

Proper 19C, St. John's Olney, 15 September 2019

The Reverend Henry P. McQueen

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

S.D.G.

And there is the prophet Jeremiah welcoming us this Sunday morning, what a way to start your day? Jeremiah is not the most cheerful of prophets and this passage is no exception; there does not seem to be an end to his gloom and doom. In this passage the very foundations of creation are being torn down. In creation God said "Let there be light" and there was light; Jeremiah looked to the heavens and there was no light. In creation God gathered the waters together in one place and the dry land appeared; that firm foundation of dry land that God formed is now changed, in Jeremiah we find that it quakes and moves to and fro. In creation God let the earth put forth vegetation and God filled the sky with birds of every kind; in Jeremiah the fruitful land was a desert and all the birds of the air were gone.

Happy Sunday?

In truth it can feel like that, for all of us. For a multitude of reasons, large and small, corporate and universal or very individual, life can feel like the very foundation that we cling to is crumbling. And that is for me where I find the answer to the question "Why Christian?" When all those around me see no light I can see light in the darkness and in that light I can see the answer to the question "Why Christian?".

During the month of September we are exploring the question – Why Christian? In October we will try to answer the question "Why Anglican / Why Episcopal? and in November we will drill down and look at the question "Why Saint John's". But we start with a firm foundation, we start with exploring Why Christian.

When Jeremiah speaks of judgement and the whole land being a desolation, when Jeremiah says the heavens grow black we have a choice: we can be like those the prophet speaks of, we can be foolish people who are skilled at doing evil, we can turn our backs on God, turn our backs to all that God has taught us, turn our backs to the prophets and turn our backs to the law, we can turn inward and believe that self reliance and pulling ourselves up with our own boot straps is the answer; or, and this is our choice, we can stand with God and proclaim why we are Christian.

In 1995 this country experienced the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in our history, the Oklahoma City bombing. As rescue efforts began 24 search and rescue dog teams came from around the country to scour the bomb site in hopes of locating survivors. Sniffer dogs who search for humans are trained for two distinct duties, there are cadaver dogs who search for the remains of those who have died, and there are search and rescue dogs who are trained to find the living. After days of searching the site of this horrific bombing the handlers noticed that their dogs were no longer responding as they should, they were showing signs of depression. The dogs who were trained to locate survivors were only finding the casualties of the bombing and it affected them. These trained dogs were becoming sullen, they were becoming dark and lost.

The handlers had to respond to this overwhelming sense of loss that they and their dogs were experiencing. So amidst the rubble and debris, other rescue workers purposely hid themselves, and the dogs were sent out to search again. These searches were successful, the dogs found living human beings, and the dogs did what they were trained to do, upon finding a survivor they rejoiced and played with a toy. They threw an impromptu dog party complete with barking and wagging tails.

Jeremiah, and our world, can feel overwhelming; but we are Christian – so there is always hope, there is always light in the darkness. There is always someone who will do the right thing.

In Luke's gospel today we heard of two people who did the right thing; a shepherd and an unnamed woman. Sorry to say but, both shepherds and unnamed women were not held in high regard in Jesus' time, they were not heroes, they were not someone to turn to in time of trouble. Yet in today's reading they both did the right thing. The shepherd found the lost sheep, and the unnamed woman found the lost coin. Seek, find, rejoice, that is the framework of this story. That is the hope we find on these pages, that is the inspiration we need.

For my own education I often look at the works of talented photographers with the hope that, even accidentally, I might capture an image that approaches the level of their work. I find inspiration in looking at other photographers images. While doing this I recently came upon a series of photographs that were all created from a composition of plastic trash that had washed up on a beach. Each day this photographer would

walk along the beach and pick up the plastic that had been washed ashore. As the mound of plastic accumulating in his studio grew he began to see a pattern emerging and from that he created a series of images. This was all trash, this was all found objects, there was nothing special about any of these items, but from these lost items he created some beautiful images that told a story about plastic pollution. From these lost items he created something that could cause us to rejoice.

There was nothing special about the plastic in the photographs, other than it was lost. There was nothing special about the sheep in the story, other than it was lost. There was nothing special about the coin in the story, other than the coin was lost.

We often hear this parable and in our minds already envision Jesus as the good shepherd. Jesus who seeks out the lost sheep. Jesus who carries the sheep back to the flock on his shoulders. Pavlov rings a bell and his dogs salivate, we hear this parable and see Jesus as the good shepherd. But there is another character in this story.

There is a woman, an unnamed woman; and she comes to us as a housekeeper. This housekeeper cleans her home, she dusts and sweeps, she sets everything in order so that she might find a missing coin. There is nothing special about the coin. If I reach into my pocket and pull out the change that has accumulated there I can not tell you the story behind any of the coins, they all look the same. They are different sizes, different colors, but they really are all the same, they are all pocket change. They are all pretty ordinary.

But this ordinary woman, a housekeeper, does the most ordinary of tasks – cleaning, so that she might find the lost coin.

I have no intention, or desire, to take away our collective image of Jesus as the good shepherd; that image is found through Scripture and the psalter. We so often turn to the comforting words of the 23rd psalm; “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.”

That image of the good shepherd sustains us, but, have you ever considered that this ordinary woman who is cleaning the house, this ordinary women who finds the lost coin is Jesus?

Have you ever considered that Jesus comes to us as an ordinary house keeper, that Jesus comes to us in the midst of the ordinary task of cleaning?

God comes to us in the ordinary. God seeks us out, not because we are unique or special, but because we are lost. God seeks us, God finds us, and God rejoices with all of heaven that we have been found. We who were lost have been found.

The 14th century poet and mystic, Lal Ded, says it this way:

I was passionate,
filled with longing,
I searched
far and wide.
But the day
that the Truthful One
found me,
I was home.”

Why Christian? because God will seek me out, God will find me, and God, and all the heavens, will rejoice.

Why Christian? because there is always always always light in the darkness.

There is always hope.

There is always God in Jesus Christ our Lord; and I don't have to be special or unique, I only have to be lost and God will find me.

There is always always always God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen,