

The Hot Wind Blows

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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse— ¹² a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

22 “For my people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good.”

23 I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.

25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.

26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

27 For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

28 Because of this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above grow black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back.

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

Today is our second study from the prophet Jeremiah.
And some of you may be wondering,

“Why another sermon from Jeremiah?
Why is the message of an ancient prophet important to us today?”

Well, first of all, the book of Jeremiah is Scripture, and we in the Reformed tradition believe that the Word of God is the only rule of faith and practice. “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof and training in righteousness.” That’s in the Bible.

But, I have found that many people these days need more than a theological statement about the importance of Scripture.

They want to know,
“How will this message help me personally?
Why should I care about Jeremiah’s message?”

That’s a fair question, and I think that the Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman can help us on this question.

He contends that the language of the prophet engages our *imagination*.

Through the use of powerful images, the prophet helps us to look at the world in a different way.
And, perhaps more importantly, the prophet helps us see our own lives differently.

The prophet helps us get beyond the mind numbing complacency that is so prevalent in our world.
He helps us see the world from God’s perspective. He helps us understand “what’s going on”. (Marvin Gaye)

We used to sing about “what’s going on” when I was younger. And we still need to think about what’s going on, what’s really happening in our world.

The prophecy of Jeremiah is as important now as it was long ago.

God's people still need to consider the devastating consequences of evil ... because like the people to whom Jeremiah first preached, we too are often blind to what is really happening.

The prophet gives us eyes to see.

BLIND TO THE THREAT

Last week we talked a little bit about what was going on in Jeremiah's world.

The small nation of Judah was sandwiched between two powerful nations, Egypt to the south and the Babylonians to the north.

They were under threat on all sides.

Judah should have taken a more humble approach to foreign affairs given her precarious predicament.

But, instead they challenged the authority of the powerful Babylonian empire.

Why did they do such a stupid thing?

Simple. Religious pride.

They thought their cause was righteous.

They thought that God was on their side no matter how reckless their foreign policy might be.

They had the Temple in Jerusalem and therefore the presence of the Almighty.

They were God's chosen people.

They didn't have to worry about judgment.

Right?

The prophet says, "Wrong!"

Destruction was definitely on the way.

Judah's vulnerability was due to more than just their leaders' political and military miscalculations in a dangerous world.

They were vulnerable because of moral depravity.

They had abandoned the covenant they had made with the Lord, and they were mistreating the most vulnerable among them.

It was as if the God's people had been sold into slavery again by the greed and ambition of her leaders.

In short, God's people had been unfaithful.
And the time of judgment was at hand.

The ancient prophets are all in one accord on this issue.

National security and personal salvation would not come from the sword, taking from military action. Indeed military action would bring just the opposite result.

True security would come from doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with their God.

But, of course, they didn't want to hear that.

Come to think of it we don't want to hear that either.
So what could they do?

HIRING ANOTHER PROPHET

What happens when a prophet tells the people what they don't want to hear?

They got another prophet.

They banished Jeremiah and his message.
And they listened to "other prophets" who preached a message that was more in line with what they wanted to hear.

Problem solved.
But not really.

The actions of those folks remind me of something the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy.

Paul warned, "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires."

That seems to describe our day as well.
We have ears that itch for a certain message.
And there are always preachers who are willing to give us that message.

But, beware.
Just because we agree with a message does not mean that it is a word from God.

The judgment of God cannot be dismissed by just getting a prophet who gives us a more favorable message. The words of a true prophet have a way of cutting to the heart of the matter.

The words of a true prophet have a way of cutting through all the religious and political posturing.
The words of the true prophet give us an unvarnished view of the evil in our world and the evil in our own lives.

This kind of soul searching is not an easy process.

It's summarized very well in the book of Hebrews,
"... the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow, it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

We know how Jeremiah's word of judgment played out in Judah.

Jeremiah's prophecy proved to be true.
God's people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

And the Promised Land became a wasteland.

But, if we believe that the Word of God is living and active, then today's lesson is not just about what happened to those people way back when. Today's lesson gives us prophetic insight into the problems that face us here and now.

So, let us listen to the word's of the prophet with an open mind.

If we send the prophet away because we do not like his message, we deny ourselves the possibility of change.

Instead, let these difficult images cut deep into our thoughts and intentions.

Let these words of judgment become opportunities for our own repentance and salvation.

THE HOT WIND

The first image of judgment is the hot wind that comes out of the desert.

I'll never forget that first year I spent in Texas. At that time I had lived my whole life in the cool mountains of West Virginia.

Texas seemed like the hottest place on planet earth to a Mountaineer.

And in the Spring the weather got even worse.

But, one night I noticed that the trees (what few of them we had in central Texas) were swaying in the night breeze. I ventured out to feel the cool night air.

"This is going to be great," I said to myself.

But, I was sorely disappointed.

It was not the cool evening breeze that I had come to expect in my home state.

It was a hot wind.

In fact, this wind didn't cool things off.

It made things worse.

It felt like I had stuck my head in a clothes dryer!

(I talked to my daughter who lives in Houston this past week, and she confirmed my experience. The hot wind still blows in Texas!)

I imagine that the destructive force of the desert wind is sort of like that ... only much worse.

It is so hot that you can't catch your breath.

Sometimes the wind blows at almost hurricane speed. Dust covers everything and gets into everything.

The hot wind of the desert is a powerful force.

It is a juggernaut of destruction.

This is not some gentle breeze of corrective judgment.

This is the wind of judgment.

Those of us who lived through the ill winds of hurricane Charley know what that's like.

In 30 minutes shingles were ripped off the roof, trees and fences were felled, and the misery was just beginning.

We lived for months with piles of debris in front of our homes.

If you flew into Orlando during those days, whole neighborhoods were filled with blue roofs ...

blue tarps placed on the roof in a futile effort to keep out the rain that would follow with two more hurricanes.

This gives us just a small inkling of the destruction that this ill wind can bring.

But, the wind described by the prophet is an even greater force of destruction. The prophet told them quite clearly that the wind was coming.

STUPID CHILDREN!

So what did the people do?

How did the people prepare for the ill wind that was coming?

Did they go out and buy storm shutters?

Did they stock up on water and canned goods?

Not at all.

They choose to turn off the TV and not to listen to the storm forecast.

They said, "We've never had a storm like this before.
I think the prophet is overreacting."

I think we need a new weather man.
Tom Terry is just too pessimistic.

The people are described in verse 22 of our lesson as "foolish."
They are "stupid children" who have no understanding of God or the world
in which they live.

They do not know God or trust God
They do listen to the prophet.
They do not turn from their evil ways.

Instead, they trust in their own misunderstanding.

The Scripture tells us that their only "skill" is in the pursuit of doing evil.

They have no concept of how to do good.
Their world is just the opposite of the good world that God created.

A RETURN TO CHAOS

So what does punishment look like for foolish people who are skilled in doing evil?

As we mentioned in our lesson last week, sometimes the potter has to start over and make something new when the clay falls apart on the wheel.

It was heartening to know that God is at work to redeem and recreate the world.

But, this next image reminds us that the process of redemption is very painful and costly.

In the book of Genesis we read about how God created the world.

No longer is the world chaotic, dark and void.
Out of the darkness God shines the light of new life.

God creates the plants and the animals.
And finally God creates human beings.

And all of it was pronounced “good”.

Well, in the vision of the prophet, we have a force that can only be described as “uncreation.”

This prophet imagines a return to chaos.

He imagines a time when the world comes apart at the seams.

Instead of world filled with light and life, the prophet sees a world that is void and dark.

There are earthquakes everywhere, and the mountains and the hills are moving back and forth.

In this vision, the world is empty.

Even the birds had flown from this desolate land.

Once fertile ground was a desert.

Cities lay in ruins.

That’s what the judgment of God looks like.

That’s a portrait of what a return to chaos looks like.

A RETURN TO CHAOS TODAY

So how do these images of judgment inform us as people of faith in our day? Let me give you some examples of how the forces of evil and chaos are at work today.

This past week there was an earthquake in North Korea because of an underground test of a nuclear weapon. They’re developing a submarine so that they can deliver those weapons to our own shore.

This past year has been the hottest year since we began recording temperatures.

Almost all of our glaciers are retreating.

A hot wind blows in our world.

Some tell us it’s our imagination.

The extinction of the great ape is being threatened because of war and poaching.

There may come a time when one of the most magnificent animals the earth has ever known will be no more.

The city of Aleppo continues to be destroyed by those who are evil. We see the images of the children covered in dust and blood.

We see refugees desperately trying to cross the sea on overcrowded boats.

A once bustling modern city now is almost deserted and has become the symbol of despair.

Everywhere I go I meet people who are afraid for their safety.

Powerful forces threaten from the East and the West, North and South.

The threat of terrorism knows no geographical boundary. It has even come to our own city.

The Pulse nightclub has now become a shrine not only of terrorism but also of prejudice and religious intolerance.

And of course today we remember our own nation's Armageddon.

911 marks that day when blue skies were replaced with dust and death and despair.

It's been fifteen years, but we do not forget.
We cannot forget.

Friends and loved ones were lost that day.
And now when we sing America the beautiful, we have a hard time with the words in the last line, those words that speak of "alabaster cities" that are "undimmed by human tears."

We may have believed that before 911.
But, now we are more sober.

It is difficult to look upon scenes of judgment and despair.

But, the prophet suggests that this is what God's people need to do.

When we see the destructive force of self-inflicted judgment, we understand the depth of our own sin and the need for salvation.

This is true not only for nations, but also for individuals as well.

WE FALL SHORT

The Bible tells us that "all have sinned" and "fall short."

What does that sin look like?

What happens when we fall short?

The prophet has painted us a picture.

It is the hot wind of destruction.

It is a wind that tears apart the good world that God has given us.

It strikes me that this scene of judgment is, in the end, eerily quiet.

After the hot wind blows, the prophet finds himself alone in a wasteland. It is a place devoid of human or animal life.

In that wilderness, that sadly quiet place, the prophet invites God's people to reflect upon their own complicity in bringing about the destruction that has come and will come.

In this wilderness we are invited to engage in some honest soul searching.

What have we done to make the world in which we live a place of despair?

Could it be that we are just as lost and alone as those who came before us?

To quote another song writer from my misspent youth, "The answer my friend is blowing in the wind ..." (Bob Dylan)

Whether the wind will be the hot wind of God's judgment or the cool breeze of God's Spirit depends on us.

Will we become even more skilled in doing evil?
Or will we join the Great Shepherd in trying to seek and save the lost?

Our lesson for today is a thoroughgoing portrait of destruction. But, in verse 27 we get a glimmer of hope. We read,

“For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.”

Thank God that judgment is not the final act in this play. Judgment, this return to chaos is the first step in a new creation.

God can make the desert bloom.
God can bring His people back from exile.
God can save sinners.

God can do all this ...
... even when the sun goes black and his only Son is crucified by the very people He came to save.

Let us spend some time this week contemplating that place where destruction is complete and heart wrenching.

Let us not turn away from pain and the suffering.
Instead, let us mourn with those who mourn.
Let us look unflinchingly upon the judgment wrought by evil.

And then let us look to the cross, that place of suffering and despair, ... the garbage dump that served as a metaphor for hell.

And on that cross we will see more than judgment and despair. We will see the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth.

And finally in response to that scene, let us do something.

Let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

Let us do our part to bring about the kingdom that surely comes.

Amen.