

**Jerem. 17:5-10**  
**Ps. 1, 1 Cor. 15:12-20**  
**Luke 6:17-26**

**Sermon**  
**By**  
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Growing up here in the Southeast, I became accustomed to seeing the rich foliage and many trees of this area even in the winter, and yes, even after Hurricane Helene. You might agree that it can be hard to see the forest for all the trees! I especially remember a very large tree that grew in our back yard when I was a child. If you could take a walk with me there, you would see how it grew beside a spring that bubbled up from beneath a stump, providing a constant source of water. The tree had limbs that reached way up to the sky, and when I eventually dared to climb its branches, I could see for miles and feel the tree sway in the wind. It felt alive, as did I held in its embrace!

How very different the geography and vegetation were when later in life I moved to Wyoming. At 7,200 feet above sea level in the high desert, you could look for miles in all directions and not see a single tree - or person, or car, or house! Yes, there were clumps of sage brush, and tumble weed blew across the roads. Eventually, I learned that as you traveled this barren land, if you looked closely, there were places where you could pick out a line of greenery that marked a river or stream off in the distance, which nourished a few trees and vegetation on its banks. There wasn't much to sustain life there, nor was there much life to sustain.

With a similar view of the biodiversity in his world, the psalmist wrote: "Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper. It is not so

with the wicked; they are like chaff which the wind blows away.” Within the very first psalm, the psalmist describes the value and reward of being rooted in God and in God’s law.

The prophet Jeremiah echoed this wisdom in a warning to the Hebrew people who had strayed from the path of God. “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord,” he proclaimed. “They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes.” But, Jeremiah went on to say, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green.” The Israelites faced a dawning spiritual and physical crisis. Jeremiah knew that their response and inner resources would determine their fate.

You see, Jeremiah prophesied at the time of the Babylonian Exile, that transition when the Israelites were uprooted and carried to a foreign land. With Jerusalem destroyed and their temple torn down, how would they survive once cut off from all they had known and depended? Their faith and religion had been centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. Their livelihood was rooted to the ground they lived on. But after their initial shock and struggle in exile, Jeremiah eventually shared a new vision of a time when God would give God’s people a new covenant, not written on stone, but on their hearts. Like a tree whose deep roots cannot be seen, this new covenant would be written deep within each individual. And like a tree in fertile ground that prospers and bears fruit, we recognize those who keep God’s covenant by the fruits they produce, regardless of where they might live, or the conditions they find themselves in, or the hardships they face, or who

their rulers might be. It has been said that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the security to endure conflict, security which comes from an inner strength.

The truth is, like the Israelites in Babylon, most all of us will find ourselves living in an exile of some kind at some point in our lives, pulled up by our roots, either literally or figuratively, and planted in a place that is foreign. Can you name such a time in your life? Are you living in exile now? We are continually made aware of the millions of refugees in the world today, and we do not have to look far to find those who are exiles or refugees in the communities around us. They may be neighbors, workers in our yards, roofers on our houses, servers at our tables, or members of our churches. And, whenever there is a change in the leadership that we have counted on to bring us stability and prosperity, whether in our government, our families, or even in the church, we may find ourselves feeling like exiles within our own land. During such times, our world is turned upside down and we may very well ask, “where do we find the security and peace we so desperately need and seek?” The prophets tell us that if it is not found deep within, we may discover that our lives, like the leaves on a tree planted far from a stream, begin to wither and die.

Turning to Luke’s gospel, it is after Jesus comes down from the mountain where he prayed all night and then chose his twelve disciples, that he gives his great sermon, not on the mountain, but on a level plain. Here he addresses those who will be his closest followers, those who have chosen to give up everything they have to begin a life as wanderers, or exiles with the Lord. To these twelve especially, but also to those within the hearing of his voice who came for his teaching, healing, and release from demons, Jesus speaks words that must have been difficult to hear, and that turned their world upside down. To their surprise, and perhaps disappointment, Jesus does not offer them

4

riches and power, fullness and happiness. Rather, he says quite plainly, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on

account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven...” The twelve must have wondered, as may we, if the life of discipleship is strictly one of hardship in this world, with the hope for delayed gratification in the next?

Those of us fortunate enough to live in the 1st world today with all of our comforts and opportunities, and who have had the opportunity to see or visit faith communities in the 3rd world, the Global South, may have found ourselves scratching our heads and wondering how people of such poverty and hardship could possibly be so steadfast and vibrant in their faith, showing generosity, care and love to strangers. How can they celebrate life so much, having so little? What we can learn from them and others of such deep faith is that we must empty ourselves of ourselves and the world to make room for God. Yes, we must empty ourselves of ourselves and the world to make room for God. To be the blessed of God is to have nothing but God! That is the key to the well that does not run dry, to the bread that keeps us full, to the love that gives us joy, and to the riches that are not of this world. We must discover and live by the covenant that is written deep within us, on our hearts.

As Jeremiah prophesied to the Israelites, as Jesus preached to his new followers, and as we hear anew in the Gospel message today, there is a pressing need to reorient our relationships and reverse the status quo in order to gain a right standing in the eyes of God. Blessedness does not describe a state of happiness so much as one’s standing

5

before God. Take comfort knowing this is not reserved for the next life, in another place, and at another time. Because God is incarnational, as was shown through God’s Son Jesus Christ, what God has to offer us is offered now, ...here, ...today, ...to all. And as God showed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, those who seem withered and dying in this world are not doomed to an eternal judgment of condemnation. We can all search within ourselves for that living water, that water that gives life, the water of

baptism. We all have the ability, with God's help, to turn around, make new choices, and extend our roots even in a new place.

As one who has moved around a good deal in my life - from the Southeast, to the Upper Midwest, to the Western plains, to the West Coast, and back to the Southeast - I have often reflected on the fact that I don't really have very deep roots anywhere. And although I am thankful for the varied experiences I have had and the relationships I have made, I do envy those who seem well established in a community of family and friends. All of which makes me recall a piece of wisdom that my late mother-in-law often shared. "Bloom where you are planted," she would say. As people who find ourselves as refugees or in exile for all sorts of reasons, even in our own land, these words can be life sustaining. The real roots that matter most and nourish us regardless of our circumstances, are not those growing in the ground under our feet, rather they are those that grow in our hearts, in our souls, and nourish us from above. It is that never ending spirit of God that will sustain us at all times, wherever we are, and enfold us with God's love to make us truly alive!

Even in the worst of circumstances we can be sustained and fed when we are rooted in God. A number of years ago, Natan Sharansky, a Russian Jew and advocate for human rights, was arrested by the KGB for treason. While in prison, his wife gave him a book

6

of Psalms to read. Natan later shared that it was his meditation on the psalms that gave him the strength and ability to withstand the brutal conditions he experienced for the nine years he was incarcerated. The psalms had such an impact on his life, that when he was finally to be released he refused his freedom, lying down in the snow until the KGB returned this treasured book of psalms to him.

So my fellow refugees, fellow exiles, as we wander in this uncertain, chaotic, and sometimes frightening world, let us always recall and heed the words of our spiritual forbearers who wisely wrote:

**“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green.”**

Then blossom where you are planted!