

“All in All”

September 1, 2013

Jeremiah 2:4-13

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 fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" 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 none passes through, where no man dwells?' ⁷ And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in 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 Ba'al, and went after things that do not profit. ⁹ "Therefore I still contend with you, says the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend. ¹⁰ For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has 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 that which 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 waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

A common practice of conquering empires was to separate the rich, wealthy, and politically influential to new lands and leave the common people behind to be governed by trusted conquering bureaucrats. In this way powerful people were displaced, disorientated, and unable to regroup to rebel because they were so wrapped up in their survival in a new land. The commoners left behind would not really be affected as they would be essentially exchanging one government for another. The conquering empires authority would then be established. Jeremiah was a prophetic voice to the Jews in exile when the tribes of Judah were a part of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians conquered the Tribes of Judah who were at that particular point considered vassals of the failing Assyrian Empire. Jeremiah comes to prophetic power during the time of King Josiah and immediately following Josiah's death.

Why am I telling you some of this history? Well, as we study scripture it is important to know and understand where the voice of prophecy comes to us from Jeremiah and the other prophets in the First Testament. It is important to look at scripture through its own historical context and through other forms of literary criticism so that we can glean all the meaning possible from the text.

Now Jeremiah's prophetic voice came to be following the death of King Josiah who as King had emphasized a reaffirmation of the covenant of Moses, those wonderful Ten Commandments, and true worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Scholars tend to agree that Jeremiah as a prophetic voice was a voice of hope to the displaced people of Judah.

One of the struggles of the exile was for the Jewish people to know God and to be faithful without the temple. For so long the Jewish tradition was centered on Jerusalem and the temple built there. The temple was the center of not just worship but of culture. It was where God manifested Gods self. Even in the wilderness time of wandering before the temple was built God was represented by the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant and the tent where it was held was holy. Here the people were asked to find God and to recognize God without their familiar surroundings and understanding.

Finding God and recognizing God even when there is no temple to worship at was the deep struggle of the exile literature throughout the First Testament. We get the unique experience of being able to re-read and witness God at

work through and in the midst of change for people who were devastated at not only losing their homes and all they were familiar with but they also were losing their place of worship, their connection to their faith and belief.

Remember we are reading from Jeremiah. This is pre-Christ, pre- enlightenment, pre Disciples. Yet, today in 2013 the simple truths of identity and knowing who we are in the midst of a changing empire still resonate. The empire of smartphones, gender equality, ipads, projector screens, ageism, new music, tablets, live streams, websites, sexism, and the list can go on and on is the ruling empire. Our world today is different, the headlines that cross our newsfeeds use terms and discuss topics that even five years ago would not have been touched. The world has changed and we are changing to adapt to our circumstances and parameters of life that the 'ruling' empire has given.

So where is God? So often things change, our lives change, and changes are thrust at us by circumstances and the world and sometimes they creep up on us so slowly that we blink and things are different. So where is God amidst these changes, how do we find God when we have been taken over and are exiled from the familiar and know that even an eventual return to familiar will never be the same. We have changed, we have been changed, and the place in our memory no longer exists. Have you ever gone back somewhere from your childhood? A place that holds so many good memories and yet when we step into those supposedly familiar walls and nostalgia washes over us for a moment and then reality emerges through that nostalgia haze. It does not seem so glorious, either we have overly glorified it in our memories or that place has drastically changed or even we have drastically changed.

Yet sometimes we cling, we cling so desperately to what can no longer be, to things that no longer hold under the empire we live in. Jeremiah's prophetic voice still resonates. "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, crack cisterns that can hold no water."

We are trying to hold onto something that is no longer. This is a prophetic truth that held true for the Jewish people exiled to Babylon who were trying to hold onto the God and faith foundations that were no longer able to be utilized and it holds true for us today. You see as Disciples of Christ we go through periods of change, transformation, and conversation relative to the times we live in. We are continually asked as Disciples of Christ to find God's voice in the midst of our new empires.

One of the awesome parts of being a Disciples of Christ is our rich history of embracing the changing world. We have historically as a denomination been on the forefront of religious freedom and equality; it is part of our founding principles. In fact one of the first slogans of the Stone-Campbell movement was "in essentials unity; in opinions liberty; in all things charity." This slogan comes from when the movement joined together and realized there were some differences in how they worshiped. The differences came from different areas and different groups of people. Yet, the slogan's principle is one we can still stand on today as our church is living in a new modern and evolving empire.

We can still value and love one another with our core beliefs being our very confessions of faith, you know how we stand up and state "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the of the Living God, and Lord and Savior of my life." That is our essential belief and that is what matters. All the other things, the music we play, the order of worship, the way we pray, the space we worship in, even who we worship with, who is welcome at the table are areas where we can as agree to disagree, areas we can be in amazing conversation about and areas of spiritual growth and learning. Jeremiah's prophetic voice resounds today because to focus on cracked cisterns that do not hold the living water that is brought to us by Jesus Christ is not what we are called to do as Disciples. We need to be prophetic voices for our faith in today's empire; we need to live out our faith and our calling as Disciples of Christ. Amen.