

Proper 19 – 16 Pentecost – Year C – September 15, 2010 - Homily
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14, 12-17; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15:1-10
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On one of my multiple business trips to Toronto, a whole group of us met and went out to dinner. A bunch of tables were pushed together for us to make one long gathering in an outside covered patio. It was a cool evening, and the patio area was being heated by a few of those tall propane heaters that look like lamp stands. As the meal progressed, so did the fidgeting and general unease. There was a distinct tension in the air as if something was about to happen.

Jeremiah's prophetic words speak of a coming storm so hot it will burn up, rather than breeze through. The word storm comes from the proto-Germanic *sturmaz*, meaning noise, or tumult. Jeremiah's lament speaks of God's judgment, and of how God will use the Babylonian empire to bring catastrophe upon the chosen people. The impact of the devastation caused by the Babylonians was indeed every bit as bad as Jeremiah prophesied. God's covenant people were scattered and exiled. During their exile, the survivors came to believe that the Babylonians were sent against them as instruments of God's judgment. In other passages of Jeremiah, the foolishness and stupidity of Israel and Judah is described variously as ingratitude; unresponsiveness to discipline and prophetic warnings; hypocrisy; and seeking salvation in other gods, otherwise known as idolatry and unfaithfulness to YHWH.

Jeremiah gives a graphic and detailed account of the destruction. Each point is punctuated with the phrase "I looked on the earth, and lo..." The disastrous events unfold in Jeremiah's mind's eye, like a reversal of the steps described in Genesis when God created the heavens and the earth and populated it with plants, animals and humans. The fruitful land will again become barren and void, filled with chaos. Jeremiah sees and is mesmerized by the horror of it all. There's no doubt in Jeremiah's words that this is God's doing. The disaster is inevitable, but there is a hint that the people will find grace beyond it – as indeed the Biblical record of salvation history shows to be true.

No one wants to be called foolish or stupid, especially by God. However, God is not in the business of cheap grace without heartfelt and true repentance. God's characteristic judgment is, nonetheless, always linked to God's love. In this passage, we know that God's love created a covenant community that was meant to reflect God's love, mercy and compassion, and respond to God's commands faithfully. It is said that, "Accountability is human stewardship of the gift of that love and its goals within the community." The divine goals expressed throughout Scripture include equality and justice for all, as well as compassionate care for the poor and oppressed. Through Jeremiah's prophetic voice, God demonstrates concern for His children, but that does not mitigate the need for repentance when necessary. What God sees in His people is foolishness and stupidity. This is manifest through their words and deeds, demonstrating a deep and abiding spiritual ignorance at work here. In the absence of true or divine wisdom, the people have done what people will always do if they believe there is no sovereign power at work in the world or in their lives. They have become selfish, greedy, idolatrous, and evil in God's sight. There is a genuine absence of Godly character and virtue amongst the chosen people. God's children seem to be willfully ignorant of what God requires of them.

Today, it is hard enough for you and me to accept the challenges in life that lead us to growth in our faith. Or even for us to be grounded in faith, and accept the imperative to continue our spiritual growth. We are much more sophisticated than bacteria in a Petri dish, growing like crazy as long as the food holds out. We tend to seek and settle for a homeostatic state, level ground if you

like, or a kind of bedrock of immoveable beliefs that form a foundation of our sense of security. This is where we feel safe and comfortable. It is that place where we also drift into foolishness by thinking we have it all together, and under control. It is hard to change, even when we know that is what God is calling us to do. Few of us desire God to really rock our world. Spiritual earthquakes are terrifying and dislocating. What we thought was familiar terrain suddenly disappears or changes dramatically. Spiritual growth is hard work! Yet transformation, movement, change and growth are not optional extras to being a disciple of Jesus. So when we try to ignore God, fail to understand what is required of us, or become resistant to God's will in any other way, then we can be sure that God will do whatever it takes to regain our attention. These storms can blindsides us if we are going along in our own little world. God's storms can come in many forms. It can be everything from the wake up call of the century, the proverbial two by four that hits us in the head, or a nagging feeling that something is just not right in our lives. God is leading us back to prayer, reflection, discernment, and often repentance, in order that we can figure out what is going on, and in what area of our lives God is challenging us to grow.

Whatever method God chooses to get our attention, it might feel to us like an alien invasion. Beliefs and ideas that we may have held sacrosanct can suddenly be challenged in all kinds of ways – something we hear, something we read, something we learn at Bible study. That's very scary and threatening! Things in our lives that we thought would not change are turned upside down, leaving us feeling vulnerable and even desolate. A fool that believes there is no God, lives without hope, and exiles them self from God's grace. To refuse to remember God's steadfast love and faithfulness, or to stubbornly prevail in meeting our own selfish needs without respect or regard for others is to be stupid in God's sight. As Christians, our faith is grounded in the hope of the resurrection. Even in difficult times, when we are undergoing painful growth in our faith journey, or transitioning into a deeper love and knowledge of God, the rock that keeps us steady is our hope and faith in Christ Jesus. We live our resurrection lives now because of the present joy of our salvation, not just the future expectation of eternal life. Our hope lies in the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesies later in these words, "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

Back in Toronto, as the evening progressed there was a distinct air of unease. The conversation was flowing just fine, but a few of us were definitely twitchy, and kept looking around nervously. About half way through the meal, quite suddenly a two to three foot fireball appeared maybe fifteen feet behind our table. It began to roll towards us. I watched it quite mesmerized and even unbelieving at first, almost like Jeremiah. Then snapping right back to reality I joined the flood of people making a quick exit. The folks who had their back to the fireball, later told me and others that they saw the flames reflected in our eyes and they got up and fled without a second thought. One of the propane heaters had malfunctioned – a flame had also set fire to the canvas roof of the patio cover. It was probably all "out of code", who knows? No one was hurt in the incident, praise God! But the heat was a little too close for comfort! As we go home this week, and reflect on Jeremiah's prophetic words, it would be good for us all to consider whether we are flirting with fire, or perhaps feeling the heat of the storm in our own spiritual lives. If there is anything nagging at us, then God will help us if we refocus on Him. Taking time to pay close attention to God's will is always time well spent.

Amen.