

Kirk of St. James, August 30th, Sermon, Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Over the past five months perhaps you have found yourself thinking about the pandemic and how it is affecting humanity. A number of weeks into the pandemic the world famous Madonna posted a statement that did not sit well with people. While surrounded by rose petals and quarantining in her mansion she called the virus “the great equalizer.” I believe what she meant was the virus did not discriminate. Whether you were rich or poor, or what country you lived in, or what profession you held anyone could catch the virus. The problem with that statement while it may be true is that there are a lot of factors that come into play. We know there are areas of the world where people could not afford to quarantine (even here in our own city), or their jobs as front line workers did not give them the options. There are areas of the world where hospital and health system capacity are almost non-existent, and access to much needed medical supplies are few. So, while anyone could in theory catch the virus there is a disproportionate part of the world where for various reasons your risks are much higher and more deadly.

Even here on the island there was a recent news article talking about how the pandemic was especially difficult for people struggling with addictions. Without access to supports like N.A or A.A groups and, people being restricted in travel and contact with others, people were suffering. I don't know how you feel but, I really struggle with that. For example, people in war torn countries, or struggling with famine, now having to contend with a global pandemic seems really unfair. I am certain there were people struggling with

this question in Italy when their hospitals were overrun, and the military had to carry away the bodies. Situations like this, where suffering feels like it is overrunning us can bring up the question of theodicy—“the exploration of the reality that in spite of God’s goodness and omnipotence, evil exists.” To put it in more familiar terms the question “why do bad things happen to good people?”

There is no way in light of how complicated the question of theodicy is that we could deal with it fully this morning. However, it is something Jeremiah is wrestling with in our scripture reading this morning. I find it helpful to hear Jeremiahs thoughts, and God’s response.

Jeremiah was a determined prophet with a difficult calling. His job was to stand in the face of wrong doing and call people to account. He must look at what is hopeless and then proclaim hope. His ministry spans forty years, and it is full of challenges. One writer said “the prophet Jeremiah confronted a blithe disregard of God in the land. People’s heads were in the sand as their world came unglued. They heedlessly nicknamed Jeremiah “Danger-Everywhere,” and persecuted him for his prophecies. The prophets suffering amid the conflict is laid bare before the reader in passages such as ours. It teaches us what a dogged orientation on God’s work and purpose may cause.” It can’t be easy for Jeremiah. He feels this call from God in his life, he answers it, and then he also has to suffer for it? He is not impressed with that reality. If he is doing what God wants him to do then he should not have to suffer as well.

We hear his deep and honest frustration come through in this passage. This not just about a bad day where nothing went right. It is about a prolonged period of time where he feels like he is alone and doing this work God asks him to do with absolutely zero thanks for doing it. He implies that God has forgotten him and asks him to remember him. He lists the things he did, and then he also lists the things he did not do. He did not rejoice with the merrymakers, no he sat by himself. Throughout his lifetime Jeremiah is threatened, reject, forced into hiding, arrested and beaten. He comes by his name the “weeping prophet” quite honestly and to be perfectly honest he has had enough. His cries to God are raw “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable?” Then he delivers a harsh description of what he exactly thinks of God. “Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook.” I don’t see many motivational posters or church vision statements using words quite like that.

It is interesting accusation. Water in the ancient world (as it is today) was a vital commodity. It meant life or death for people, crops and livestock. Jeremiah is implying he thought he had found sustaining life in God but instead of steadily flowing, the waters have dropped and receded—there is not enough here to sustain his life.

While an accusation like that may make some people defensive and angry God does not rebuke his honesty. As one writer pointed out “The text does not suggest that Jeremiah should have kept his doubt to himself, but that God will not let Jeremiah remain there, trapped in his dark night of the soul. In this sense, it speaks a word of grace.” What tangles up Jeremiah is not the fact that he is full of lament or, asking questions, or even his criticism

of God. What is problematic is how Jeremiah is coming to view his call. Keeping a running tally of what he is doing right (or in some cases not doing), and focusing on himself and how things are in relation to him. Jeremiah is losing sight of why God has called him. So, when God responds he encourages Jeremiah, and tells him he will support him and not let evil persist over him but, he must turn back to God and the heart of his call.

In many ways it is a tough passage and we can likely all relate to the feelings of Jeremiah in our lives. Moments where we feel abandoned, unloved, or forgotten. God reminds us that he never leaves us, and whether things are good or bad he walks with us. I know that sometimes we would like something a little more concrete than that. An assurance that when we do the right things the right things will then happen to us. But we know this is not how the world works. Sometimes things fail, or we get sick, or we struggle, or we feel depressed. It is okay to lament, and ask questions, and even call God a deceitful brook if we must. My prayer is that when those moments come that we have people in our lives who can remind us of the promises of God, and moments where we feel his presence surround us promising “for I am with you to save you and deliver you.” Friends through the hills and valleys may you know God’s loving presence, and when you don’t may you be surrounded by those who can remind you.