

The Rev. Abbott Bailey

This past Wednesday, the Mom's Bible Study was looking ahead to today's lectionary readings by exploring Jeremiah's commissioning as a prophet. After a time of quiet contemplation, we began to wrestle with Jeremiah's appointed task "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." In our conversation, we all struggled with the fitful combination of his work – decimation and restoration, the greater emphasis seeming to be on destruction. And we wondered how we might detect, let alone embrace, a message of hope that seemed to glimmer faintly among the rubble and debris that Jeremiah's call evoked in our minds and imaginations. All of the sudden, someone in the group blurted out, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

For those of you who aren't familiar with the show, it is a reality program on ABC that renovates the homes of families who have experienced significant hardship, who are living in sub-standard conditions, and who have in some way exhibited care beyond their own personal circumstances.

One of the first things to happen is the preparation of their existing house, which usually involves razing it. The houses are usually in such a state of disrepair and need so many adjustments to accommodate the families' situations that the only option is to completely demolish them. As the family stands by, often filled with conflicted emotions, bulldozers carelessly crumble the existing structure as if it were made of tinder sticks. Though the original house is utterly dismantled, the design team always incorporates remnants of the former home as if to remind them that the power that held them together and made them who and what they are still does. It is as though the tearing down and destroying in order to rebuild is an attempt at the re-creation of the family – an attempt to make space for new life and new possibilities.

Jeremiah's commissioning suggests a similar dynamic at work. His prophetic ministry took place in one of the most chaotic times in ancient Israel's

history. A minute and divided kingdom situated in the bridge between the Babylonians and the Assyrians to the North and the Egyptians to the south, they were literally surrounded external threats on every side. The Northern kingdom of Israel had already been defeated and placed under Assyrian rule a little more than century earlier. The Southern kingdom of Judah had barely averted a similar disaster during that time, and now the “foe to the North,” the Babylonians, were wreaking havoc. Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry occurred during this turmoil in the periods just prior to, during, and immediately after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of a significant segment of Judean society to Babylon.

In many respects, Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom were an attempt to wrestle with and account for the utter devastation that had befallen the people. Either God was unjust and impotent or Israel was to blame. Jeremiah contended that it was Israel and not God who was the cause of the tragedy that had befallen them. This perspective that was in direct conflict with the predominant theology at the time, which held that there was an unconditional covenant between God and the people of Israel promising the preservation of the Davidic lineage on the throne and the eternal protection of Jerusalem. This covenant was irrevocable and remained in force irrespective of anything that the people did or didn’t do (321). Jeremiah saw it another way, however. He believed that the Israel’s occupation of the land was conditional on obedience to God, and when he looked around, he saw nothing but disobedience. As far as he was concerned, the popular theology had created complacency. The people had broken the covenant with God and were living the consequences.<sup>1</sup>

All of this sets the context for Jeremiah’s work and the impulse behind his prophecies. The truth in this text is not, however, found in judgment or justification. Rather, I see as the central insight the truth that God’s creative hand is at work in the midst of the confusion, turmoil and even the apparent

---

<sup>1</sup> Victor Eldridge, “Jeremiah, prophet of judgment.” *Review and Expositor* 78 Sum 1981, p. 321, 322

destruction that Jeremiah is attempting to reconcile. Tearing down and building up, plucking and planting are two sides of the same coin – they are the necessary work of creation.

According to Jeremiah, God was at work in a colossal movement of cosmic forces that could only parallel the world's creation, the first movement of which had to be the world's undoing. Reminiscent of a reversal of creation, Jeremiah utters the words of God, "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light... I looked and lo there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled...For thus says the Lord: the whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not make a full end."<sup>2</sup> Building on this small sliver of hope, Jeremiah later prophesies, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will put a new law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people. " In other words, God is promising to reconstitute the people, the result of which will be new life and abounding hope.

Out of this central insight, I see a message to us Episcopalians in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Despite all the noise of turmoil, despite any claims of unfaithfulness from various quarters, I stand here confident in my conviction that we are not in the midst of confusion and demise, but of growing clarity and re-constitution at the hand of God. The evidence for this was absolutely abundant in the gathering of over 500 people from throughout the Diocese of Virginia here in Richmond this weekend for our Annual Council.

Over the course of our two days together, in between times of prayer, song and reflection on the words of wisdom and encouragement offered by Bishop John Paterson, Chair of the Anglican Consultative Council, we conducted church business. Among our many tasks, we honored the work of Lauren Stanley,

---

<sup>2</sup> John J. Collins, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004. p. 339.

diocesan missionary in the Sudan, who has persevered through riots and civil turmoil, harassment and assault to stand as one with the often persecuted Christians in that region. We welcomed the Church of the Messiah, a mission church of 12 years in Fredericksburg that had experienced some turmoil in its early years, into our midst as a parish with full church status. Among us were vestries delegates from among the remnant of those faithful to the Episcopal church in the churches that voted to sever their ties with us. They stood as a visible sign of hope. And we elected the Reverend Shannon Johnston, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Tupelo, Mississippi to be our new Bishop Co-adjutor. He reminded us that our unity is found not in our opinions and positions, but in Jesus Christ.

It is a unity found in joining Christ in his mission to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, free the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord. We owe tremendous gratitude to Bishop Lee for both his patient, faithful and ultimately prophetic attention to the turmoil in our diocese AND his ability to see God's hand at work in our midst – to raise this to our attention – and to gather us around our common mission.

While we may not fully understand what is happening – and we dare not claim to – and while we must never claim the seat of righteousness in the midst of it – we can know with the certainty of God's faithfulness, that God is moving in and through it – that what is being plucked up is being re-planted, that what is being destroyed is being rebuilt – that our re-creation and restoration – bringing forth new life, new possibilities, and greater strength – is at hand.