

“Creation pleads: Advocate for me!”

Text: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Prayer: Holy One, come to us as we ponder on your Word. Open us to the Spirit’s presence in our hearts so that our lives may be a vessel for your truth bringing hope to the world. Amen.

A few months ago, we were visited by a violent windstorm that swept many parts of Ontario and Quebec. It was a fast-moving windstorm that causes widespread damage. I’ve never seen quite a powerful wind like that. Trees and electric posts fell down, backyard trampolines and patio chairs flew out and about, some houses lost roof shingles and boats capsized. It was certainly a violent, scary wind to contend with.

Today’s text in Jeremiah uses the wind as a symbol of destruction. That’s why scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann refers to this text as a “dangerous poem”[1]. Growing up in the Philippines, where hurricanes and tsunamis were constant regular visitors every year, I know how turbulent winds can easily destroy properties, animals, farms, homes and lives. This wind portrayed in Jeremiah is so different from the wind in the Creation Story in Genesis. The “wind” in Hebrew is *ruach*, which is transliterated as the breath or spirit of God. In Genesis, *ruach* is the spirit of creation - soaring, stirring, blowing upon the formless, dark void, stimulating and energizing as it aids God’s work of ordering, creating and blessing. The wind in Jeremiah 4, however, is a turbulent, disturbing wind of God’s judgment that burns and scorches God’s people and nature.[2] In ancient times, the wind had a two-fold task connected mostly with farming: to winnow, which is to sort, and to cleanse. Winds of a certain strength were useful to separate wheat or grain from the chaff or hay which blew away. A wind that was too strong, however, ceased to be of use, blowing both wheat and hay. This image of a destructive wind is a symbol of devastation.

Jeremiah was a prophet from a very early age and he lived and prophesied almost three thousand years ago. The people of Judah, where Jeremiah lived, had entered into some rather unhealthy and useless political alliances and Jeremiah’s people were conquered and sent off as refugees into Babylon. Jeremiah preached in a context where he saw immanent political and military disaster for his nation, and he eagerly hoped to turn back the tide. He desired honest soul-searching that would lead kings to be humbler on the world stage and people to be more mindful of justice and righteousness. Jeremiah strongly believes that when a people abandon

their ideals and beliefs, their nation, their way of life is in peril. When they suppress the truth, their society is in danger of collapse. He demanded justice in dealing with one another. Prophetic words got Jeremiah into trouble. His prophecy was not smooth, nice words of a blessing. Instead they were the opposite – like a curse- they were jagged words, critical words about not measuring up to the people’s covenant with God. Jeremiah questions Jerusalem’s foolish leadership and callousness. They have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear. God was not pleased at all with people who are skilled at doing bad things. Relationships between God and people turned sour.

The song “Four Strong Winds,” by Ian Tyson came to mind while reflecting on this text. It tells the tale of a relationship that’s on its last legs, saying more about a dying love. This is clearly a song about a failing, if not an already failed, relationship, evidenced by the words “But our good times are all gone/And I’m bound for moving on”. It seemed to me that God was saying to the wayward people that their good times – their wonderful relationships are all gone, but God is bound to move on.

Jeremiah proclaims that the evil ways that his people have done correlate to a world on the verge of collapse. The earth itself returns to the chaos of the beginning when the world did not know God. The prophet recounts the destruction of the earth and that it resembles the un-creation of the world from its beginnings: mountains and hills were shaking, the skies were devoid of light, the birds have fled and disappeared, the once productive land is now barren, cities are in ruins, the whole earth is in mourning. This text is difficult to understand, but it certainly nudges us to realize that evil ways can lead to destruction, the whole creation included.

The hot wind is blowing on the earth. What shall we do in the face of its roaring blast? What messages about the earth’s desolation do we hear today? Sadly, we are less connected to the earth. We have lost touch with the rhythms of the earth. Thousands of species are going extinct as they are being hunted or their habitats are being destroyed. The earth’s water, air, forests and soils are suffering from pollution and wild fires. We are facing global warming and climate change and we bear a significant moral responsibility to heal the earth’s wounds. When we look at what’s happening in the human world, where there is famine and disasters, where

there is poverty, unjust wars, injustices, alienation, or moral decline, and add to the list – the ongoing COVID pandemic, we tend to think that the earth is a hopeless case.

In a worship material written by Betty Lynn Schwab in collaboration with Bruce Sanguin, both writers profess that the universe is not out there somewhere. We are not over here watching it. We are part of the inside of the universe. The air around us is also in every cell of our body. We are in the air and in the air. We are the result of the creativity of the universe, and in a sense, we are the very presence of that creativity at this very moment. And more importantly, Jeremiah's text reminds us that we are not separate from God, the Womb of All Life, the Heart and Mind that gave birth to this universe.

Although Jeremiah's words are difficult to ponder, there is still good news that comes out of them. "For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end." A sign of hope: "I will not make a full end." It is true there is sickness in the world, and earthquakes and war and crime and poverty. But there is also beauty and compassion and sacrifice and humility. Don't these count for something too? Are not these in the world because God is still at work? Jeremiah tells us that all is not lost. There is hope. God's grace is not lost forever. God is still speaking.

Twenty-one years ago today, we were blown away by the images of devastation. We sat speechless, watching the surreal scenes. The winds of trouble caught our full attention when nearly 3,000 people were killed, 400 were police officers and firefighters, in the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center in New York City. We commemorate this tragic event and call it the horrors of 9/11. There's some wisdom in today's text in Jeremiah to help us mark the 21st anniversary of this tragic event and to hear the prophet calling us, reminding us to act against violence and destruction. That strong wind calls us to look back, to remember, to grieve the violence, destruction and death, as well as to rejoice in the acts of courage, compassion, and solidarity of many people from all walks of life. But we are also called to look forward, to see and embrace a future that is not defined by violence and hatred but instead is shaped by hope, possibility, and the grace of God.

It is far clearer now why Jeremiah is not the most popular guy in the pulpits of the 21st century. In an age where we want to hear that we are loved by a caring, non-judgemental God, old Jeremiah's unrelenting finger-wagging sermon is hardly what any of us hunger to hear.

What do we do with him? Despite his disturbing words, we must make a place for him today. His uncompromising demands for justice, his unbending disagreement with an empty faith; his anger towards people's unwillingness to care for the earth; his unwarranted questioning of the status quo – these are themes that are mostly needed in today's world. Jeremiah is calling us to advocate for the earth. Many of us feel helpless as we watch our world bent on self-destruction and desolation because of greed and the consequences of our actions. And while we are busy debating about our responsibility for this desolation, we need the creation of relationships, tools, and technology on a local and global scale to address many of these situations. Like everything, it starts locally. At home. As we consider finding places for housing, infrastructure, and employment for people, we also need to remember other species and their important role in ecosystems and the environment on a larger scale. We can do our part in caring for the earth, no matter how simple or small it seems to be. Three words can make a big difference if we put them to practice in our daily living: reduce, recycle, re-use. Mother Earth is pleading us to recognize how deeply we are interrelated with all of creation.

I close with these powerful words by Fyodor Dostoevsky when he writes: "Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things."

Welcome back, brothers, sisters, young and old. The wind blows in different directions, but with God's grace, we know that hope still abounds. And we can make that "hope" happen. Now let's get to work! Amen.

Reflection: Take a few minutes to reflect on the message that you have just heard. How will you make amends to the earth for the mistake of putting your well-being ahead of the health of creation? What one commitment will you make to heal the earth from its desolation?

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 61.

[2] Anatheia Portier Young, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, www.workingpreacher.org.