of any person, any community, any world.

At this depressing point in writing this sermon, on Friday, the rain came pouring down in torrents. And I decided to walk out into the narthex and watch through the front doors as the rain fell in sheets. But then I was attracted into this sanctuary, and in here you can hear the rain beat on the roof, and suddenly I felt happy and comforted. It reminded me of when I was a boy, twelve or thirteen. My dad had a pickup truck with a camper shell on the back. It was a green 1973 Chevy I think. And when it would rain on a summer evening my brother and I would grab our sleeping bags and a pillow and run out to the truck, dodging the raindrops, climb in the back and spend the night listening to the rain beating on the roof of the camper shell and talk about life, what were our plans for tomorrow and the next day.

We loved to listen to that rhythm, that tattoo of water droplets hitting the camper shell. I think it was because we felt safe and warm in there and we could sense that we were protected by that shell that was impervious to the falling water. I felt that same feeling of comfort and protection when I walked into the sanctuary and heard the rainfall, and it made me realize that this roof is like our God. It protects us from the elements, just as our faith, our God, protects us from all that is out there that would destroy us, including ourselves.

Verse 11 tells us that a scorching wind will blow and it will do more than winnow or cleanse. It will be a destructive force. And we are given to understand that this destruction comes upon the Kingdom of Judah because the people do not follow the rules that God lays down for them. They worship foreign Gods. It is as if they have torn down the walls and collapsed the

roof of their abode and now the wind and all the elements are allowed access to their lives. In fact, in the end, the Babylonians came from the north, and rained devastation down on the kingdom of Judah, carrying the people away to servitude in Babylon.

(Sing “By the Waters of Babylon”)

And I think this kind of destruction is not just applicable to Judah in the sixth century before Christ’s coming. We can see examples of this in history, especially the history of the 20th century, probably the most destructive century in the history of humankind. We need only look at the Second World War to think of the desolation that was created when the fascist power of Germany not only reached deep into the well of nihilism, but tried to pervert the church to its own ends and ultimately rained down destruction that nearly consumed an entire continent. And what happened when Marxist powers basically outlawed Christianity within their boundaries? It may at least have been partly the loss of the moderating influence of Christianity that allowed for the Gulag Archipelago, slave labor camps, in the Soviet Union where 3-8 millions died¹, as well as the Cultural Revolution in China where at least 2 million people lost their lives.²

In verse 18 of our reading we understand the Lord saying, *“Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces the heart!”* What is it that God is telling us here? Is God the cause of all the destruction that comes down upon us when we forsake God,

¹<https://historyofrussia.org/stalin-killed-how-many-people/>

²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/the-cultural-revolution-50-years-on-all-you-need-to-know-about-chinas-political-convulsion>

when we try to live without God? This is a hard question and it leads us to ponder God's roll with regard to evil in the world. My own understanding is that we have a determinist God. Though God wants nothing but good for us, it is our own actions and our own wandering from God that aligns with what God knows will happen. As this verse tells us, our own sin and the evil that springs from it is bitter. Yes, it is bitter. It does pierce to the heart, but I think this passage is also telling us that it pierces God to the heart. So when we wander from God we strain our relationship with God, not from God's side, but from our side.

We can see this from a practical perspective in verse 22, *"My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* We can see this by considering what happens when we decide to stop obeying the simple rules that God has laid out for us. We can just take a few of the Ten Commandments as an example. Number 10, when we covet the things of others it is a sin. And I should clarify what coveting is and is not. Coveting is not seeing a nice bicycle that someone has and thinking you would like to have one too. Coveting is seeing that bicycle and thinking about how you could ride off with that one if you could cut the bike lock off with a bolt cutter when the owner is inside the coffee shop down on Second Avenue. Such thoughts lead to action. Which leads us to another commandment, the eighth, do not steal. If we all stole from each other, what kind of dog eat dog world would we end up creating for ourselves? ...and all this by breaking down our relationship with God and with each other.

And this picture of a wasteland that Jeremiah paints is not merely a physical reality. It becomes a spiritual reality for us as well. For when we give up on God, our lives become empty and meaningless, and this is the very definition of “nihilism”.³ When we think we can do without God, we find that without the relationship with our creator that we are driven to acquire and experience things that can never fulfill us, while in God we may find all the comfort and love that we need to sustain us through the good times and the bad.

So, in essence, when we forsake God, we are the ones who end up creating the wasteland, the wasteland in which we may live, and the wasteland which could be our soul. In verses 27 and 28 we can read, *“The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark...”*

But even should the worst happen, not everything will be destroyed, because no matter how bad we may screw things up God still extends a hand to us. No matter how hard we try to sever our relationship with God, God remains in relationship with us. God will continue to offer to be our God. The last two lines of our reading sound ominous and harsh. God says, *“I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back.”* But what is it that God will not relent from? What is it that God will not turn back from? Is it the destruction of Israel? Is it the destruction of God’s people? God charted a course for the universe when God spoke the world into existence. God made a covenant with Noah, and made a covenant with the Israelites when they left Egypt. God made a covenant with us

3 <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/nihilism>

when God sent Jesus Christ to redeem us. I think here we might understand that God is not going to relent, will not turn back from us, God will not give up on us.

And if we look back at history, we can see that this is surely true. Christ came after the writings and events of Jeremiah's time. God continues to give us chance after chance. I think God is, indeed, like the camper shell on my Dad's pickup truck when I was a boy. We were kept protected from the wet, we were protected from the cold. We were comforted in the knowledge that because that roof was over our heads we could weather the storm. Yes, God is like this roof over our heads right now. It shelters us from the wind and the rain and it will shelter us from the heavy snows of our northern winters. Even if we run out from under it, it will still be there, always up there, over our heads protecting us as long as we remain under it.

Please put yourselves in a posture for prayer...Eternal God, in spite of our sin, in spite of our wanderings from you, you remain in relationship with us. We may weather the storm and go out from under your roof. We may stray far from you, but we know you are always there to be with us, to protect us.

Wherever we forget you, wherever we ignore your call to us, whether it is a physical place or in our hearts, it becomes a barren waste.

Lord lead us to your bountiful garden that we may live in peace and harmony with ourselves, with each other and with the world.

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