

## Potter and Clay

For the next several weeks, we'll be looking at the prophet Jeremiah. All of the prophets did their work around the time of either Israel or Judah's destruction. Jeremiah began his prophesy just before Judah's defeat by Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BC. His work carried over into the time of the exile, when as many as a fourth of the people of Judah were deported to Babylon...including many of its best and brightest.

That event was deeply traumatic for Judah. Even worse was the realization, through the prophets, that Israel's priests and kings were not immune from God's judgment. That this horrible event didn't happen because their God was weak. Instead, it happened because God ordained it.

That was shocking to the priests and kings, and to the people who bought into the intertwined system of throne and temple.

For that matter, it's uncomfortable for us. It forces us to face that difficult question "what is God doing when the really terrible things happen? Did God do this?"

It's a haunting question that all too often leads people to give up on God. I think the best thing to say is that the answer is not the same in every situation. If your loved one dies in a car accident, that's not God's doing. If someone is abused or assaulted, that's not God's doing. That's the wrongdoing of the abuser.

None of that kind of bad stuff is what God intended for us. But God doesn't manipulate any of creation. God opted out of micromanaging people and nature. What God does do is suffer with us in the midst of our suffering. God weeps with us. But then God stands with us and walks with us to get us through it.

Much of the crappy stuff that happens to us is not remotely God's doing. It's stuff that happens in a world that God does not manipulate. Things happen and God promises to meet us in the midst of it and walk with us through it.

But what specifically about what happened to Judah? That seems different. Jeremiah is pretty clear that the defeat and exile of Judah was a result of God's action against them. This is not in the category of bad things that happen for no apparent reason. In essence, Judah brought this on themselves.

They have failed to be the people God called them to be. Like a potter wrestling with clay, God has been in a centuries long period of shaping a people, only to have them stubbornly and repeatedly go their own way.

When you look at the sort of Zen-like image on the front of the bulletin, or when you watch a video of a potter, it looks so easy.

When Daryl was the Adjutant General for the National Guard, the adjutants' general of the United States met twice a year. One of the meetings we went to was in Albuquerque. The generals all worked and the spouses did fun things, at least at the summer meeting. One of our activities in Albuquerque was pottery making.

It is not as easy as it looks. You get your lump of clay and put it on the wheel and get it spinning. You're spinning along merrily, trying to shape it with your hands, but pretty soon your pot starts to lean. You try to straighten it up, but pretty soon it's a misshapen lump that only vaguely resembles a pot or vase. Or you realize one side is getting too thin and you try to correct it and the whole top comes off.

There's not much to do but pull it off, roll it up and start over. We were just doing it for fun, but if I really was invested in creating something beautiful, I would have just been frustrated. It's almost like the clay has a mind of its own.

That's what Jeremiah is being shown. The clay represents Judah. Judah has been wrestling with God for centuries since the Mt. Sinai experience and the gift of the law. Through the period of the judges, the people would get themselves into a mess and God would raise up a judge that could help them and bring them back to the people God wanted them to be...for a while.

Through the monarchy, God raised up prophets to try to get the people reshaped to be who God called them to be. Repeatedly, Israel, and then Judah, chose their own way...a way that did not lead to life.

Now, in the days of Jeremiah, God is reaching the point when the clay needs to be smashed and rolled up in a ball and slapped on the wheel again.

But what exactly is it about Judah that brings things to this point? And is there still a chance for them to avoid this terrible fate? In this, the prophets all speak pretty much with their own unique voice to the same things. Here's Jeremiah in an earlier oracle of judgment on the nation:

<sup>5</sup> For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, <sup>7</sup> then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.

Judah's chief sins were idolatry and the exploitation and injustice with which they treated one another – especially those at the bottom – the immigrants, the widows, the orphans, the poor.

At the beginning of Jeremiah, there is still an opportunity to repent. That was really the chief goal God set for the prophets – the dire warnings were meant to bring Judah back into line with the people God wanted them to be.

Still, in today's reading, the possibility of repentance is there. Judah, and most especially its kings and priests, are faced with a choice. Will they turn back to God? Will they turn away from worship of other gods? Will they trust God instead of relying on alliances with other nations to save them?

Will they strive to live as God wants them to – by caring for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant? By treating one another justly?

Or will they continue on the self-destructive path they have been on?

If we are to believe Jeremiah and the words God gave him, Judah could have averted disaster. But it's hard to turn the tide once idolatry and oppression have become a way of life. Entrenched in ways that denied God and hurt people, the nation barrels towards destruction. In essence, prolonged stubbornness and resistance to God will lead to God essentially letting them have their own way...a way that leads to destruction.

And lest we decide Jeremiah's words can be left in the dusty path of Jewish history, today's gospel makes it pretty clear that God is still in the business of shaping us and pruning us. Jesus' teachings tell us that what God wanted for Israel and Judah, God still wants from us...to care for the vulnerable, to love one another, to not worship a god of our own making. A god who backs our plans and schemes that lead to the same injustice of which Judah was guilty.

Jeremiah's words are words to a nation that has lost its way. Jeremiah's words...and the words of the other prophets...and the words of Jesus...remind us what we as Christians are still supposed to be about. They remind us that God is still the potter. And we are the clay. The hope is still for an end product that achieves the kind of world God wants. A world of justice and compassion.

Later in Jeremiah, we will hear words of hope. We will hear that God's harsh words of dire consequences won't be the last words...that the clay will be reshaped by God.

But for today, we are invited into the same choice Judah had. Which god will we follow? Which God will we obey?