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St. Brendan's Episcopal Church
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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-32
"Yet I will not make a full end."

A few weeks ago folks who could fit it into their end-of-summer calendars had the opportunity to gather at Elaine's house and discuss *Life After Doom*, by Brain McLaren. Folks who couldn't make it or for whom the title was uninviting can get the synopsis here—climate change! Too late! Try anyway! Work together in community! And stay in the moment with as much gratitude as possible for every little thing for which you can be grateful, while you do what you can, no matter how small. Gratitude wherever possible, nourish community, stay in the moment, do what you can.

We turn to Jeremiah and Luke, who will help us with these tasks. A bit of exploration of Jeremiah in a teacherly way before I get to the preacherly way—sometimes the biggest spiritual insight, the "Oh wow, I never thought of that," comes to me from digging around in the language, the historical setting, the text in relation to other texts, and so forth. In addition to reading the Jeremiah text in the Christian Bible NRSV translation, which we have heard this morning, I read it in the Jewish Study Bible. And something very important jumps out at us when we do that.

The verse that in the Christian version reads (God is speaking) – "At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse—a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.", in the Jewish version reads, "At that time it shall be said concerning this people and Jerusalem: The conduct of My poor people is like searing wind from the bare heights of the desert, it will not serve to winnow or to fan. A full blast from them comes against Me. Now I in turn will bring charges against them."

The conduct of my poor people is like searing wind. Not a wind issuing forth from God, but a wind against God, caused by the behavior of God's people. Hold that thought! God is not the

initiator of the searing, hot wind, the people are. Their conduct is the problem. We are reading texts in translation into English, of course, but these differences are not accounted for by that.

The next set of verses we read from Jeremiah go on to portray a "foolish" people without sense and a world overcome by human evil. There are some differences in the language between the Christian and Jewish versions, but nothing as striking as what we just read. And, with the help of commentary, we learn that the phrase "waste and void" in Hebrew occurs **only one other place in Scripture**, in Genesis 1:2, translated in the NRSV as "formless void." The void that existed at the beginning of creation has now returned. From this we can see that the verses in Jeremiah are verses of **de-**creation—what God has made is now being un-made. The spirit of creation, the wind from God, the breath that swept over the face of the waters, bringing all into life is now a wind that is scorching and destructive, and created by the behavior of the people. In Genesis 1, God forms land and lights the heavens. But what Jeremiah sees is the opposite of that—the earth is back to void, the heavens have no light. Creation has been unmade.

Jeremiah writes in one of the most tragic and world-ending times of the people of Israel; the city of Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar and the people are being carried off into exile. And Jeremiah, like all the prophets, in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Christian scriptures, believes that the people have brought this tragedy upon themselves, by flouting God, by not living in the ways which God has instructed them to do. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, we read of promises made by God to the people of Israel, always imbued with the conviction that God will exercise power in a manner that is both ethical and rational, and the people will do likewise—key phrase there— "the people will do likewise." The people don't get to behave like spoiled, thoughtless, self-centered children, temper-tantruming and being greedy, trampling on the rights and ignoring the needs of others, and then expect God to sort it all out. The people have full stature in a covenant modeled on all the other ancient covenants of the world they lived in—legal documents between kings and subjects, where despite the power differential, the "lesser party"—in this case, humans—and the greater power, God, both have rights and responsibilities. The god of the Hebrews was not a despot who could do whatever he or she wanted, at a whim.

The dire descriptions we have heard from Jeremiah are a prelude to his words in later passages about accepting the grim reality that the people are experiencing. And they are words about learning to thrive in adverse circumstances. Jeremiah doesn't downplay the catastrophe of the captivity and the exile, but he encourages the people to live within it, trusting in God. "'When you search for me, you will find me…' says the Lord." (Jer 29:13a).

The words and the teaching of Jeremiah (and of Luke) were set down during "End Times", several hundred years apart, although they wouldn't have called their situations that, believing as they did in the **unending** faithfulness and presence of God. From Luke we hear the assurance, the promise that no one and nothing is too small or too lost to be forgotten. Jeremiah tells us that we need to accept life on life's terms, in order to move forward. Luke tells us two parables of Jesus that reassure us that no matter our behavior, God seeks us, God rejoices when we return. Jeremiah quotes God thus —"I will not make a full end." Both of them write to, and amongst, confused, frightened, angry people, in troubled times. Just like us.

We spoke earlier about the Creation story in Genesis 1. After the world is made, we hear the story of the first humans. God says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." A handily self-serving interpretation of that word "dominion" has been used by many Christians for centuries to mean that we get to do whatever we want to the rest of creation, we're the bosses. No covenant of rights and responsibilities here! Jewish commentary is careful to point out that humans are presented not as the owners of creation, only God is that—but as stewards. God has made humankind in God's image, and both the Jewish scriptures and the Christian scriptures tell us that this image of God includes unending love for ALL of what God has made. God loves us, and we are meant to love the world, every bit of it, every person, every rock and tree and animal. We are able to love in this way because we are loved. And that love includes painstaking attention and care, and the exercise of power ethically and rationally.

When Jerusalem fell to the armies of King Nebuchadrezzar, its leading citizens were carried off to Babylon. Jeremiah at first stayed behind, and wrote letters to these exiles, telling them that

Jerusalem would be destroyed and their captivity in Babylon would last a long time. He was telling them this not to further distress them, but to encourage them to face the harsh reality of their times, to seek some kind of normalcy despite the world-ending cataclysm they were in, and not to waste their energy and their time in mourning, hoping against hope that the life they had known would return. His message was that the old days and the old ways were over. This exile in Babylon, this conquest of their nation, this destruction of their temple, is the context in which God will now work. Jeremiah recognized that for them to have a future of any kind, they were going to have to start over, renewing their relationship with God, and living differently, permanently.

What is the potentially world-ending cataclysm for our times? The words of Jeremiah, his description of the unmaking of God's creation, can't help but remind us of climate change. The Jewish version of Jeremiah's words links this de-creation to human behavior. Jeremiah wasn't talking about physical, biological climate change—but he was talking about the kind of attitudes and actions that have brought us to the point we in the 21st century are at— attitudes and actions that all too often treat others as resources to exploit rather than as partners in a web of relationship.

When we think historically and scientifically about climate change, looking for cause and effect, removing emotion and accountability for a moment, we can see that, basically, what we humans have done here on planet Earth is evolve. Use our intelligence and our innate capacities—we could say, our God-given capacities—to make our lives better and better. Some scientists tell us that climate change as created by humans rather than geological processes began with the invention of agriculture. Humans figured out ways to divert streams and rivers, to make green spaces where there hadn't been any, affecting the circulation of air and water. Humans cut down forests and burned them for heat and cooking. For millennia, these were minute changes in the atmosphere of the planet, but they are examples of the exercise of our ability to alter the natural world to our own advantage, often at the expense of other living things. Those early humans, just like farmers and gardeners today quickly learned things from the land and the climate even as they changed it, nourishing the soil, conserving water, keeping track of what would grow best and so on. The harmonious balance wasn't perfect, of course, but people were dependent upon

understanding their own locale and working with it. And religious belief and practice played a huge and mostly positive role in this work with nature, even as people were unknowingly altering the world. Early humans, just like us, wanted more of what was good and developed techniques to foster that. But their tools and practices had unforeseen consequences over the long-term.

So now let us put emotion and accountability back into this discussion of climate change. What would Jeremiah say if he were here observing us? He would remind us that our use of tools and practices has not been, is never, just innocent evolution. If we do not ground ourselves in God's mandates for justice and care for all of creation, if we put our own desires ahead of God's, we are bringing about our own destruction. His words 500 or so years before the Common Era are full of passion, full of angry, devastated critique, of judgment. He sees the behavior of the people which has brought on the judgment of God made evident by the Babylonian conquest and calls it out. He tells the people that they have closed the door forever on the lives they once had. He might say the same to us. Scientists are certainly telling us that. But Jeremiah also gives practical advice to the exiles, telling them to live the best lives they can in exile and under conquest, and rebuilding their relationship with God. And he tells them that God has said, "I will not make a full end."

On this Sunday as we celebrate Creation we are aware of the vast reach of human alienation from God and from the natural world. It would be easy to despair. But let us instead practice gratitude for every little thing that we can be grateful for, do what we can, no matter how small. Nourish community, loving as God loves us. Trust that no matter what, God is with us. Amen.