

## **Morning Worship, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 (Proper 19)**

### **Lectionary:**

#### **Jeremiah 4:**<sup>11-12,22-28</sup>.

Jeremiah was either born or began his ministry in thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, in 627 BC. During his life, Babylonia succeeded Assyria as the dominant power in the Middle East. He witnessed the return to worship of the Lord (instituted by Josiah), but also (after Josiah's death in battle in 609), the return of many of the people to paganism. When Babylon captured Jerusalem in 587, Jeremiah emigrated to Egypt. God called him to be a prophet to Judah and surrounding nations, in the midst of these political and religious convulsions. Our reading today is taken from one of his poems. In it, he paints a bleak picture of the consequences of spiritual faithlessness, a wrathful God that will destroy the earth as the Israelites know it.

#### **Psalm 14**

The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) They are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, and thanksgiving, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Today's reading is a lament for a faithless generation.

#### **1 Timothy 1:**<sup>12-17</sup>.

1 Timothy, along with 2 Timothy and Titus form the Pastoral Epistles. Their style and themes are so similar that many think they were written by the same person. They claim to be written by Paul, but the structure of the church that they show and the content of their teaching indicate they were written a generation or so later. In New Testament times, a writer sometimes honoured an earlier leader by writing under his name. 1 Timothy begins by emphasizing the importance of correct belief and by cautioning against false teachers; the leaders at this time are designated as bishops, deacons and elders. TIn today's passage, the writer also speaks as Paul, praising the grace that enabled a persecutor of the early Christians to become one of the most faithful servants of the early church.

#### **Luke 15:**<sup>1-10</sup>

The three synoptic gospels offer similar portraits of the life of Jesus; Luke is the third of the synoptic writers. Its author, is traditionally thought to be Luke the physician, who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys. He draws on three sources: Mark (via Matthew), a collection of "sayings" (known as Q for Quelle, German for source) and his own knowledge. The text never uses Semitic words, suggesting that he wrote primarily for Gentiles. His gospel places particular emphasis on God's love for the women of Israel, the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and lepers. In

today's reading Jesus answers criticisms that he dines with the outcasts of society by telling two of his best-loved parables- the lost sheep and the lost coin.

### **On the Lighter Side: Out of Bounds at BlackComb**

Have you seen that yellow, two-engined reconnaissance plane from Comox circling low over Squamish recently? I have seen it several times in the past few weeks. Each time it passes over our house, I worry whether someone like Tyler Wright has climbed one of our mountain ranges and got lost or injured, or has ventured out into Howe Sound in a small boat without listening to the weather forecast, and the plane is out there searching for them. In the winter, the problem seems even worse- ski resorts such as Whistler-BlackComb post large signs warning "Danger- Out of Bounds," but people with little experience push past them and find themselves buried in a deep crevasse. As night falls, the people of our Squamish Search and Rescue Teams must go out into the dangerous areas at their own expense, and at great risk to their own lives, looking for someone who may be badly injured, and try to carry them back to safety. The Search and Rescue groups are not only very brave and public-spirited, but also show a great deal of love for people they probably don't know, and who may have got into trouble because they acted stupidly.

There weren't too many billion-dollar ski resorts in the time of Jesus. Nor were there reconnaissance aircraft to look for folk who were lost on the mountains. But there was danger on the hillside from treacherous rocks and marauding beasts. The main problem came not from skiers, but from sheep. Sometimes, at least to our way of thinking, a sheep can also be pretty stupid; may be, it just doesn't know any better. So it wanders off among a maze of little paths on the hillside, looking for longer and tastier grass, and very quickly it becomes totally lost. It has no idea how to get back to join the rest of the flock. When I was a boy in North Wales, I saw many sheep in the fields across the lane from our house. Most of them stayed in the field sensibly enough, but there were always a few who were more adventurous. They would force their way through the hedge, down the lane and over the stone wall that surrounded our garden, hoping that our cabbages would taste better than the farmer's grass. It was fairly easy for us to drive these sheep back to the farm. But if an animal is lost on a snowy mountainside in the middle of winter, it's a very different story. If you want a glimpse of the shepherd's life, try reading "I bought a mountain," the story of Thomas Firbank, a rather naive Canadian who bought a sheep farm in the mountains of North Wales. It is cold and dangerous work to look for a lost sheep in the winter. But a good shepherd is prepared to do this. He or she tucks all the other sheep safely into the sheepfold, closes the gate securely, and climbs over the hillside for many hours looking for the missing animal.

One of the best-loved stories of Jesus was about a shepherd just like that. He left his other 99 sheep behind, and went out into the cold and ice to seek the one that was missing. He could have said "It was that stupid animal's own fault. If it had any brains, it would never have jumped over that wall or pushed through that hedge. I'll leave it out on the hillside to teach it a lesson." Or he could have said "Well, it's only one sheep that's missing. That one's always been a real nuisance. I'll just stay here in my warm little hut and keep an eye on the other 99 sheep that do what I tell them." But instead, the shepherd sought

high and low, inching along narrow mountain ridges in treacherous wind and snow until he found the missing animal. May be it was injured? He certainly didn't even make it walk home! No, he wrapped its legs around his shoulders and carried it. And when he was back at the farm, he had a big party to celebrate finding the wanderer.

The point of the story is that Jesus thought God was like that brave and caring shepherd. God certainly wants people to be sensible and well-behaved, but is even more concerned about someone who doesn't listen to parents or teachers, the sort of person who has done something that we think is really stupid or wicked. We might say such people are no good - there's no hope for them- let them ruin their lives and face the consequences. But they have within them the potential to become the sort of person Jesus wanted all of us to be. Jesus could see this, and He loved such people as much or more than those who thought that they were always sensible and good. And He challenges all of us to welcome those who are like lost sheep, helping them to find with us the way to live more like Jesus Himself.

### **Sermon: No more talk about Sin?.**

Today's lectionary readings are all about sin- a popular topic with evangelical preachers, but perhaps not the jolliest of topics to get us as more liberal Christians back into a church-going frame of mind after a restful summer vacation. What should we say about sin in 2010? We are unlikely to pack GM Place night after night with a stirring denunciation of the sins that excited our Victorian great-grandparents, or even the founders of our United Church. But there is still a lot of it about! Just pick up a daily paper, or listen to a TV commentator reciting horrific tales of ethnic cleansing, murder, rape, and political corruption. Look at Squamish: dozens of burglaries intimidating the merchants on Cleveland Avenue, drunken drivers hiring high-priced lawyers to evade responsibility for the harm they have caused, corner stores afraid to admit more than two children because of persistent shoplifting, neighbours finding sly ways to cheat on their income tax or their HST payments. Look, if we dare, into our own hearts and confront the more subtle sins of anger, envy, pride, and lack of charity. There is no shortage of sin in our world of 2010.

But this is no new development. Already, in the time of Jeremiah, God was getting pretty steamed about the sins of the world! Calls for repentance had been ignored. Now, the Almighty would give vent to righteous anger, sending a "foe from the north" (v. 6), probably the Babylonian army, to smite Israel. The Jewish people may have had an intellectual understanding of God, but they failed to translate this knowledge into their daily living, God's judgment would sweep across the land like a fierce, burning sirocco. The chariots and cavalry of the invaders were going to destroy every city, leaving the king chicken-hearted, and the religious leaders appalled (v. 9). What was once a fruitful land would become a scene of utter desolation, a primordial void, unable to support any form of life, not even the birds (vv. 26-27).

The Psalmist was equally pessimistic, as he lamented the breakdown of moral order.

*“They are all gone aside, they are all become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (v.3). The fools that he sees are not atheists, as a quick reading of the text might suggest- they give intellectual assent to the idea of God, but deny that the Almighty is concerned with human behavior. As Proverbs puts it, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction”* (Prov. 1<sup>7</sup>). Is this a realistic picture of the way our Creator looks at sin? Should we accept this view of an angry, vengeful God? Many evangelical preachers still see the world in such terms. Unless we heed God’s call to repentance, we will be condemned either to a meaningless, chaotic void, or to the burning fires of hell.

A few years ago, Prince Charles raised a few eyebrows by making a pilgrimage to a monastic centre of the Eastern Orthodox Church on Mount Athos, in Greek Macedonia. This monastery is perhaps best known for Elder Silouan, who died in 1938. In one conversation, a hermit said to Silouan "God will punish all atheists. They will burn in an eternal fire." But the Elder looked upset. He asked the hermit, " Suppose that you were in heaven, and you could look down and see others burning in hellish flames, would you feel happy?" "It can't be helped, it's their own fault," answered the hermit. Father Silouan looked at him sadly and said - "Love cannot accept that..." That sounds more like the God in which I believe.

What does the United Church have to say about sin and salvation? In the year 2010, we find no mention of sin on either the Church’s main web-site or on our own local web pages. Nor is it featured in the “New Creed.” But if we look back to our spiritual heritage, we hear quite a lot about sin. The 1925 parliamentary “Act of Union” that created the United Church was pretty uncompromising:

*“We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law and that no man can be saved but by His grace.”*

I have particular difficulty with our Presbyterian forebears. Embedded in the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 we find the declaration:

*“By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.”*

This is the unfortunate doctrine of predestination. Some people are destined to become spiritual giants, but others, sadly, just don’t have it in them. Even worse, the difference between the elect and the reprobate lies not in the individual. All are equally unworthy, but somehow God has decided to show mercy to some, and not to others. I am not sure how far this theology was exploited in Nazi Germany, but such beliefs were certainly front and centre as Vorster’s Apartheid regime confined black citizens to menial labour in the gold and diamond mines and the squalor of townships such as Soweto. In an earlier generation, Christian shipping magnates and landowners found that predestination justified the fortunes made by trading slaves from the backward nations of Africa. George Whitfield, one of the founders of the religious awakening in the Eighteenth Century, claimed that Georgia in general and his plantation in particular would never be prosperous unless slaves were allowed to cultivate it. And predestination thrust upon the

shoulders of British imperialists the duty both to enlighten the savages of India and to destroy the culture of our indigenous peoples in residential schools.

But, as Christine will tell you, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, parted company with Whitfield on this issue. He had a very different view of sin and salvation. He didn't say "Some may be saved," or "Most may be saved," or "People like us may be saved," or even "Nearly everyone may be saved." He talked about the four "Alls." "All need to be saved. All may be saved. All may know that they are saved. All may be saved to the uttermost." The wonder of God's grace was that even the most hopeless of reprobates could find salvation. For Whitfield and his supporters, this was like waving a red rag at a bull. The Whitfield faction decided to picket Wesley's services, handing out pamphlets that denounced this horrible idea of universal salvation. But John Wesley stood up in the pulpit, tearing a copy of the leaflet into small pieces. And he invited all of the congregation to follow suit. In the words of Leslie Griffiths, a former President of the Methodist Conference, "What followed was a ticker tape welcome to a theology of grace."

Our gospel reading favours Wesley's interpretation. Luke tells us that Jesus was making himself very unpopular with the churchgoers of his day, the Scribes and Pharisees, because he was mixing with the lost and the hopeless- tax collectors and sinners. Today, our tax collectors are not only honest, but also very helpful to bemused Canadians who try to complete their tax returns. But in the time of Jesus, tax collecting had essentially been privatized. The Romans asked no questions about how the money was raised, provided that they got what they wanted. Usury, fraud and excessive personal profits were all too common in the local tax office. And because the tax collectors worked for the foreign invaders, they had made themselves ritually unclean. Surely, people like this had chosen to put themselves beyond the mercy of God. But Jesus chose to mix with such people, and to justify his actions he told those famous parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The Pharisees were even more shocked as they heard the parables. What blasphemy to liken God to a lawless roust-about like a mountain shepherd, or even worse, a woman? Jesus did not deny that many of the tax-collectors had lost their way in life. But he argued that for this reason we should strive even harder to bring them into the community of the faithful, and we should rejoice when people like Zacchaeus accepted this invitation.

The epistle of Timothy links this message of Jesus to the warnings of Jeremiah and the Psalmist. Christians should be wary of false teachers ((v. 7) who made religion an intellectual exercise, elaborating the faith rather than living the kind of life these truths demanded. "Love" (v. 5) should be the basis of Christian conduct. The Mosaic law was good (v. 8), but those who had "understanding" (v. 9) and were leading Christ-like lives had no need of it. Above all, God's mercy and love extended to those who seemed the worst of sinners. Paul himself had previously blasphemed and distorted God's message, going around persecuting and exterminating Christians. But Christ came into the world to save sinners (v. 15). There was pardon, even for someone such as Paul.

Shaw's Candida tells of the Rev James Morell, a clergyman in London's East End. He spent most evenings lecturing to left wing groups. The curtain rises as his secretary searches his diary for a time when he can speak to yet one more group. He is already promised to the Greenwich Independent Labour Party, the Tower Hamlets Radical Club and the Mile End Social Democrats. There's just no more space on the calendar. His secretary advises "...Tell them you can't come. They're only half a dozen conceited costermongers without five shillings between them." "Ah," he replies, "but you see, they are near relatives." The secretary stares in surprise – "Relatives?" "Yes," says Morell, "we have the same father – in heaven" "Oh" says the secretary, "is that all?" "Ah" he replies "Everyone says it, but no one believes it."

But Shaw is right - We all have one creator, and whoever we are – whatever our race, our politics, our sexuality, our wealth, our intellect, or our beliefs – we are all sisters and brothers. We may have lived from our infancy in homes where loving parents led us in the way of righteousness. We may be like John Newton, the author of the hymn Amazing Grace, who from the age of seven knew nothing except the harsh life of a slave trader. But Amazing Grace! Our Creator has put within each one of us the potential to become a son or a daughter of God. Let us seek out this potential within ourselves, and in all those whom we meet, rejoicing as we encourage one another in the path that Christ has trod.

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