

At the risk of saying something you have heard at least a hundred times already, the last 16 months have been challenging to say the least, possibly the most challenging time of our lives. The world as we knew it turned upside down-what we took for granted, what we took as normal, all changed almost overnight. And while there have been gifts and blessings that have come out of this collective experience, at heart many of us feel...unmoored, still trying to process what happened and is happening-confused, vulnerable, and uncertain.

When we drop into the Book of Jeremiah this morning, Jeremiah is feeling vulnerable, uncertain. He has been anointed to shake God's people up, to get them to turn from their ways- chasing other gods- shiny glittery gods. To remember who they are and who God is. To stop breaking the Covenant- the bond of mutual love God drew up with them ages ago. And so for over 20 years Jeremiah has been warning the people Israel that they would pay a price for running after fancy houses instead of spending time in God's house. For stockpiling wealth while beggars with empty cups roamed the streets. For relegating entire groups of people to second or third class citizen status. For sitting down to fancy dinners while the hungry lay dying on the doorstep. He warned them that death and destruction were the inevitable fruits of this unGodly seed. People had a variety of responses to Jeremiah and his unwelcome message; some ignored him, some slandered him, some physically attacked him. There was simply no evidence for his claims, the wealthy told him. They were prosperous. Their national defense was strong. They had what they thought

was a pretty good relationship with God with whom they didn't really bother unless they needed something. It turned out Jeremiah was right. Israel fell to Babylon during his lifetime and he witnessed both the destruction of the Temple and the wholesale exile of God's people-the harvest of the unGodly seed.

But before Jeremiah was proven right people were pretty sick and tired of him and his rants, his truth-telling. So the high priests had him arrested, beaten and put in the stocks overnight- a spectacle for all to see and mock. Jeremiah had had enough and he switched from complaining about the people to complaining to God about his own lot in life. He, a prophet of God, had just spent the night in the stocks- beaten and bloodied by the high priests. And God didn't bother to lift a darn finger to help him out. Was that any way to treat God's anointed prophet? God had sent Jeremiah to wake the people up but everyone kept right on snoring. And so he complained bitterly. Clearly, this was not how he thought things would go for those who were doing God's work.

Which raises the question, for me, of expectations- makes me ponder the first encounter between God and Jeremiah- when God recruited Jeremiah to be a prophet. What did Jeremiah think God had promised him that he did not get?

What was it he found so enticing in the first place that caused him to sign up and what did he think he was signing up for? My guess is, like most of us, Jeremiah was operating from mixed motives-don't get me wrong, God has done some of God's best work through people with mixed motives. So whatever else got him

hooked, Jeremiah wanted to play his part in God's dream for the world. But given that he was human and all, it is likely he was also looking for something in return- for a little reward.

If you could chat with Jeremiah I am guessing he would tell you he wanted to be effective- he wanted people to listen to him. This isn't a bad thing- but the problem is many of us can't stop at that. We progress from wanting to be effective to wanting to be looked up to, to have power-who is going to listen to you, after all, unless you are held in some esteem? The wish to be effective can easily morph into the wish to be admired-which rarely pans out for followers of God.

The most common expectation would-be followers of God possess, I think, is that if we are faithful to God we will be protected, rescued, defended, upheld, showered with blessings. The morally and Scripturally bankrupt "prosperity Gospel" preached by Joel Osteen among many others is all about this idea-the idea that wealth, possessions are a sign of God's favor, God's reward for being a fabulous person. For Osteen and his ilk that means getting massive mansions and multiple cars. But from a Biblical perspective this is absolutely bonkers- I can't recall reading about a single person who received public acclaim, wealth, power or prestige from living into his or her call. Prodding or dragging the world towards God's dream is hard work and it does not come with a fancy sign up bonus. Fighting for justice for all people, fighting the forces of evil and hate, takes courage, it takes a realistic assessment of what you are signing up for. It takes

the willingness to let go of the idea of reward- that we are owed anything for living into God's dream.

We in this room, every one of us, is called to prod, drag the world towards God's dream. We have to choose to answer- God isn't going to force us to do anything.

We can choose to ignore the call. The call to dismantle white supremacy in a country in which the average white American family of 3 has 20 times the wealth of the average black American family of 3 and in which voting rights for Black and Brown people are under significant threat. To work for the civil rights of LGBTQ children of God in a nation that still relegates them to second or third class citizenship. To work for peace in a nation in which the myth of redemptive violence is alive and well and where thousands die each year in a hail of bullets.

To point out to this generation that death and destruction are the inevitable fruits of this unGodly seed. To remind the people God loves wildly- to remind ourselves-we have forgotten God. We need to enter the work our call demands knowing that the baseline for life is God's love- that is a given-and we do not need to work to earn it, but we also need to enter with our eyes wide open and with our expectations in order.

Because, as Jeremiah found out, the only reward for doing God's work is doing God's work. Also- if we do that work really well we are likely to end up killed. Or in stocks. Or at least in the doghouse. That is the pinnacle of success in the upside down world of God's kingdom where you choose the lowest seat in the house and invite all sorts of inappropriate people to dinner. Countless people

bear witness to this truth- from Jeremiah to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr - all of them God's good friends.

If you haven't been scared off yet, if you hang around church until Palm Sunday you will hear the story of what happened to God's best friend. His reward for perfect love, for walking always in God's way, was death on a cross. But here we are, worshiping him. Puzzling isn't it. That we ever got the notion that our faith should win us respect, influence, prosperity or protection. Jesus never once told his followers that the Gospel would "work".

So as I puzzle through this I figure either we here have been seduced, like Jeremiah, or we have glimpsed something in Jesus that eclipses all our self-seeking fantasies. I am not going to even try to describe what that something might be, for I fear it might end up sounding just like all the other rewards we pursue. There was no reward for Jeremiah. There is no reward.

There is only the self-emptying, self- annihilating love of God, who raises us from the dead.

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