

The 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, February 17, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton.  
Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

All of today's readings are raising up a choice for each and all of us, today and every day, in the way we choose to live. I say "choose" because where attitude and intent are concerned, it is a choice.

Jeremiah is, by turns, angry and joyful. Jeremiah's angry with those who are self-focused, who are willing to trust others only as long as those others do what these self-focused individuals want. "Who cares who else might suffer, as long as I get what I want, what I deserve!!" On the other hand, Jeremiah's joyful – exalted – about those who are other-centered, who put their trust in God, and not themselves.

There are consequences to our choices, Jeremiah says, so we'd better think carefully. To make that choice requires us to reflect on issues of mortality and finitude, of the need to be aware of our own ambiguity, the potential to baptize our self-interest as morality. We can't help being self-interested but we need to place our self-interest in the context of a willingness to sacrifice for a greater good. That's the choice here: is it to be darkness or light, authenticity or hollowness, integrity or dishonesty, self or other, blessing or curse?

In his writing to the Corinthian community Paul seeks to connect our hope *for* resurrection with the reality *of* Christ's resurrection. If we don't rise in the here and now then there is little likelihood that Christ rose. **We are, and are to be, Paul says, the proof of resurrection.** If, through baptism, we're made into icons of Christ, then we're also – as weak and flawed as we often are – also **icons of divine resurrection.**

For Paul, as for Jesus, resurrection is – first and foremost – this-worldly, is or must be here-and-now, before it's otherworldly. We experience resurrection through our ability to be renewed in times of struggle, stress, and defeat. And there's a choice here, too: is it to be darkness or light, authenticity or hollowness, integrity or dishonesty, self or other, blessing or curse? It's our choice, expressed in the way we choose to live.

And then there's today's Gospel passage. You've all heard of the phrase "The Sermon on the Mount," right? Matthew says that Jesus went up to a high place (Matthew 5:1) and began to teach (ch. 5-7). Here's Matthew drawing together of all of Jesus' teaching into one, continuous presentation. To set the stage, Matthew describes Jesus going up to this high place to emphasize that – just like Moses – his/Jesus' teachings come from God.

Less familiar is the phrase which Luke uses for Jesus' teaching: "The Sermon on the Plain." Scholars use it to contrast Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but in so doing they accidentally mislead us. Luke never uses the word "plain"; what he says is that Jesus stood on "a level place" (Lk 6:17ff). Luke doesn't feel the need to convince everyone that Jesus' teachings come from God – he has a different agenda, a different context in mind here, and he chose a word used by the Prophets Of Old, translated into Greek as *pedinos*. When the Prophets used that word in

Hebrew, they were most frequently using it to refer to the places of corpses, disgrace, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (e.g. Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11).

This is second-level subtlety that we miss without understanding what *pedinos* meant. Luke is saying that God's reign comes not into some fancy, idyllic all-sweetness-and-light fantasy world, but the real world where we struggle, fret, agonize, suffer, die.

At the same time that the prophets talked about a "level place" as one of darkness and suffering, they also said something else; they foresaw God renewing all the level places of our lives, all the places of corpses, and disgrace, and suffering, and misery, and hunger, and annihilation, and mourning. The glory of God's salvation would be revealed in those very same dark places, and the darkness would be defeated – transformed by the light of that glory (see also Isaiah 40:4, 18; Ezekiel 3:22, 23; 8:4).

The way of the Realm of God in this world goes right through all the desolate places of life; and when we find ourselves there, in those desolate places, we find Jesus there, too, inviting us to join him on the journey of our lives toward a place of renewal and joy.

And so it is that in today's gospel passage, Jesus' words connect those dark experiences of finitude, struggle, and mortality with being blessed.

We, who are – or claim to be, anyway – Jesus' followers are to live in the present on the basis of the values and practices of God's Realm. We're to do that no matter the struggles, the darknesses we encounter; if we can do that, ***we will be blessed.***

The Blessed, Jesus says, know their need, they immerse themselves in creative and nurturing interdependence because they recognize that they have no other choice that really matters. They know God is God and they aren't! They can't use their privilege to fly over the valley; they must walk through the darkest valley – the valley of the shadow – with God and others as companions and support. In the biblical tradition, the person most pitied is the rugged individualist, needing nothing and no one – not even God – to thrive. Such independence is, as one writer has said, an illusion:

***“the illusion felt by billionaires, presidents, celebrities, star athletes, and successes – until life confronts them and they discover trusting any mortal, including themselves, will lead to personal and communal ruin. Creative interdependence nurtures, rather than blunts, personal agency.”*** (Bruce Epperly)

Today's scriptures challenge us to embrace interdependence, as we journey through the level places of our lives. The virtues of interdependence are humility, gratitude, compassion, empathy, generosity, and love. Connected with one another, the energy of the vine flows through us, we are nourished as we nourish each other, and there is always room for one more at the table.

AND today's scriptures remind us of the flip side of the divine coin: there's a choice here: as we make our journey, is it to be darkness or light, authenticity or hollowness, integrity or dishonesty,

blessing or curse?