

An Anniversary . . . and a Future
Jeremiah 4:23-28
Sermon by Dan Schrock
September 11, 2016

²³*I looked on the earth, and lo,
it was waste and void;
and to the heavens,
and they had no light.*

²⁴*I looked on the mountains, and lo,
they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.*

²⁵*I looked, and lo,
there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.*

²⁶*I looked, and lo,
the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord,
before his fierce anger.*

²⁷*For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.*

²⁸*Because of this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above grow black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back.” (NRSV)*

I

15 years ago this morning, at 8:45, a passenger jet from Boston crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, tearing a hole in the building and setting it on fire. 18 minutes later another passenger jet, also from Boston, crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center, setting it on fire as well. At 10:05 AM, the south tower collapsed, and 23 minutes later the north tower also collapsed. The two disasters created huge clouds of smoke, ashes, dust, and debris.¹ Nearly 3,000 people died from the day's attacks.² Many of us who were alive then remember watching videos of the destruction with stunned disbelief. That kind of destruction, caused in that kind of manner, had never before happened on U.S. soil.

¹ A chronology of the day is available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/chronology.attack/>.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/>

II

The text in front of us from Jeremiah is also about destruction, but a very different kind of destruction than happened to the World Trade Center towers 15 years ago. This text has no passenger jets commandeered by terrorists. It has no skyscrapers with burning holes, no billowing clouds of smoke and ash. There are no bodies of dead people.

Instead, this text imagines the ungluing of creation. Four times Jeremiah looks out on the landscape, and four times what he sees is a natural world that has come undone.

- The first time he looks at the earth, it has become a waste and a void.
In the sky there is neither sun, nor moon, nor stars.
The world is now an empty, dark place.
- The second time he looks, his attention is drawn to the mountains and hills.
He notices them shaking and vibrating,
as if an earthquake is rippling underground.
- The third time he looks,
he realizes there are no people anywhere.
To be clear, this is not some war zone full of dead or wounded bodies.
It's just that there are no people at all, whether alive or dead,
for as far as his eyes can reach.
Even the birds have fled.
- When he looks for a fourth time,
he sees land which once produced wheat and barley, olives and figs,
is now nothing more than dry, barren desert.
Moreover, every city in his field of vision has been reduced to rubble.

Summing it up, when Jeremiah looks on the landscape he sees no light, no people, no animals, no water, and no cities. And above it all, the mountains and hills are writhing in distress.

III

Why have these horrible things happened? The end of verse 26 bluntly says why: these things have happened because Yahweh is fiercely angry.

God's fierce anger is not something most of us want to talk about. The idea of God's anger makes us uncomfortable and poses tricky theological questions which are hard to answer. We're much happier to talk about God's love, God's mercy, and God's patience.

In previous centuries, Christians were more willing to talk about God's anger. When you were in high school, perhaps your English teacher asked you to read parts of a sermon by Jonathan Edwards, called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Jonathan Edwards preached this sermon in the early 1740s to his own congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, and then later to another congregation in Enfield, Connecticut. Probably the most famous part of the sermon is when Edwards asks people to imagine themselves as a spider or some other loathsome insect, being dangled over a fire by a God who is angry about sin. Reportedly people in one of these congregations were so terrified that they broke out into loud shrieks and wails. Their caterwauling was so disruptive that Edwards didn't even get to finish preaching the sermon.³

I've never done that kind of sermon; and if someone did preach that kind of sermon here at Berkey, most of us would be turned off. It's not the style of preaching we're used to. In addition, Jonathan Edwards' sermon comes out of a Puritan theology that Anabaptist Mennonites don't really identify with. Still, at least we can admit that Jonathan Edwards was trying to wrestle with the reality of God's anger, which is more than most of us have tried to do.

Yet if we pause to think about it, we do know about anger. Every parent I know of has gotten angry at some point with their children. You tell your daughter 10 times not to interrupt you while you're talking on the phone, but she does it anyway and so you get mad. I remember one son in the Schrock household—who shall remain nameless—who repeatedly refused to take a shower. So with some anger I finally picked him up, carried

³ http://www.thearda.com/timeline/events/event_232.asp

him into the shower, and turned the water on. Sometimes we parents step over the line in our anger. At other times, both parents and children probably know that the parents' anger is justified.

That is exactly the case in Jeremiah 4:26. The text assumes that God's anger is justified. Despite repeated instructions and warnings from prophets like Jeremiah, the people of Judah were still oppressing the poor and still worshiping other gods. Though God has been patient with them for a long time, God's patience has nearly run out. For the moment God is still withholding the divine anger, but that won't last much longer.

IV

Please remember that this text is a poem. It is not a journalistic news report of something that has already happened. Jeremiah was not a reporter for CNN or the Goshen News. This reads more like a prophetic vision, or more accurately, a prophetic nightmare. We have no way of knowing for sure, but maybe one night in bed Jeremiah had a nightmare, and when he woke up in the morning, wrote his nightmare down in the form of this poem. However the poem came to be, Jeremiah is using it to grab the attention of people in his religious community. He wants to seize people's imagination, to wake them up from their spiritual slumber. Here in the first part of the book, particularly in chapters 4-10, Jeremiah tells people they don't have much time left to shape up. An enemy from the north will invade us, he says, unless we stop our awful treatment of the poor and stop flirting with other gods. Later in the book, names that enemy from the north as the mighty Babylonian army.

Jeremiah's long career as a prophet lasted something like 47 years. While his nightmare in 4:23-28 never happened in all its details, the substance of that nightmare did indeed happen: the nation of Judah, with its stubborn repression of the poor and its continual idolatry, ended. The nation of Judah was brought to its knees, chastened.

V

Over the course of his 47 years as a prophet, Jeremiah came to know God rather well. After reading the book of Jeremiah, you get the sense that as a man Jeremiah was an unusually sensitive soul—someone who was acutely aware of his own emotions as well as acutely aware of God's emotions.

Therefore it's not surprising that Jeremiah could sense when God's anger had dissipated, just as most children can also sense when their parents' anger has dissipated. Jeremiah learned that God did not stay angry for long. After the Babylonians left, Jeremiah's poetry shifted dramatically. He sensed that God's anger was not the endgame. Instead of writing poems about destruction, he wrote poems of restoration. The poetry of dire warning became the poetry of galloping hope.

In chapter 31:10-14, Jeremiah composed another poem, not a nightmare but a daydream. In this poem God gathers up people who had been scattered hither, thither, and yon, and arranges for them to live in an abundantly watered land of grain and wine and olive oil, of young calves and frisky lambs. In this poem women dance in the streets and men make merry with songs. The poem exudes gladness and joy. Jeremiah did not live to see this new poem happen. As an old man he was taken against his will to Egypt, where he died after a long life of sensing God, trusting God, and responding to God.

Centuries later, the writer of Hebrews celebrated people like Jeremiah who by faith leaned forward into God's future, even though that sparkling future of God seemed dim and far off. But that's how it is for all of us, right? By faith we look beyond September 11, 2001. We too lean forward into God's shining future, without knowing when, where, or in what ways it may yet break open among us. We live in the assurance of things hoped for, with the conviction of things not seen.