

CROSS NOW

Texts on Sunday, September 30, 2007

Colossians 3: 1-11; Jeremiah 32: 1-15

Some from my church will recognize the phrase, “the sine-wave method of teaching the Older Testament.” I use this method in my classes to help beginners get oriented in the wilderness of the Hebrew Bible. The map is this simple. Every book and every story in it is written in relation to at least one of seven points on a table of good and evil. Abraham and Moses and David mark three high points of divine goodness. Each is followed, or swallowed, by a grievous falling into the pit. Abraham to Egypt, Moses into the time of the Judges, David into Jerusalem’s destruction and exile. I ask a class, Does this pattern seem familiar? Someone invariably says, *It reminds me of my life*. Yes. Down and up we go, and down again, oscillating, like a fragile web in a wind, between hope and grief. Must we go on like this always? If so, is *this* hell?

We read: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord . . . in the tenth year of Zedekiah, King of Judah.” *The tenth year of Zedekiah*—those five words are enough to make the heart that knows this story to brim heavy with tears. Zedekiah: the last king in the house of David to rule in Jerusalem, the last to cross the threshold of the temple. *The tenth year*: the taught heart knows the count; it stops at 11; only one year remains now to the house of David, to the house of hope, to the house of the Lord, to be burned and brought down. We have opened the Bible to read from a tragedy. It is not the sort of calamity which the TV news anchor calls “a tragedy.” *A tragedy occurred last night when fire broke out . . .* Not even the evil and disaster of September 11, 2001 compares as tragedy with what is to happen to Jerusalem in the eleventh year of Zedekiah. A soul formed by this story knows every step, every turn on the path. The word tragedy can be reserved for a special use, the local news notwithstanding, to help us speak with awe of the ruin of greatness caused by the ignorance and the arrogance of the great who could not see the rot in themselves, in their nation.

Hamlet and *Lear* and even Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman* invite us into the cleansing ritual of together watching tragedy unfold, that we may see ourselves. But Israel’s tragedy invites us into more than the together-watching ritual. Yes, we can see ourselves. But more, Israel’s story calls us to see and then set down how they actually handled tragedy, how they actually lived when the ruin of what they loved was upon them. No, it is no documentary, recording scene after scene where despair and violence randomly conquer this man or that woman. Rather, Israel has given the world an account of how great the hope was, of how appalling was the loss— temple, tradition, all time—and of how unexpected, how disturbingly creative was the word of the Lord through the prophets, that this ruin was from God’s hand, not the enemy’s, to set down righteousness on the earth in place of our evil ways.

There is no account like it in all of history, where a people accept as true the judgment of the severest critics, and while still on their knees, confess— speaks together—their responsibility for their ruin. In that very action, the heart which has learned to wait upon the Lord lifts its face from the ground to God, and the tragedy, whose seed was arrogance, begins in humility to be transformed into life of some new kind. The question is, How do you do this? When tragedy swings low, what can you do to begin to be purified from its stench and ruin, to rise and to walk again? Israel saved you some stories on that subject, like jars in the cupboard for when flood is all around.

Now, many in the church traditions seem to think that Israel’s stories are not necessary to a Christian—that they are to Christian hope like those card boards inside store-wrapped dress shirts and blouses, nice for display, but which you throw away when you put the thing on. This is an error. Perhaps it is related to the reasons that the Christian religion doesn’t really work very well for so many American church goers, who are only proud of our nation and our power, and ignorant of the rot in our

tragic history. At our most naïve, most arrogant confidence about our religion, Christians talk as if the good news can be doled out like soup from a ladle, straight from Colossians 3. “Set your minds on things that are above, where Christ is, not on things that are on earth.”—as if anyone might just go and do that, day by day, once we say we are saved. I haven’t seen it.

Consider Jeremiah, who buys a field when things are at their worst. The tragedy is about to break over them all, and he sets his mind . . . on a piece of earth in Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin. It sounds exactly opposite to Colossians’ calling us to “things above, not things that are on earth.” But try this out: What Jeremiah does with that land, with those seventeen shekels and with that deed of purchase—all those “things on earth”—is a lesson in *how* to set your mind on things above, in how to handle tragedy. You might say that the Christian tradition embraces the whole Bible as one, not because it needs a cardboard stiffener, but because without the older testimony, Christian hope would be a county fair balloon, drifting upward toward things above, airy and lofty-minded, but hopeless of its goal. Jeremiah shows us something humbling; something not all Christians accept but which Colossians itself elsewhere declares, that long before Jesus had come on earth to show the light of God’s Word, the light of God’s Word was pouring down on Israel and many saw it, and many were fully blessed in their seeing. Here is the saving grace we can see already at work in the prophet, just as it was in Jesus—that you can only set your mind on things above *by means of* things on earth, by handling them and loving them. If we cut ourselves off from the things of earth so we might fly away; if we dream only of the sweet by-and-by, then the things above, as the apostle means it, will elude us, and we will not know the joy of the declaration, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” But Jeremiah’s deed can provide a practice on the way.

What did he do with “the things of earth?” Was his mind set on them? Did he risk a huge amount of money? Did he get himself forty acres he could surely farm, if he got fired from his prophet job? Did he invest in savings bonds for his grand-nephews and nieces? You see where I am going: To have your mind set on things below means to believe that the things will bring you the happiness you really want, and that you cannot be happy without them. That’s all. That is the lynch pin holding the wheels on the cart of all your despair, on the freight of all the world’s evils, that we think we cannot live without that thing, whatever it is. And so we get it, or try to get it, however we can. This is to have our mind set on the things of earth.

But Jeremiah was up to something else as the tragedy of Jerusalem thundered near. He was not after something concrete for himself or for his relatives, even though the deed was in his name, and could be owned only by his relatives, if not by himself. No, Jeremiah was acting out hope for the sake of all who could witness it. In the midst of the storm, he was declaring for all who have eyes to see, that even now, right here, the tragic cycle of victory and grief can be overcome in an act of hope. In an action so lightly and so lovingly touching the things of earth, without grasping or grabbing, that all who see it sense its purpose: to show God’s Word on earth incarnate, God crossing over now to declare that it is safe to live and safe to die from this earth. This is how you set your mind on things above—by practicing handling things below with such care and such spiritual intelligence that any one of them can be made to gleam with the light of life that has no end but God. You know what I mean. The awareness of it may last but seven seconds, but by the grace of God, you can so regard the face of one of the earth’s wretched, or of your enemy, or of your own child, that hope, eternal hope, beams through you. You can so turn your eye toward the slightest object on your kitchen table as to cherish, with awe the wonder of molecules and movements of creation that consort with human hands you will never see to bring paper or potatoes to you like a prayer. When you are so minded of the utterness of your being blessed, no matter its context of griefs, there can come alive the desire to be a blessing to others, as Jeremiah did, as Jesus did, by means of these things below.

Cross now into the possibility of being a blessing, of giving something up in such a manner that whoever sees sees not the giver but the giving; sees not the thing itself, but the things above, sees Love alive. About ten years ago, some time before I was called to this city, Elder Bill Schulz of Central Church was moved very much by Jeremiah's deed, as he and the church wrestled with an opportunity to purchase property for new ministry, even while all the numbers on the church books were turning down. Moved by Bill's vision, the church did buy that field in this town whose numbers were almost always tumbling down. For the better part of these ten years, lively hope sprang from children's eyes in that building. Now, as most of you know, the building and its programs are closed. All the buildings of Central are gone from our hands. What does it mean? What does it mean that all our plans turn and shift and founder, whether in our generation or long after we are gone? What does it mean that all thing below are passing away. When your mind is set on things above, when your heart soars with gratitude to say, "I have died, and my life is hid with Christ in God," then you know that you are responsible to make sense of what is passing away. You must interpret, for your sake, for the sake of the generation to come. Take some thing you love and have loved dearly, and when the time is right, let it go with your own hands in such a way that any who see will see Love. Cross now.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
Central Presbyterian Church

*delivered at MacAlpine Presbyterian Church
Buffalo, New York*