

## Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? They did not say, "Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through where no one lives?" I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defied my land, and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handled the law did not know me, the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesized by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children's children. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

### "How Can Integrity Be Restored?"

Not long after a tile from Boston's Big Dig ceiling fell down and killed a woman, a person asked me: "If you were in her place, what would your last words be?" Without hesitating, I replied: "I'd probably say, 'oh sh--!'" Critically he responded: "What kind of clergy says that? Aren't you suppose to say, 'God help me?'" Well, no, I thought. Not when I believe that God is already helping me in every life and death moment whether I ask for help or not. And no, not when I don't believe that God would suspend the laws of gravity to save me from getting crushed. And no, not when I am compelled to be true to myself by telling it like it is! Because what if, it was systemic graft, greed, and corruption that caused the cracks in the ceiling---and I was just collateral damage?

Our scripture reading from Jeremiah is an after-the-fact reflection on a terrible time in Israel's history when the Babylonian empire had swept over the nation state of Israel, had crushed the Holy City of Jerusalem, and had taken people of value to them off into exile. The prophetic writing was an attempt to help the Jewish community get at the truth about what went wrong---from God's point of view. The consciousness raising began with a question in the public square.

*What wrong did your ancestors find in me  
that they went far from me,  
and went after worthless things,  
and became worthless themselves?*

He ended with the pronouncement that the problem lay within God's people.

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked,  
be utterly desolate, says the Lord:  
for my people have committed two evils:  
they have forsaken me,  
the fountain of living water,  
and dug out cisterns for themselves,  
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

The sin was two-fold. First, as a religious community, too many among them had forsaken Yahweh. Too many had broken the first four commandments about first allegiance and honor of the One God of Israel. In this historical tragedy, the prophet judged that the violation was mostly against the commandment: You shall have no other gods before me. The prophet charged God's chosen people with having faith in and serving the gods of money, power, fertility, plentiful crops . . . in the neighboring lands of Kedar, across the Cypress. God's people chased after lesser gods whenever they failed to remember the deeds that Yahweh had done to form them as a holy people of and for the Lord.

They did not say,  
“where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt . . . ?”  
The priests did not say,  
“Where is the Lord?”  
Those who handle the law did not know me.

Second sin. As a nation state they had lost their integrity as a socio-religious community. They had broken the last six of the Ten Commandments and had become worthless, cracked cisterns for holding the glory of God. They had failed to examine and take responsibility for their corporate sin. There was no shock among them that they had become morally bankrupt.

In an extended discussion of this theme in 7:27-34, Jeremiah pointed out a specific way in which Israel worshipped and sacrificed to a lesser god in the surrounding culture.

And they go on building the high places of Topheth,  
Which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom,  
To burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—  
Which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

. . . and God’s people were neither shocked nor appalled.

In a recent UCC Stillspeaking Devotional (Aug. 24, 2010), Rev. Quinn Caldwell (Associate Minister of Old South Church, UCC in Boston) reflected on this scripture as it relates to our nation’s war in Afghanistan. I’d like to share it publically for three reasons. First, to help see how ancient prophetic wisdom is relevant for us today. Second, to awaken within us a sense of what shocks and appalls God. Third, to kept before us our responsibility as a covenantal people of faith, to recognize, to name, and to confess the lesser gods that we corporately serve.

As of this writing, the United States has been at war in Afghanistan for 104 months. It is the longest war in United States’ history. By

comparison, U.S. involvement in Vietnam lasted 103 months. Over 1,100 Americans have died in the conflict; no one knows how many others have perished as well. In today’s passage, Jeremiah expresses God’s displeasure at the practice of human sacrifice, which at least some in his day were apparently indulging in. He makes it clear that God is categorically against the practice, and further, that any “god” that asks for it is in fact no god at all. On the other hand, we know that God is very much in favor of self-sacrifice, of pouring one’s own life out on behalf of those in need. After all, that’s exactly what God did in Jesus Christ, isn’t it? 104 months into the longest war in our nations’ history seems like a good time to stop and take stock of what’s going on. Is this a story about good people pouring themselves out in noble and self-giving ways for others, a story about the quest for freedom, security, a better life? Or is it a story about sacrificing our sons and daughters on the altar of a god that is no god?

*A native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt after a tragedy. He said, “I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one.” The grandson asked him, “Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?” The grandfather answered, “The one I feed.”* (Holy Ground, p. 143)

Let us pray for the restoration of our integrity as God’s people. *Holy One, give us the grace to pour ourselves out for any cause that is pleasing to you, and to never sacrifice a son or daughter for anything at all. Amen.*