

Church of the Crossroads  
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 16, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

SEEKING THE LOST

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

Luke 15:1-10

The prophet Jeremiah envisions a stark and bleak future for the people of Israel and for the earth itself:

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.  
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking;  
and all the hills moved to and fro.  
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.  
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the Lord, before the Lord's fierce anger.*

—Jer 4:23–26

A dreadful judgment is in place, and the execution of it will be God's doing. That may be harsh news to our modern ears; we prefer a God who is kind and compassionate. Our tendency is to take a passage such as we heard from the Book of Jeremiah and either dismiss it or domesticate it.

To do so, however, might be to do ourselves and the passage itself a disservice. For Jeremiah's description of a devastated earth may resonate with what we ourselves know deep within our hearts. The truth is that if we continue on our present course, the earth may well become exactly what Jeremiah describes: a wasteland in which the only survivors will be cockroaches.

Just before I wrote this, I was reading Jeremiah's words while sitting on our back porch. The song of a Shama thrush caught my attention, and then the song of her mate. Are we ourselves headed for a world in which

these songs will be silenced, in which all the birds of the air will have fled. I found myself filled with great sorrow. I truly worry about our world and the earth itself. I worry for those 5 grandchildren of mine. Somehow, Jeremiah gives voice to my anxiety.

Jeremiah's voice has its modern counterparts. T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* is one such expression. But there are others, including the devastating description of the earth we find in Cormac McCarthy's bestseller novel, *The Road*. Or, listen to Margaret Atwood's description of the earth after global warming has taken its toll. This description is found at the beginning of her novel *Oryx and Crake*.

*On the eastern horizon there's a grayish haze, it now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how the colour still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic.*

—Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. 3.

Now there is one thing all these descriptions of a devastated earth share in common. The responsibility for the devastation belongs to human beings alone. It is we who are wreaking havoc upon the earth. This is true even with Jeremiah. God may be the one who brings about the judgment, but it is the faithlessness of Israel and Judah that has led to the judgment. Israel and Judah have lived as if there were no God. They have forgotten their past and their dependence upon the grace of God. They do not remember when God freed them from bondage in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to a new land. In the new land, they have abandoned their covenantal responsibilities and have chased after false gods. Clearly, they alone will be cause of their own downfall.

What to do? Change their ways, surely. As for us, what can we do? Change *our* ways, certainly. Return to God. In other words, return to our spiritual foundations. Become responsible once again, responsible for one another, responsible for the earth itself. Then, the judgment may be averted and the impending disaster avoided. After all, even in that devastating

prophecy of Jeremiah, there is a word of hope. “For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.” (Jer 4:27) Even though these words may have been a later addition to the original text, the words portray a God who does not want or desire the destruction of all things. Israel still has reason to repent.

How to begin? What step might be the first step? Here, I turn to those two parables from the Gospel of Luke, because I believe that the first step we might take is to seek after that which has been lost. For, we modern human beings, especially those of us who live in a North American context have lost much. We have lost our spiritual roots and have opted for a materialism that cannot satisfy. We have lost our commitment to the common good and have chosen to look out only for ourselves. We have lost our sense of wonder and have replaced it with a reliance on technology and technique. We have forgotten that we were created to be faithful stewards of all that is and have instead chosen the way of mastery. We have lost sight of God’s realm of justice and peace.

Perhaps the first thing we need to do is to search for that which has been lost. Now, let us turn to those two little parables themselves. We know that the Gospel writers took the parables as first told by Jesus and used them for their own purposes. So it is that Luke, the Gospel writer, uses the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin to explain why Jesus associated with sinners and outcasts. Luke portrays a Jesus who went out of his way to associate with those who were despised and rejected by others. He therefore is like the good shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep who are safe to search for the one lost sheep.

This parable reinforced the Christian community’s portrayal of Jesus as the good shepherd seeking the lost. After all, the Jesus of John’s Gospel also says that he is the Good Shepherd. Of course, if Jesus is the Good Shepherd of the parable, then we are the lost, for who does not know himself or herself to be a sinner? This understanding led Ira Sankey to compose that old Gospel hymn we heard this morning and which I remember singing as a child most every time an evangelist came to town. Jesus searches for us until we are found. It’s interesting, though, that the church did not, in similar fashion portray Jesus as the good housewife sweeping her house until she finds the lost coin.

It may be a distortion of the original meaning of these parables to view Jesus as the shepherd or as the housewife, even if this is what Luke wants us to do. Perhaps the parables are simply stories about the need to search for that which has been lost. If this is true, then we are the shepherd and we are the housewife, and our task is to seek out the lost sheep and the lost coin, to retrieve that which has been lost.

If Luke can use these stories to suit the purposes of his gospel, surely we can do the same. The task we face, it seems to me, is to search after that which has been lost. The task is not to secure more sheep or gather up more coins. The task is not to “move forward,” but to stop and recover what has been lost. That phrase, “move forward”, has become commonplace. There is hardly a news broadcast during which someone does not use the phrase. The president says that we are “moving forward” in Iraq. The economy must “move forward,” the economists say, even if it means offering home buyers risky deals, and a further destruction of the earth. The president of Virginia Tech says that the tragic event of last year is now in the past; Virginia Tech is now “moving forward.” Everyone, it seems must “move forward.” And so, when I am now asked how it is with Crossroads, with a telling smile, I reply, “We are surely moving forward.” Then, my questioners smile back, for we all know that the task of the church is not to move forward but to be faithful to the Gospel. Just for fun, you might want to listen for the phrase. Not a day will go by without you hearing it. It is so acceptable culturally, so American.

Well, today’s word is that the task is not to move forward; but to seek after that which has been lost. If that puts a check on progress, well, that is for the best. If that makes us conservatives in the best sense of the word, that is, those who want to conserve and retrieve that which is important for life, then that, too, is for the best. For unless we seek that which has been lost and retrieve it, whether it be deepest spiritual roots, or our commitment to the common good, or our sense of wonder, or our true identity as stewards of all that is, or our allegiance to God’s realm of justice and peace, we may be lost forever, and Jeremiah’s prophecy, and T. S. Eliot’s and Cormac McCarthy’s and Margaret Atwood’s may indeed come to be. And we will be the ones responsible for the disaster.

This is not an easy word for us, but it is a word that we need to hear. The good news is that in this community of faith, we have heard the word,

and we have begun to retrieve that which has been lost. It will be an ongoing task, this task of searching and finding, but it has begun. Certainly, we must bear a faithful witness in the world to that which we have found, and that, in itself, is a daunting task. But whether it be our search for that which has been lost, or our discovery that what we have searched for has been right there all along, or our faithful witness in the world to the truths that we have found, underneath it all there is not despair, but hope; not dismay, but joy. The last word is indeed joy. “Rejoice with me, says the shepherd, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” “Rejoice with me,” says the woman of the house, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

Or, as Bonhoeffer would say, discipleship surely has its cost, but it also has its joy. So, my friends, the world as we now know it, is headed for disaster. But that need not be the final word if we ourselves will continue to search after that which has been lost, and if we will help our world do the same. Searching for that which has been lost, and retrieving that which is there to be found will mean not only our restoration as a people but the restoration of God’s beloved creation. And nothing could be more important than that. So may it be. Amen.