

The lectionary is a way to read the Bible in public worship, as we come together each week for common prayer. It's a template, organized on a three-year cycle. What that means is that the same readings that we heard today come up every three years: we last heard them in September 2007, and they will not be read again until September 2013.

This also means that these are the very same readings we heard nine years ago, on the weekend after September 11, 2001. Some of you may remember, as I do, that there were people here for worship that weekend that I'd never seen before (and whom I have not seen since.) They came, I imagine, looking for a word of hope and comfort in the midst of events that were too frightening to comprehend. You could have heard a pin drop when the lay reader got up to read from the fourth chapter of the prophet Jeremiah, these same difficult words we heard today:

"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."
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 his fierce anger.

What struck me, more perhaps in hindsight than in that moment, was that as brutally harsh as Jeremiah's words sounded as they filled this room, that they also seemed to capture where we were emotionally. We, too, had just beheld what can happen when people put their talents to work for doing evil rather than good. We too, beheld a city in ruins. Jeremiah of course, did not have lower Manhattan in mind when he spoke nearly six hundred years before the birth of Christ. He was speaking about the city of Jerusalem being "waste and void" because of the devastation caused by the Babylonian army. He was speaking of the temple, not the towers, being brought to the ground. Even so, on that September day nine years ago it seemed as if the gap between Jeremiah and us had been closed, and we were together in our confusion and grief and fear and anger. The biggest theological question of all was right up front as well: *where was God?* Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that the prophet is not only the one who hears God's voice, but the one who can *feel God's heart*. Heschel had no patience with the "god" of the philosophers – Aristotle's famous "Unmoved Mover." As Heschel read the Bible (and *especially* the prophets) he discovered what he called *the pathos* of God. The God of the Bible, he said, is a God who loves us even when we do behave like stupid children who have no understanding; a God who loves us even to the point of His own broken heart. Jeremiah imagines God more like a frustrated Parent than an Unmoved Mover: "I've done everything I can," God says. "I created

humanity in my own image. I gave them the gift of Torah, a gift “sweeter than honey.” How on earth could they have messed things up so badly?”

Prophets like Jeremiah push us way out of our comfort zones. But they do so for a reason: they are trying to push us hard enough and far enough out of our denial so that we will take another look at our lives and the world around us, so that we will see the parts of ourselves and the world that we would prefer to cover up. They do this not to depress us but to wake us up, so that we can truly live. When tragedy strikes, we ask, “where is God?” The answer that the prophets give is one we don’t usually want to hear: that God has been holding up God’s end of the bargain, and the real question is this: where are God’s people?

Most of us can’t bear too much reality, and we don’t really want to hear about the pain of the world. Denial is one response; getting numb is another—and we have any number of options in our time to help us get numb. Flannery O’Connor once said, “to the hard of hearing you need to shout.” I’ve always thought that is as good an image of what the prophets are up to as any. They seem like mad men at times, shouting away. But they have the difficult task of breaking through our defenses to get us to see what we prefer not to see. Nine years ago our collective defenses were ripped down, and so Jeremiah’s hard words hardly needed for the preacher to say more. But what about today, on these waning days of late summer nine years later?

When I thought about what to say as ministries start back up again this weekend, I confess that I thought a lot about avoiding Jeremiah altogether for something happier. But as I prayed and reflected on these texts, I realized again that Jeremiah lived through hard times and he refused to sugarcoat the realities of the pain and hardship of the Babylonian Captivity. This first decade of this millennium has also been a very difficult and polarizing time for our nation and for the wider Church as well. We are not immune from all of that here at St. Francis. It seems to me that we come to church not for sugarcoating but for a dose of reality, and that our several callings to ministry take us not to some dream world that we wish existed but more deeply into this world, with all of its warring madness and all of its challenges. It also seems more obvious to me on this ninth anniversary of 9/11 more than any that have gone before that we’ve not yet grieved, and because we have not yet grieved we have not moved on. We are collectively, as a nation, stuck.

From the perspective of hindsight we know that the road ahead for Jeremiah and the Babylonian exiles would be a long one, as in something like a half century or so. We don’t like to hear such things, of course, in a culture that wants “closure” as fast as possible. We want someone to make it all better for us as quickly as possible and in the absence of a quick fix then there is always blame, or denial, or getting numb. But it is worth remembering that even through those decades of the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah was able to imagine the dawn of a new day, and to speak of hope. If you can stay with that old bull-frog of a prophet all the way to chapter thirty-one, you do find good news. There he begins to talk about the day when God at long last will write the law not on tablets of stone, but on people’s hearts. That law is the law of love.

As followers of Jesus Christ, love is a non-negotiable. We are held in love and because of that we are called to love others. It is the core value that defines who we are and if we can’t live out of that core value in difficult times then it is really nonsense to pretend that it matters. If we cannot live out of and into that love when times are tough it’s nothing more than sentimentality.

Love is not the same as being nice, or of liking everyone. Faithful people in Jeremiah's day as in ours will and do disagree on many things. But in the Church, at least, we are called to disagree without polarizing and demonizing the other—for Christ's sake. It is in this world that nearly a decade after 9/11 remains fearful, embittered, and grieving that you and I are called to serve, to speak up, and to act as "instruments of God's peace." It is in this world that we are called to preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary to use words. As in Jeremiah's day, and centuries later in Corinth, so we too must remember that the law of love "is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude...it does not insist on its own way but strives for the truth."

I didn't agree with former President Bush on very much. But I admired and respected him when he went to the Washington Islamic Center on September 17, 2001, less than one week after 9/11. There, as you may recall, he said that Islam is a religion of peace and that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 had nothing to do with the teachings of Islam or the sincere Muslims of the world who deplore terrorism. He went on to say that those who inflict harm on innocent Muslims are "just as wrong" as those who carry out terrorist attacks.

Nine years later, as a nation we seem to be in danger of forgetting that insight. In places like Gainesville, Florida and Murfreesboro, Tennessee and even at Ground Zero itself we are in danger of acting like the First Amendment applies to everyone except Muslims. We are in danger of letting fear and ignorance and blame beat down our better angels.

As Christians, you and I are called to do better than that: we are called to love our neighbors even when we may not agree with them. This past week, in the midst all of the talk about burning Korans in Florida, the American Bible Association said it would stand in solidarity with Muslims by offering a program to give away two Korans for every one burned. This gesture was, it seems to me, a courageous witness rooted in Biblical faith. Maybe the only good thing that came out of this last couple of weeks of media circus in Florida is that people on the right and on the left were united in the belief that burning books, and especially holy books, is never a good idea.

Walter Brueggemann has said that it is the task of prophetic ministry to "nurture, nourish, and evoke an alternative consciousness" to the dominant culture around us. My job as a preacher and pastor—and *our work* as "all of the people" called to share ministry in Christ's name—is to remind one another of what we already know: that perfect love really does cast out fear.

There is a prayer found on page 815 of the *Book of Common Prayer* that to my mind fits for this occasion. We remember, of course, those who died on 9/11 and we pray for their families and friends. But out of that reality may we also offer a prayer for the whole human family as we remember the work God has given us to do. Let us, then, pray:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*