

Leaving the Land of Plenty
Jeremiah 2:1-13
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“O [you] sinner[s]! Consider the fearful danger you are in: ’tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell; you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.”

Yes, my friends, you are, like the people of Israel in Jeremiah’s time, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” the title of that famous sermon I just quoted, written by the eighteenth century revivalist preacher, Jonathan Edwards. It is not often that I get the urge to preach fire and brimstone, and about the “bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath,” but there is just something about the prophets that brings it out in me. I guess that hearing about the sin, idolatry, and faithlessness of the Israelites reminds me of your sin, idolatry, and faithlessness, and I feel the need to hold your souls over the very flames of hell, and give them a

nice little roasting. So, how does it feel, you great mass of sinners? Is it getting a little warm in here?

The truth is, actually, that I find preaching to you about the prophets to be quite challenging. Yes, you are sinners, to be sure – we all are – but in spite of that, your faithfulness and focus on God are really quite commendable, and you live out the Gospel in very gracious and generous ways. You are quite aware of the dangers of idolatry, and do your best to avoid them. You teach the faith very well to your children. When you wake up in the morning, you never forget to ask, “Where is the Lord?” To preach on the prophets at ECF is like preaching to the choir. I feel like I sound quite trite trotting out these passages about God’s condemnation of a faithless people in the midst of a very faithful people. It sounds quite hollow too, to rant and rave about an idolatrous nation and its leaders, as Jeremiah does in his declaration of God’s displeasure with an entire nation and its leaders, when we are just one church in a country that doesn’t even recognize us as a legitimate faith community, and we can’t vote anyway.

And yet, the prophets are a part of the Bible we ignore at our peril, even in times of relative faithfulness and relative justice. You see, even if we are ninety percent faithful, there is still that ten percent. Even if we are faithfully tithing when the offering basket goes around, there is still a little more in our pockets we could pull out. Even when our Biblical knowledge is expansive, there are always more ways to apply that knowledge. If all of that sounds like the pursuit of an

unattainable spiritual perfection, so be it. The point is not to exhaust you with a never ending marathon of spiritual exercise, provoked by a guilt trip that you are never doing enough for God, but rather that in the absence of a pointed reminder every once in a while of the dangers of the neglect of our continuing faithfulness, that neglect comes to fruition in a way which then calls out for the return of Jonathan Edwards and his chastisement of us as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and I really don’t preach that kind of sermon very well.

I suppose that is a very long introduction to tonight’s message from Jeremiah, in which we find the nation of sinners in the hands of, at the very least, a disappointed, if not angry, God. The tone in this first condemnation of the nation’s bad behavior is closer to lament, recalling the way a beautiful relationship began, only to see it fall into ruins through neglect. “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.” But then you cheated on me, God says in so many words, and chased after worthless things, turning your backs on the God who brought you into a plentiful land. There is a great irony in God’s choice of the images of idolatry. You see, this is a people who will soon be forced to leave their land of plenty; they will be defeated by their enemies, and forcibly relocated to another country. But God lays it all at their feet; you are a people who have already left the land of plenty. I gave it to you, but you abandoned it when you forsook me, when you dug your own cisterns, and forgot about the living water. And now the joke’s on you, because

that cistern you dug, that tank on which you wasted your effort, is cracked and holds nothing, neither rain water for the dry season, nor hope for the future.

ECF will soon be celebrating its twenty-fifth birthday, a remarkable achievement in so transient a community as the expatriate community. Those of you who have not been around for all of those twenty-five years may not know that comparatively speaking, we are currently living in a land of plenty the likes of which we have never enjoyed, in terms of people, finances, building, programs, and, I like to believe, faithfulness. We are truly blessed. We have crossed the River Jordan and taken possession of the land, so to speak: “I brought you,” says the Lord, “into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.” Thanks be to God for this plentiful land. I want to stay here. How about you?

Tonight I want to suggest three traps we need to avoid to keep us from leaving the land of plenty, three temptations in our lives individually and collectively against which we need to be on guard, lest we begin digging our own cisterns instead of relying on God’s living water. The first temptation is what I would call bailing. It is a staple of Hollywood storytelling, the tale of a man who seemingly has it all, who is on top of the world, but who loses sight of what is important and trades what endures for what is fleeting. Because he is too lazy or too fearful or too blind, he refuses to do the hard work of dealing with his own demons, and leaves his wife and kids to shack up with a younger model, only to find he’s made a tragic mistake in bailing out on the ones who really love him, for

the one who really only loves herself. Sometimes he comes to his senses in time, and she takes him back. Sometimes she doesn't.

The temptation to bail, to chase after worthless things and unprofitable things, rarely comes about because the good things we currently have suddenly no longer have the same value. We may delude ourselves into believing some version of that tale, but the truth is more that over time, in our little compromises and self-justifications and indulgences, we ourselves have diminished in value, and we start looking for someone or some thing to shine us up a little, to restore our luster so that when we look in the mirror we are a little less frightened by what we see, at least momentarily. We have let ourselves slip, or have given ourselves away too easily or cheaply, and so we seek consolation in the arms of a quick fix. It is easier to blame someone else for not being who we want them to be than to become who we want to be, who God wants us to be. And so we blame, and then we bail, and then we find that we have changed our glory for something that does not profit, and that without even realizing it we have left the land of plenty, and that our return is beyond our own ability, dependent on the grace and mercy of the one we have scorned. When we have bailed it means that we have forgotten to ask, like the nation in Jeremiah's time, "Where is the Lord?" – in our marriages, in our workplaces, in our churches, in our relationships of all kinds.

At perhaps the other end of the spectrum, we have the temptation of settling, of holing up in one corner of the land of plenty and being stewards of all of its

beauty and generosity. When we settle, for second best, for a fraction of the blessings of life to which we are entitled, for safety and security, for a paycheck, for the limited love and respect we receive, we are selling ourselves, and our God, short. Once again, we fail to ask, “Where is the Lord?” – the Lord who promised abundant life, who promised joy, who promised peace. When we settle, we may experience a taste of those things, but we don’t get satisfied by them the way God wants us to be satisfied. The land God gave wasn’t a land of limited resources, but a land of plenty to be enjoyed in all of its fullness. The land we have been given is not a wilderness, full of deserts and pits and drought and darkness, a land through which no one passes, where no one lives. Our land is flowing with milk and honey, with abundance, with possibilities, with opportunities. Settling is like living in Costa Rica and never leaving San José!

If it were only the limitations of on our enjoyment of life that settling implies, that would be bad enough, but settling is a worse sin for the way it shortchanges God and the gifts God has given us. “Some gratitude,” God is saying through Jeremiah. “I gave you a land of plenty and what did you do with it but defile it?” You did not use it for the purposes I intended, to be a blessing to all, to be a light to the nations. You have kept your light under a bushel basket, to borrow a later analogy from Jesus. In this temptation of settling, the same logic applies to the faith, gifts, and relationships God has given to each of us uniquely. When we settle for having faith, and fail to exercise that faith, we have shortchanged God.

When we acknowledge that God gifts people for ministry, but fail to explore our own giftedness, we have shortchanged God. When we give thanks for the relationships God has given us, but do not cultivate them, we have shortchanged our God. Settling is the sin of denying the very glory of God.

In addition to the temptations of bailing and settling, the final temptation I would lift up tonight is the temptation of betraying. Perhaps betrayal is implied in bailing and settling, but perhaps it speaks more specifically to our willfulness, or maybe the weakness of our will. The image we are given in Jeremiah of the people actively digging their own cisterns speaks to the willfulness of betrayal. It is not as if they had to dig cisterns because the water ran out. Rather, they are digging them because they think they can provide for themselves better than God can provide for them, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Where was the water in the desert during those forty wandering years? At the end of Moses' staff, a gift from God. Where was the food in the desert? On the ground each morning waiting for them, a gift from God. But not satisfied with being supplied with all they would ever need, no matter where God led them, they sought more, betraying both gift and giver. At the heart of betrayal is not recognizing, not even remembering, where it has all come from. That's why Jeremiah says, "They did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' ", the most powerful condemnation of them all. Perhaps the cowardice of bailing can be forgiven, maybe even the denial of settling too, but not betrayal. "Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord."

Let me conclude with a story of betrayal, a story of leaving the land of plenty, in which I hope you will be able to see your own betrayals, or potential betrayals, the ones for which we must always be on guard. This story came to me in a most wonderful way, tucked into the dustcover of a book from the library of a pastor named Bill Gleditsch, whom I was honored to know during my time in Pittsburgh. After Bill died, his wife offered me first crack at his personal library, and I was grateful to have been given the opportunity. Among the books I selected was one which held this story, which quite literally fell out on the floor the other day, as if it were meant for this week, and so I offer it to you. I'm not sure if Bill wrote it or simply copied it, but here it is:

As the sun set over the ranch, one could see its cattle grazing peacefully on the pasturelands, the sheep nibbling the hillside brush, the finely cultivated rows of vegetables in the garden, and the stream of smoke which poured from the chimney of the ranch house.

On its porch in the worn rocker, dozed a robust young man, son of the mother and father for whom this earthly paradise had meant years of toil and ensuing satisfaction.

Not always a son, however. Once a stray who had wandered fatherless, toward the peaceful setting. Adopted in love as a child of the kingdom of cattle and sheep and butterflies and sunshine.

The mother knew no other endeavors than toil and sweat, no other emotion than joy. For the son she labored. For the kingdom she sacrificed without the verbal reward so often necessary.

Years passed. The father died. The ranch prospered. The mother aged. The son rocked in the well-worn ruts on the porch while slinging stones at the birds or throwing sticks for the dogs.

One sultry evening, the Mother, upon returning from the fields, lifted her weary legs up onto the porch beside the boy.

“Son, she whispered with a faint smile, “I lived that you might have life abundant.”

“Yup,” the son replied without opening his eyes.

“Son,” the mother continued, “I have met your every need.”

“Mmm,” mumbled the boy.

“Son,” pleaded his Mother, “You must promise me that you will care for our kingdom. That you will water and till and tend the fields and feed the flocks. That you will never forsake that peace and abundance...for it can be found no where else.”

“Yea, sure,” groaned the son.

Having finished the work for which she had been sent, the Mother departed.

As the years passed, the ranch deteriorated. Sheep which were not fed died. Vines which were not pruned bore no fruit. Fences which were not mended allowed outsiders to invade and plunder.

One evening as the sun set over the dying fields, and the son sat dozing on the porch, a stranger approached him.

“Man,” he said with a smirk on his face, “I will relieve you of the toils of this kingdom in exchange for a life of slumber and relaxation. I will give you thirty pieces of my finest china in exchange for your peaceable kingdom. You need never again tend flocks or bear fruit.”

Upon hearing these words, the Man opened his eyes, stood up, smiled broadly, accepted the china, began to cackle and without even a backward glance, walked down the road, out of the gate, and became lost forever in the world.

May God help us to avoid the temptations of bailing, settling, and betraying, as we enjoy the land of plenty we have been given. Amen.