

Sermon: Stubborn People, Stubborn God

Year C, Proper 17

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Sirach 10:12-18 or Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112;
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

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You can hear the longing that Jeremiah has put words to. As a prophet he is naming their fear that they have turned from God and that something appalling, shocking, desolating (Jeremiah 2:12) is coming. How could you put into words this fear, because you'd be saying, in effect, that all our self-sufficiency is being put in the place of God. After all, God helps those who help themselves. Which is not in the Bible, by the way. Jeremiah sees his people have failed some pretty important questions, like "Where is the LORD?". The people didn't ask it and the priests didn't ask it. They turned away from God, and decided to take things into their own hands. The rain would come and they would channel it into cisterns, so they didn't need to be reliant on the God who sent the rain. Only they built leaky cisterns. So this fantasy that they didn't need to rely on God was falling apart in front of them.

You can also catch a whisper of what they are longing for: a return to the old ways. The old ways got them out of slavery in Egypt, got them through *the wilderness, a land of deserts and pits, a land of drought and deep darkness, a land that no one passes through, where no one lives* (Jeremiah 2:6). The old ways *brought them into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things* (Jeremiah 2:7).

We get that, right? We're in a chaotic time now, where the old ways appear to be falling away and what's filling the void seem pretty unnerving. We're talking about racism in a way we never done before. We're talking about the environment in a way we never done before. We're talking about immigrants in a way we never done before. And we're acting on all those things in a way that's new too. Can't we just go back to the way it was when we weren't screaming at each other? Can't we just go back to the way it was when we didn't have to watch our selves so closely because everyone seems so ready to take offense over the smallest thing?

I don't often preach on the Psalms, although I use them in our worship prayers pretty frequently. I was intrigued by the phrase *So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels* (Psalm 81:12). That felt pretty familiar. We seem to have a lot of stubborn hearts around us these days, a lot of folks who are following their own counsels. We seem less interested in finding common ground, being driven by data, listening to the expertise others can offer, including the expertise that comes from the school of hard knocks.

God has given us intelligence and freedom.¹ We can remember the past, analyze the present and project into the future. We act on those analyses and projections. But we don't know everything; we misread the past and make lousy predictions. We don't anticipate, or, more honestly, deliberately ignore, the likely outcomes of the actions we take. And we're doing all of that just as other people around us are doing the same thing. Never mind the larger forces of nature and the social, political and economic trends we are a part of.

¹ This whole paragraph is based on Ellen T. Armour, "Proper 17, Theological Perspective, Psalm 81:1, 10-16" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 10.

We use that intelligence and freedom to orient ourselves. We do those analyses and projections to keep ourselves lined up with our world, the physical world around us and our beliefs about how that world works. Love your neighbor. Give folks a hand. Keep your nose out of other people's business. And we get it. There have to be some rules to make it easier to get along. Bring your trash to the transfer station. Drive at a sane speed on the correct side of the road. Kids should be in school not at work. And it seemed to be working pretty well. We could always get into a few good arguments over things. But for the most part, we could make it work. Especially in a small town where most everyone knows each other.

But that doesn't seem to be working anymore. We're going from being oriented in our world to disoriented. Our instinct is to say, "put it back." We want to say, "Listen up, let's go back to the way it was when it worked." I think you can hear something like that in Psalm 81, *O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!* (Psalm 81:13). If we just turned back to the old ways, we would be oriented again.

The Book of Psalms is a sort of hymnal. We don't have the music, but we have the words. Like our hymnal, not everything in it is a song, but it's mostly worship materials, some prayers, lots of songs, some ancient texts that are used in worship on special occasions. There aren't a ton of instructions in it. In fact, if you've not tackled one before, even our hymnal is kind of odd. There aren't any page numbers, you don't read from the top to the bottom, instead you keep looping from the top to the bottom, verse after verse. You just learn how to use it from the people around you. And if you don't know what 4:2 time is in *Lord Jesus, Think on Me*, you hope Yifan does since he's the guy playing the piano.

So just like our hymnal, there are instructions in the Book of Psalms, even if we don't know exactly what they mean. For instance, Psalm 81 is supposed to be sung to the tune "Gittith," although we don't know what that tune is. But there is something in the instructions for Psalm 81 that caught my eye. *Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day.* (Psalm 81:3). New moon and full moon. Psalm 81 is supposed to be used at least twice a month. And on particular holy days.

Psalm 81 says, the people have stubborn hearts and turn away from God. God has given them the freedom to turn away and they do. God longs for them to return to God's ways. But it has to be their choice. Psalm 81 says that however stubborn the people are, and we know we can be plenty stubborn, Psalm 81 says that God is even more stubborn. Because God will be there; when we return to God's ways, God will satisfy them, with the finest wheat and honey from the rock.

So look what they did, those ancient Israelites who wrote down the Book of Psalms. They noticed they were a stubborn people who turned away from the ways of God. So every couple of weeks, they built in a reminder of what would happen when they returned to the ways of God. They would experience abundance, of the finest of wheat and honey from the rock. That abundance would come from their stubborn God who was determined to give them the freedom to turn away. If they could only remember, that abundance would come from the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt. The stubborn people from whom we are descended knew that they would fail, they would turn away from God again and again. So they put Psalm 81 into regular

rotation so they would submit to divine judgment again and again.² They would be reminded of what happened when they returned to God's ways.

Here's the other thing to notice. We figure out how to use the hymnal, how to work along in this life. We're oriented. And then something changes, maybe even us and our own beliefs about what is just and right. And we're disoriented. God offers us a return to God's ways, but not to the past. Because returning to the past never works. We can't go back then. We know more, we understand more, our analysis and predictions are better, deeper, wiser. We're using the gifts God has given us of intelligence and freedom. We can return to God's ways, which is not the same as going back to a past we can never retrieve. We are re-oriented. In this cycle of oriented, dis-oriented, re-oriented, we are living a resurrection life.

The grace of a stubborn God is offered to God's stubborn people. Something in life goes awry; we become confused, scared, angry, disappointed. God seems to have disappeared, yet we go forward to discover that in the midst of confusion, mysterious turns of events occur. We receive more than we deserve. By grace, we capture a vision of God's "new normal," God's promised rule, or the kingdom of God – a vision symbolized by the finest of the wheat and honey from the rock.³ Oriented, dis-oriented, re-oriented, we live a resurrection life.

² Henry F. Knight, "Proper 17, Homiletical Perspective, Psalm 81:1, 10-16" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 11.

³ Arthur (Art) Ross III, "Proper 17, Pastoral Perspective, Psalm 81:1, 10-16" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 10, 12.