

“The Big Bad Wolf”
Jeremiah 17:5-9
by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Jeremiah 17:5. "I the Lord have put a curse on those who turn from me and trust in human strength. They will dry up like a bush in salty desert soil, where nothing can grow. But, I will bless those who trust me. They will be like trees growing beside a stream, trees with roots that reach down to the water and with leaves that are always green. They bear fruit every year and are never worried by lack of rain. You people of Judah are deceitful, so that you even fool yourselves and you cannot change." The NIV phrases that last verse as "The heart is deceitful above all else and who can trust it." The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God!

I'd like to start today with a children's story that I think you are probably familiar with. It's the Three Little Pigs; I'll give you my version of it anyway. There were once three little pigs who went out into the world and decided to build homes for themselves. The first little pig went out and he built his house of straw. It had a door and a window and he liked it very much. Well, his brother, the second little pig, went out and built his house from stick. It had a door and a window and a porch with a rocking chair and, boy, he liked it very much. Then, their third brother went and built himself a house made from brick. It had a door and a window and a cozy little fireplace inside, and he liked it very much. But, as so often happens in life, just when we get things how we want them, along comes the big bag wolf. He knocked on that door of the first house, the house made of straw, and said "May I please come in?". and that little pig new better, and he said "Not by the hairs of my chinny, chin, chin." But it was a house of straw and so that big, bag wolf huffed and he puffed and he blew that house in. Fortunately the first little pig was a better runner than he was a builder and he manged to get next door to his brother's house and so was saved, at least for the moment. The big bad wolf came a callin' at the house next door. He knocked on the house made of stick and he said "May I please come in?", and of course the brother's answered "Not by the hairs of our chinny, chin chin." But the house was only made of stick and so the big bag wolf he huffed and he puffed and he blew the house in. But, fortunately those brothers were better runners than they were builders and they hightailed it next door to their brother's house, to the house made of brick. The wolf came a callin' and he knocked on the door and he said "Can I please come in?", and of course the brothers answered "Not by the hairs of our chinny, chin, chin." But, the wolf huffed and he puffed and he blew himself senseless a couple of times and couldn't blow the house in. He thought, I'll change strategy here. He climbed up on the roof and he went down the chimney but the brothers were on to him and the fire was blazing and the pot was boiling and he ended up the main ingredient in stew. You didn't know that? I'm not

sure if that's how the story really goes but somewhere along the way I got that in my head.

I bring up that story, really as a kind of lighthearted way to talk about a pretty tough issue, because sometimes life huffs and puffs and it blows our house down. But, it doesn't have to be that way. In today's scripture passage, Jeremiah is talking to the house of Israel, after the big bag wolf has come to visit. Indeed not only their house, but their entire nation, was figuratively blown down. There is kind of a good news/bad news scenario in today's story. The good news is, is that God is willing to forgive them, the bad news is that the reason they are in this mess is because time and again when trouble came calling, instead of trusting in the Lord, first they went to Egypt and asked for help and then they went to Damascus and asked for help and instead of helping, those countries or nations plundered and used Israel, and it was no protection at all. In fact, even Egypt was conquered and carried off by the Babylonians that Israel had sought protection from in the first place. But, Jeremiah gives us some building instructions on how to build or not to build. He gives them this very plain warning, because their track record has just not been that good. He warns them plainly, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals."

You see, the problem with people of course, is that they're only human. We are not immortal, all powerful, all knowing, all present, so even with the best of intentions, trusting in people is a risky, risky business. We may be asking for promises that others simply cannot keep. This is not, however an endorsement of some radical individualism. Jeremiah is not promoting a God and me and let's withdraw from the world sort of approach. On the contrary, he makes it clear in other places in his writings that we need each other, but our ultimate trust must rest in God. It might sound a little bit like splitting hairs, but it is the difference between idolatry, that is setting something other than God in the place of God, it's the difference between idolatry and a proper community and a proper family. It's the difference in Jeremiah's imagery of that bush in the desert versus a tree planted besides streams of water. Trust in mere humans is a house made of stick or straw. There is no shelter or stability in such a house when the wolf comes calling.

Let me put this kind of in practical, plain, every day, earthy type terms, because it is easy to talk in the abstract and miss the point, so here it is. Your wife, or your husband, or your parents, your father or your mother, your friend or your partner may be great, fantastic even, but no matter how good they are, they make a lousy God. If you put that kind of pressure and that kind of trust in mere people, you will wear them out and you are setting yourself up for a lot of disappointment. Because as soon as they do something that isn't up to your standards or doesn't meet your needs and you find yourself in that place where you find that they are merely human, there's trouble. But,

the God who formed us also knew that the only adequate answer for our needs was himself. Jeremiah continues with those words "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord". and this is the Lord who is immortal, who is all powerful, is all knowing, is all present. The God who knows every dark corner of our hearts and still loves us. Our Lord who is perfect in his love for us and his ability to carry through on that love. Jeremiah says that those who trust in the Lord will be like that tree planted by the water. They will have that place of refuge, that safety, that house made of brick.

Well, that foundation really amounts to a relationship, and a trust, in God. We all know, at least know about Gd, but do we believe in our hearts and soles that he is good, that he desires what is best for us. And that is a question upon which our entire spiritual life will hinge, and really, the health and the vitality of our soles. Do we really know that God loves us? Not just in general terms, but specifically. We all know that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him would have eternal life. It's a great verse. We are familiar with that, but unless we know it in terms of, for God so loved ME, that he gave his son that I might have eternal life, and not just eternal life by and by, heaven in the sky, but eternal life, that quality of life that comes from knowing God here and now. That fullness of life that comes from a relationship with him and from trusting in him.

Well, if our knowledge of who God is, is flawed or even impersonal, it will be like sand in the gears and nothing else in our lives will work quite right. Then, Jeremiah throws in this last verse that seems a bit out of place, "The heart is devious above all else and who can trust it." These words seem true enough, but odd in their place, but I think Jeremiah's continuing his warning against trusting in people, only this time the person is ourselves. Where is our faith? I have run into this in different conversations and finding that the person I'm talking with has a great deal of faith, but it's faith in themselves. Or particularly in some of the rural settings that I've been at, or it's trust in the land. So whether it's self, or land or spouse or a friend or even the government and its ability to come through and meet our needs, we are easily deceived into thinking that because we have a faith that we have faith. But, faith that is in anything but God is still a house of straw or stick. Because the heart is deceptive above all else we may struggle to answer the question, "Is our trust truly in God?", but misplaced faith is still that house of straw or stick.

Now, we say, "God is good", "all the time" "all the time," "God is good," Amen, and rightly so. But we do not say life is good, all the time, all the time, life is good, because it's not true. Sometimes life is anything but good. In fact, sometimes life is downright unjust and unfair, and hard. We know the intellectual reasons, the explanations, but in the face of the heartbreak of life it just isn't very consoling sometimes. Those answers come down really to a couple of categories, moral law and natural law, or that God has

given people free will, that he has given us the ability to choose to follow him or not, to love him or not, and when people choose the not, whether it's us making the choices, or someone else, there are consequences to be suffered. And, so sometimes we are simply suffering the affect of our own poor choices or someone else's.

Then there are those times and places where God set the mechanics of this world in place. Physics and chemistry and biology and normally they work wonderfully, but there are times and places when we get caught in the gears, so to speak. We are simply at the wrong time at the wrong place. You can't ask the people in Dickinson if tornadoes are good or not when they're looking at their homes ripped apart in a matter of moments. Thankfully no one was killed, but when you look at how much sweat and tears and work it will take to restore what could be swept away by those forces of nature, it's hard to say that that's good. Normally it favors us, but there are times and places when it's not. It's not evil, but on the other hand it can be very tragic. So, we know those reasons but in the face of the consequences it can be tough.

Coming back to Jeremiah and that difference between trusting in the Lord or trusting in mere humans or really trusting in anything else besides God, there is a huge difference in terms of the state of our lives, the state of our hearts and soles, and how we respond to those times and places when the wolf comes callin'. Maybe the best way for me to explain it is by real life example; because I've seen both responses. I have had the opportunity of knowing some magnificent people in the ministry that I've had over the last 11 years now. Some of them are right here, but I'm going to use an example from somewhere else, just to be safe.

I'm thinking of a family from my first church and the first funeral I did in White River was for a 37-year-old mother who died of an asthma attack; four kids, one at college and three at home. It was tough, it was really tough. And yet this family was not bitter. Their response, their ability to handle it, was spectacular. The last funeral I did in White River was for their 8-year-old son after he had suffered through two years of battling a very rare blood disease, aplasia anemia. I hope I never have to hear those words again. Interestingly enough, the last baptism I did was for his high-school-aged sister who wanted to make that profession of faith official before everyone. As I was talking with Teddy, the father of this family, we were sitting on five gallon buckets out in the front yard shucking corn and popping peas out of their pods and going through the produce and visiting. I remember the conversation vividly and he said "You know, Gary, I am so thankful for the time I had with Candace" (this was just after Jake's death so that's what I was expected to hear something to do with Jake but he went all the way back to his wife, Candace, who died of asthma). He said "You know, we almost lost her so many times." And literally he had resuscitated her with CPR a couple of times before, bringing her back from death. He said "I'm so thankful for the time I had with

her and for our kids and so thankful for Jake (the boy) and all that he came up with." That was it. He was thankful. If anyone had a right to be bitter or angry or questioning, it was Teddy. And, yet there he was filled with gratitude for what he had, rather than bitterness for what he did not. Knowing that God was in control, knowing that God was working out the details of life somehow, that God would give him the strength to work through it, that God would work out those details for what was best. Using even dumb choices, or the consequences of physical law, and that like a giant puzzle that he was making all that fit together in the best way possible.

That's a hard lesson, because life is not always easy. But on the other hand, life is not God. Even though there is injustice and suffering here, those scales will be balanced one day, maybe in this life, but maybe not. But that trust in God allowed Teddy to say "We're going to be okay, we're going to get through this." And he became more gracious, his faith grew deeper, his grace grew deeper, his love grew deeper for it. That's amazing. Because I've seen people when the wolf came calling, simply crumble. The house fell in and there was nothing left.

As I think about Teddy and their family and that example, there are all sorts of questions that I would love to ask God. That's a sermon for another day. But, on the other hand when I look at that example and the depth of their faith and the quality of their life because they could trust, even in the midst of the tragedies of life, boy I want to be like that. It makes this passage crystal clear. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. They will be like a tree planted by waters, whose roots go down and their leaves are green in every season and every year they bear fruit." Certainly there are some tough seasons in life, but God will bear us through, even when the wolf comes a callin', if we trust in Him. Would you pray with me?

Lord sometimes life will break our hearts, but in the midst of it all help us to trust in you that we might be blessed indeed, knowing a life that is like that tree whose leaves are always green and it bears fruit in its season. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.