

Two Trees
Jeremiah 17:5-14
12/20/15
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This morning we turn again to the Book of Jeremiah. This morning it is Jeremiah 17:5-14. Before I read, I want to say that—I want to lead with this question, and that is—where we've been over the last several weeks in the Book of Ezekiel, who was prophesying to the exiles as they had been taken into Babylon, and Jeremiah was prophesying to those who remained in Judah but were nonetheless in exile under the rule and reign of a brutal dictatorship under Nebuchadnezzar. And these have been difficult subjects. They'd been hard, and apparently unusual for the Christmastime. It's true. And the reason for choosing these passages is because it's very difficult—or rather, it's quite easy to think about Christmas and the giving of Christ as a matter of course, something that can easily be taken for granted. We forget, why is it again that we need a Savior? Why was there longing? Why was there awaiting? And this has enabled us to go into the history.

But more than that, my concern, a little bit, has been this. Is there gospel in these prophecies? Is there grace? Or is there just difficulty, hardness, and judgment? That has not been an easy question to answer. In fact, there have been quite a few theologians who do not see grace here, but only prophecies unto judgment. But I want to emphasize that they are not the only ones who have an interpretation, because I do not believe that the prophecies of Ezekiel nor the prophecies of any of the prophets are merely prophecies unto judgment—that there is full grace to be offered here, and that is was a calling to righteousness. So there are prophecies to judgment here, but there is also prophecies to righteousness. It is quite possible to respond to the calling of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as it were, to find our refuge in the Lord.

And we see the evidence of these prophecies unto judgment as well as prophecies unto righteousness in this very text, of calling us to righteousness. And our longing for a Savior, our celebration of advent, is looking and asking for the Lord to send us a Messiah, and our celebrating of that fact, that God has sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, a historical figure, as Messiah. But he calls us to righteousness. But it isn't because we take Jeremiah and suddenly leapfrog to the New Testament. Is there grace here? And then, how does the giving of Christ, the coming of Christ, help fulfill this story in greater ways? That's my hope that you will see this morning—is that there is grace here, and then the fulfillment, the ultimate expression of this righteousness, is seen through the giving of Christ. Hear now the Word of God, Jeremiah 17:5-14.

This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”

Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay is the man who gains riches by unjust means. When his life is half gone, they will desert him, and in the end he will prove to be a fool. A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary. O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water. Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask that you, by the work and power of your Holy Spirit, that you would open up this portion of your Word, that we might see your grace, that we might see the beauty of Christ, the one that we celebrate. And so, by your Spirit at work in those who are here, and the one who is at work in me who preaches, I pray that, Lord, that in all of it, you would bring together all honor and glory that is due to you, and that we would grow in grace—not only our experience of it, but then being able to extend it as we live it out in our community groups, as we live it out in our neighborhoods and where we work and our families, and even in the most difficult places. Enable us, Lord, to see and receive your grace, for we need it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

In 2001—rather, the fall of 2000, my wife and I had been working towards planning to be a church-planter and family. We’d been living in Florida for four years. We never thought in a million years we would ever live in Florida. It was not our first choice, but God is not about our first choices. And so we ended up in sunny southwest Florida. If you’ve ever been in southwest Florida, you will know that there are very few trees, and the ones that were there, they largely cut down to build houses. And so we got used to a fairly humid but sandy place with not a whole lot of trees.

And then God called us to the second place we never thought we would live: New Jersey. We got on a plane. We traveled to New Jersey near the Thanksgiving time of 2000, and we remember flying into Newark—okay, not many trees in Newark. But as we were flying over the area, we got into a car and we drove west, and as we drove west just a few miles, it was wild being around trees again. Trees were everywhere—trees of all different kinds, trees that we remember from our childhood, trees that we had not been around for quite a while.

And then we moved here to Maryland. Trees everywhere. I remember my first fall. I hadn’t raked that many leaves, I think, in my entire life. I think I had perhaps two or three sessions of twenty-five or thirty of those paper bags you get from Home Depot. I was overwhelmed by trees.

But trees, to us, are commonplace. They would seem like a natural metaphor in many ways. But you need to understand that the context in which Jeremiah was speaking and prophesying—it was an arid land. There weren’t trees of many kind. And yet he draws on this metaphor of two trees. And it isn’t just meant to be seeing these metaphors for trees and that being left alone. The question we want to be able to see is, okay, is there something else behind these two trees? And what I want to lead you to see is that these two trees open up for us a whole biblical category of metaphor that we might see the grace of God to us. So let’s look at this passage. Two trees. You’ll see in your outline two trees, heaven’s perspective, and the fulcrum.

So, together, we have the two trees. You’ll see as he begins this comparison that he lays out for us these two trees. And what’s interesting is, he describes them by way of contrast. There is no similarity except for the fact that they are two trees. But Calvin, John Calvin, in his commentary on Jeremiah pointed out that he is looking at it not from their outward appearance, but he’s looking at it in terms of their root systems. Because we need to remember those to whom he was prophesying.

Jeremiah was prophesying to a group of people who were themselves filled with pride. They believed, as those who still inhabited Jerusalem, that God would keep Jerusalem. It's where the temple is. They are the people of God. They were full of pride, believing that they were outside the possibility that God would bring judgment upon them. So outwardly, they were keeping agreements with foreign kings and foreign gods. They were full of all kinds of worship, as we've looked at over the last number of weeks. They believed themselves to be—even though in exile—that they had a way out. They thought that there was a way to prosperity. So they're—in outward appearance, they did not seem to be suffering very much. Jeremiah was.

And so he's looking at these trees not from the sense of outwardness, but from their root systems. And when he compares these root systems, he has something interesting to say. When he looks at it, he says, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord." And then he says about that one, which is very reminiscent of Psalm 1, he says, "He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives." So he's saying that this one who depends on his own inward strength, on creating his own agreements, on depending on his own strength, his own gifts, his own place, his own perspective, will be like a tree that is in the wastelands. And it's not that the tree isn't, you know, big, or perhaps even prosperous. What he notes is that he will not see prosperity when it comes.

What could he mean? He means, this is the one whose strength and perspectives are built on his own understanding. As such, he will not understand true wisdom, true prosperity when it comes. He only understands prosperity humanly speaking. He only understands prosperity and wealth and wisdom according to man. He doesn't see from God's perspective what true wisdom is—that true wisdom is not built on one's circumstances. True wisdom is built on where your root system gains its nourishment. And so he says, "He will not recognize prosperity when it comes," because he doesn't understand biblical wisdom. He doesn't understand the righteousness of God. He does not see the Lord, and he does not seek the Lord's advice or counsel or wisdom at all. And so he will not recognize prosperity. He will only understand prosperity and wealth according to the world.

But then the other, he says: "But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him." Now watch what happens. He then looks at the root system, and then the consequences of this one, when he says in verse eight, "He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." What he's describing here by way of contrast is that this one, whose refuge is in the Lord, who seeks strength and wisdom from the Lord, who seeks righteousness from the Lord, is one whose circumstances don't matter. Because it says "when he comes." Not "if he comes," but "when he comes." And when it comes, its source of nourishment isn't from outward appearances, isn't from outward agreements or from false worship or from trusting in their own strength—but rather, strength comes, nourishment comes alone from the Lord.

Now, this is important, because it was an arid land. In fact, what we know is this. From Jeremiah 2:13, which we read last week, Jeremiah announces to the people of God in Jerusalem, "My people are guilty of two sins: they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of Living Water, and they have dug their own cisterns, cisterns that will not hold water." So what Jeremiah is doing is continuing to build on that imagery. And so he's saying that this tree, the one who finds refuge in the Lord and righteousness and grace and wisdom from the Lord, is the one who, in a land of parchedness and without any visible signs of water—in fact, in a year of draught—we know that draught was upon the land because of the other prophecies within Jeremiah—that even despite the draught, the one whose place and strength is in the Lord is one who is like a mighty tree whose roots are set down by springs of water, whose nourishment is the Lord.

Now, if our dependence is the Lord, it doesn't matter what our circumstances are. And so by looking at these two root systems, what he's uncovering is what is the source of life for these two trees. The metaphor is that we have two people, two men, representing humankind. The one looks for their wisdom and strength in their own flesh, in their own wisdom, according to their circumstances, trying to better those circumstances, doing whatever they can to create agreements, to provide for themselves, even if that means disregarding the poor, the widow—that means forgetting those who are born without parents—even if it means creating all kinds of false worship. It doesn't matter. Whatever I need to do to secure my wellbeing, that's what I will do.

That is one who's like a bush in the wasteland, who doesn't recognize prosperity. Because if they did, they would understand that all that we have in this life comes and it can easily go. We came into the world naked, as we say, and we will leave the world naked. We can't take it with us. But the man who seeks strength in himself is one who doesn't recognize that wisdom, as if he can hold onto his earthly prosperity and doesn't recognize wisdom when he sees it.

The other, their source of life is found in the Lord alone, in his provision, in his grace, in his righteousness, and in his promise. That means, come whatever may, it doesn't matter. Now, that's important for Judah to hear, because they're in exile. They're under the reign of Babylon. They're elites. They're teachers. They're wise. People have been taken off into what used to be the northern kingdom of Babylonian rule—they remain, and they don't know what's going to happen to them, and they are doing whatever they can to secure good favor. But the ones who find their refuge in the Lord, it doesn't matter.

Now, as I said a few weeks ago, I want to repeat again in a little bit more practicality now. That is, if our root systems of our faith is in the Lord our God who is the giver of wisdom and of life, and we do not look for our prosperity and our wisdom from the wisdom of human beings and of humanity and of presidents and kings alike—we can honestly say, as those who find grace in the Lord Jesus Christ, in God the Father—we can say, "It doesn't ultimately matter, then, what happens to the nations of the world as it relates to who I am as a person." Whether the United States is a superpower for the next hundred years or for the next two years, it doesn't matter in the sense of where we are before the Lord.

It isn't to say that we, those who are citizens of the United States, should not be good citizens and use our freedoms to promote prosperity in the Lord and wisdom and grace and mercy—yes, we absolutely should do that. But at any point where we believe our Christian faith is somehow in its vitality is connected to or hinges on the prosperity of our nation, we are in deep trouble. If our faith hinges upon where we are professionally or relationally, or how our children are doing relationally or professionally or academically—if our faith begins to hinge on those things, we will be like a bush in the wasteland, because it's not finding its roots in that which lasts. And that when the heat of life comes—and oh, it will surely come, and some of you are experiencing that red-hot heat of trial and difficulty even today in this week, or you fear it in the weeks to come—when that heat comes, it begins to put stress on the root system of your life. The question is, which tree are you? Where is your root system finding its nourishment? It was a question for Judah as it is a question for us.

But as he unpacks these metaphors of these two trees and the inherent question being "which tree are you?" he then turns and, in case we are not careful in trying to evaluate ourselves—which, we can easily deceive ourselves—he turns immediately to the heaven's perspective, to the Lord's perspective. And the Lord's perspective is given to us as he says in verse nine, where he says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Verse ten, the answer is, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

Well, he's simply replicating what he's just said. If, indeed, our wisdom comes from the wisdom of the world and from our circumstances, trying to gain our own prosperity, where our lives hinge upon something that can easily come and easily go, we will receive what our deeds deserve—inherent

instability. The root system whose nourishment will dry up—just like our circumstances can change, it's only as good in the moment that it's good, and boy, when it goes bad, it goes bad. That is what the consequences are when it says that the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.

The question hinges, then: what tree are you? If you are a tree who seeks the wisdom of the Lord, who's finding your refuge in the Lord, your grace and your mercy in the Lord, then you will receive grace and mercy. But the problem is answer the question: what kind of tree are we? Because we can easily deceive ourselves. As he states, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." There are overtures here. There are echoes here of the psalmist when he asks the Lord, "Search my heart and see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Do you see what the psalmist does?

So how do we get around the possibility of human deception of the heart? It's by opening the heart to the Lord in prayer, saying, "Search me and know me. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." For if the Lord knows the heart and he searches the heart, then we can turn to him who is the Creator of hearts, as the Scripture understands him as Creator. We can turn to him and say, "Lord, your Word tells us that you are good, and I can turn to you with my heart and say, 'Lord, search me.' And if there is any offensive way in me, lead me to a place of grace and mercy." Because it's the Lord who knows it.

This is the way of wisdom literature. As many commentators and interpreters have seen in this passage in Jeremiah, some have called it "Jeremiah's miscellanea file." I don't know why, but they did. But it is a section of wisdom literature, right here in the heart of Jeremiah. And so it's bringing us to the end of ourselves—is the heart is deceitful, and only the Lord can understand it. Then what are we to do? We turn to him.

The same works out in the Book of James in the New Testament, where he talks about how the tongue is a restless evil. No one can control it. If a man is able to control his tongue, he can control his whole life. But he's already said nobody can control the tongue, so that leads us to the inferred question: then who can control my tongue? Only the Lord. And so the response would be to turn to the Lord, "Lord, control my tongue by your Spirit." So Jeremiah, here, like all wisdom literature, is pointing out the real tension point. He's asking us, "What tree are you? And oh, by the way, we easily deceive ourselves because our hearts our deceptive." So we turn to the one who searches heart. Lord, search my heart, examine my mind, lead me in the way.

But there something else going on here than just heaven's perspective and looking at the heart of man. There is, as I referred to earlier, there is the whole symbolism of trees. There aren't that many references to trees overall, relatively speaking, in the Scriptures. But when it does, it's generally important. And the symbolism of trees we will find from the earliest chapters of Genesis to the closing chapter of Revelation. What's interesting about these trees is this: trees seem to be used as both curse and blessing. In the garden of Eden, God tells Adam and Eve, "Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Likewise, he says in Revelation chapter twenty-two, when he states to those in the words of the Lord himself when Jesus is quoted by John when he says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, and they may have the right to the tree of life. And they go through the gates into the city." So on the one hand, we have a tree in the garden of the knowledge of good and evil, which we are not to partake of. We're to trust in the Lord alone and all that he has commanded and all of his goodness and grace. And yet it finishes at the end of Revelation, as there is a tree of life in the middle of the city in the new heavens and the new earth, and we will be permitted to eat of the tree.

There's something else that's important about the symbolism of trees. It's right here in the prophets themselves. In Hosea 14:9, this is what Hosea says in speaking for the Lord. He says, "O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine

tree. Your fruitfulness comes from me. Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right. The righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them." It's interesting. He says here, again, "I am like a green pine tree. Your fruitfulness comes from me."

Anybody have pine trees in their yards? I grew up around South Carolina, long pines. My father and I every fall would go with large rakes and large bags and scoop up all these really long, red pine needles. And all these pinecones were falling. What is a pinecone? It drops its seeds. To benefit from a pine tree, which is generally tall and not necessarily always wide, you've got to be close to the tree. And when that pine tree drops the fruit by way of its pinecones, then what begins to happen—seeds are let off, and those seeds serve as a way to grow up new trees. And those new trees begin to produce pinecones. Why? Because they have received the fruit from a former pine tree.

What's being said of here is, to be a tree that produces its fruit even when heat comes, we have to be close to another tree. The Lord says, "I am like a tall, green pine tree, who produces your fruit." So it's interesting that these trees—being asked of us, "What kind of tree are you?"—by looking at the character of our lives, where our root systems are set, when we recognize and are able to answer that question, you have to be able to turn to the Lord who searches hearts and knows our minds. We recognize, why do I do that? It's because the Lord—what does the psalmist say?—is the shade at your right hand. So the Lord is not only the source of fruit; he is the source of shade.

But to experience that fruit and to enjoy that shade, that refuge, we have to be close to that tree. And so he says here through the word of Jeremiah, "I will reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." But then that produces a problem, doesn't it? If the heart is deceitful and is full of all kinds of evil thoughts—Genesis tells us this—if I can't trust my own heart and I turn to the Lord and I recognize, just like the people of Judah, just like the people of Israel, I'm fickle. I don't do so well. One day I'm obedient and the next day I'm disobedient. Lord, where is the answer? I can't even trust in myself, nor can you trust in yourself, to stay close to the Tree of Life. Because like our forefathers and foreparents, they hear what the Lord provides and yet they go against it and they rebel. They stumble on the wisdom of the Lord, and they take of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by asking, did God really say? And when we deny it when he confronts us.

So the heart is deceptive. Yes, the Lord does search our—yes, we can turn to him and find grace and mercy. But what is the real answer? That is the fulcrum. Yes, it's the question of—this comes up in this passage—what is your trust? What do you trust in? Who do you trust in? It's important because verses eleven and following say, if your trust is in the wisdom of the world, you'll be like a partridge that hatches eggs that were not your own. You stole it from another bird and put it under yourself as if it were your own. And when life is half gone, they will—the riches that we gained by unjust means, they will desert us. We will be proven a fool. Or there is the other tree that finds its place in the sanctuary of the Lord as a refuge, the Lord of hope of Israel—verse thirteen. All who forsake you will be put to shame—or those who put their hope in the Lord will find the spring of Living Water. That's the whole idea.

So the question is, then, who is your trust? And he says here in verse fourteen, "Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." That's interesting. He turns to the Lord on behalf of the people of Judah, and he's encouraging them to do the same. But notice what he says. He doesn't say to the Lord, "Lord, give me this Living Water. Give me the fruit." Is that the first thing he asks? No. He says, "Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." He recognizes as he's turning to the Lord that he needs healing. Yes, he's asked the Lord to search his heart and his mind, but he recognizes, "I need you to do more than just search and show me the way of everlasting. I need you to heal me. I need you to renew me. I need you to redeem me."

What is the way, then? Is it the one that we celebrate at advent? The answer to that question—instead of the Lord, when he spoken in the Gospel of John—or rather, 1 Peter, he says:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving for you an example that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he trusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. For by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

How is it that we are healed? The way the people of God in Judah were healed is if they turned to the one who can heal. It was true for them in Jeremiah's day as they continued to look for redemption and renewal. And so righteousness could be had in Jeremiah's day as they turned to the Lord who heals and forgives. But you will hear about next week the new covenant which would foreshadow what I just said—the one who would come, who knew the heart and what was in the heart of man, but who had no sins of himself, had committed no rebellious act, and yet he would not be full of anything but truth. There was no deceit found in him. And then he says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." There we go.

You see, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil became a tree of curse. The tree of life in Revelation chapter twenty-two is a tree of life. It's a tree of blessing. What, then, does God do to bring us, though we deserve judgment because of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—how, then, do we get to experience and be with those in the new heavens and the new earth in the center of Jerusalem, be able to partake of the tree of life? It required another tree—a tree that would be the home of both cursing and blessing, and that tree was the cross, in Jesus Christ. For him, that tree was a tree of cursing, because on that tree he received all of God's wrath for our rebellion, and on that tree he gave up his body and his blood, that we who, like he says in Hosea, if we find our refuge in the strong pine tree that is the Lord—under that tree—if we go to the tree of the cross and receive the one who was cursed on our behalf, and receive his body and his blood for our lives, the cross becomes a tree of blessing. That way, we can enter in and enjoy the tree of life.

Trees are incredibly important to the Lord. And these two trees in Jeremiah are meant to lead us to the only tree where there is life. But the one that we celebrate in advent is the one who came to die on a tree so that we can have life. The question is, which tree, then, are you? Where is your trust this day? Upon what does it hinge? The Lord invites you into the refuge of the tree, the cross of Christ, his body and his blood given for you, so that your name might be written in the book of life, that you might partake of the tree of life. This is what he calls us to, that the roots of our lives and our character would be set deeply into springs of Living Water, that we might receive the fruit of Christ and bear the fruit of the Spirit. Is there grace here? You bet there is. The grace of the love of God in Christ is offered to you this day. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would feed us and heal us. We ask you, Lord, that you would enable us to experience your grace, the grace of Christ, who took on the tree of suffering that we might partake of the tree of life. By the work of your Holy Spirit, enable us to have our roots set deeply into the springs of Living Water, so that when the heat of this life comes, our lives may be full of the fruit of the Spirit, because you are the source of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.