

“RENEWING THE WORLD THROUGH REPENTANCE”

Jeremiah 14:1-22

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Harvey, Irma, and Maria: these are names we will remember for a long time. The images that have been streaming through our news feeds or across the screen require no comment. The devastation to Houston, to the Florida Keys, to Puerto Rico and many other islands in the Caribbean; the loss of life and destruction of homes move us to compassion, to prayer.

For the most part, we have been spared the crude remarks of some preachers who like to connect natural disaster to the punishment of God for a nation's sin. This kind of theology so prominent during the crisis of Sandy Hook or Katrina seems muted in the recent disasters. I wondered about mentioning the few comments that have been made, but decided in the end that such preaching didn't need more attention. So I'm not going to talk about today's doomsday preachers, but I really can't avoid Jeremiah who blames the drought on the sins of Israel.

The nation mourns. The whole city of Jerusalem cries out because all the wells are dry, the ground cracked, no rain for the crops, no work for the farmers. Even the doe abandons her fawn in search of grass. Jeremiah says that their "iniquities testify against" them; and that because they "loved to wander..." the Lord will "punish their sins."

Now I don't for a minute think that Jeremiah is so much expressing the "word of the Lord" on this matter of the drought as he is expressing the thoughts of the people. In the midst of disaster or crisis, don't we often wonder why God's so angry with us?

A woman develops cancer. The husband has to take some time off to help her through the treatments. The medical bills build up because the insurance doesn't cover the treatments she needs. They sell the house while they still have some equity. On a particularly bad day, she turns to her husband and says, "Why does God hate us?" Invariably the next question is: "What did we do?"

In Jeremiah, we encounter a people in desperate straits who acknowledge that they did indeed do something wrong, but they still wonder if it was all that bad. After acknowledging that their "iniquities testify against" them and their "apostasies" were many, they ask God, "Why should you be like a stranger in the land...."

I don't hear this question being asked after the recent hurricanes. The stories don't express a sense of abandonment by God, but of people pulling together: neighbors expressing deep concern who had hardly ever talked to each other, strangers pulling

together resources to rescue the stranded. There's something about disasters that bring out the best in people.

We're not told what the people of Israel did for each other during the drought. We're only told of their sense of abandonment and their acknowledgement of responsibility. We're not told whether or not God rescues them, only that God was both angry and sad about their sin. In the sorrow, God sees them. Listen again to the words, the first sign of hope in the passage.

"Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter – my people – is struck down with a crushing blow, with a very grievous wound. If I go out into the field, look – those killed by the sword! And if I enter the city, look – those sick with famine! For both prophet and priest ply their trade throughout the land, and have no knowledge."

The images are different, but this is what God feels for the people of Puerto Rico and Dominica, for Texas and Florida. It is this same sorrow that touches us as we see the devastation and moves us to act for the welfare of the victims. It is this sorrow that will ultimately lead to the renewal of the affected areas.

You may recall from last week that "renewal" is our theme for the year, and that we hope to do that by talking about a lot of different "re-words." I'm supposed to be talking about "repentance" today. Janet dealt with the individual experience of repentance last week with Psalm 51 and I was going to talk about repentance from the corporate or communal perspective. We sin not just as individuals but as groups of people as well.

Well, as sometimes happens, I couldn't find repentance in the text until I'd actually started writing the sermon. You can see the problem if I outline the passage. It begins with the drought and the people's acknowledgement that their sin might have something to do with it, but there is no expression of regret. Then Jeremiah expresses how angry God is with them and that no relief is on the way. The reason given is that the people are prone to wander and their prophets and priests are liars. Promises of further devastation are made. Then God sees what's going on and expresses sorrow about it. The people again pray for relief, confessing their responsibility, but still without regret. And the passage concludes with an expression of hope in God.

Ellen Davis believes that repentance happens in the second confession, but it doesn't sound any different than the first one to me. She is right that something changes as the people move from a kind of whiny pleading to a confident expression of trust in the end.

That confidence comes not from confession, but from God's seeing them and God's sorrow. God repents. God's anger becomes sorrow. God turns around. God changes direction. This is what the Psalmist observes when he says that God's anger extends to the third and fourth generation, but the mercy of God extends to the thousandth generation. For God, mercy will always outlive anger. The Sermon on the Mount reminds us that the mark of perfection is mercy.

Our own repentance, corporate and individual, begins when we understand that God's anger has turned into sorrow, when we realize that God sees us, but will not abandon us. Repentance requires us to see as God sees and then to feel as God feels, to be angry at sin, but then to transform that anger into sorrow.

We do a lot of good things in this country. We'll be generous with the communities affected by the hurricanes. We've created a culture where the arts can flourish. We have communities where refugees can come and build a new life. But there are still things that make us angry. Why haven't we put racism behind us? Why do women still earn on average less than men for the same job? Why do we still allow companies to strip off the top of mountains, dump the pollutants into the valleys, and reshape the whole ecosystem at the cost of wildlife and plant diversity?

What makes you angry? Lyndon Johnson was angry about poverty, but he turned that anger into compassion, called for and got from Congress the largest package of legislation on behalf of the poor in the history of this country. And it wasn't random handouts, but measures designed to address issues unique to the poor. He was angry about poverty, but it was seeing the poor that moved the country toward renewal.

Renewal hinges on these two questions: What makes you angry? What do you see? The first awakens us to the reality of sin and our complicity in it. The second moves us to compassionate action that renews the community.

Some of the same things that made God angry in Jeremiah's day also angered Jesus about 600 years later. Jesus also objected to the ways that religious leaders used the faith to build their own prestige and popularity. I mention this just to remind us that Jesus offers us important clues to the things that make God angry and the things that God sees. It's not an accident that his message was "Repent, for the kingdom of God is among you."

For Christians, as for Jews, the path to renewal goes through repentance, a path, according to Jeremiah, modeled for us by God. And so we too can say Amen with the people of Israel as they said, "Can any idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this." We can trust God whether we're talking about recovery after disaster or renewal after the brokenness of sin. Amen.

Davis, Ellen F. "Learning to Lament" in *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays*. pp. 215-220. William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids MI 2016.