

BY THE RIVER
[written in oral style]

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26
6th of Epiphany, Year C

February 13, 2022
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After hearing today's text with warnings, woes, blessings, and exhortations, it is hard to know whether to duck or say Amen.

The passages, including Psalm 1, present condemnation and hope.

The Jeremiah pericope is clearly based on Psalm 1 with the analogy of plants thriving by the water or dying from a parched environment.

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Jeremiah presents two types of persons.

There are those who trusts humans, human resources and systems. They are limited by their own flesh like an animal.

And there are those who have faith in God. This is spiritual and eternal.  
It is either/or. There is no middle ground. No blending.

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Given the potential and benefit in trusting God, it is baffling why people reject God.
The question is posed in verse 9, "...who can understand it?"

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Does God understand why?

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Verse 10 reveals that God searches the mind and heart looking for an answer.

There is hope in this pursuit.

God has **not** given up on us mortals.

And, God provides—God nurtures / waters those that grow in God.

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The Luke text also presents a dichotomy.

Some are blessed and the others are cursed.

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We generally prefer Matthew's version of this message, called the Sermon on the Mount. It is safer and less personal.

Luke's presentation is "Liberation" theology.

Moreover, Luke uses the "pointed" and direct 2nd person YOU.

Blessed are you who know you are poor.

Blessed are You who are hungry Now. You Will be satisfied.

Blessed are You who weep now. You will get the last laugh.

I'm paraphrasing, but remember the "last laugh" part.

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There is Authority in those YOU statements.

Then Jesus turns to the mere mortals, to those who thrive in the unjust human-constructed system.

**Woe to you** who are rich. Your luxury will not last.

**Woe to you** who are sated. Your bounty will feed the hungry and you will go without.

**Woe to you** who are honoured and privileged. Your status and tributes are based on Lies and deceptions.

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We cannot help wondering which category we are in.

We would be prudent to do a self-assessment.

Wealth and power are not sins. They are responsibilities.

However, we should recognize that "How we live reveals what or who we trust."

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Okay, I will stop here and change gears.

We are all tired and stressed. Some are angry, some are depressed and anxious.

We do not need a heavy, provoking sermon.

So instead, I will share a story.

After I graduated from seminary, I decided not to relocate for three years so that my daughter, Jessica, could finish high school there.

I took the position of landscape supervisor for the 125-acre seminary campus. Managing the trees, shrubs and gardens was therapeutic. The landscape was beautiful.

In fact, it was designed by Fredrick Olmstead.

Olmstead was the famous, 19th century landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York City.

The campus had lots of hills, typical for Kentucky.

In one notable valley, there was a little stream with a charming stone foot bridge.

>Scott, please show the picture<

You can see the little bridge with a bench behind it.

There was an assortment of flowering plants, ornamental grasses, and all were graced by the lovely River Birch trees.

I put up some bird houses, too.

>Thanks Scott, you can remove it now<

The area was called the "Valley of Decision."

Legend had it that it was named "Valley of Decision" because in the *olden days*, the valley separated the men's dorms on one hill from the women's dorm on the other side. Late at night, a romantic interloper would make a profound "moral" decision at this half-way point,...before continuing on OR not. In the spirit of romance, I proposed to Leslie while standing on that little bridge.

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The "official" explanation stated that this garden area was an ideal, peaceful place to contemplate great theological concerns.

It was a delightful place; however, the seminary decided to put in a large parking lot right next to it.

Some trees had to be temporarily moved. A culvert with bars over the opening was set just beyond the bridge to send the stream's water into the city's drainage system. This increased the flow of the stream. Part of the valley was filled in and leveled for the parking lot.

The disturbed soil was so-called reclaimed, and the plants were returned.

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After a while, I noticed the plants were struggling. Leaves were turning yellow in the middle of the summer. Two of the birch trees were dying.

All was Not well with the Valley of Decision. In the words of Jeremiah, the plants were looking like "Shrubs in a desert." They were weeping in hunger and poverty.

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Weakness attracts predators. The plants were being attacked by insects and Worse! KUDZU VINE had moved in.

If you are not familiar with Kudzu: it is the curse of Southern flora.

Kudzu vine is a monster consumer! It consumes with wicked aggression. Kudzu grows over a foot a day, covering buildings and smothering shrubs AND trees. It thrives in warm, plush conditions, sucking the water from the soil

Kudzu is a consummate consumer: an enterprising, self-indulging plant that strangulates and exploits.

Covering vast areas gives it the appearance of strength and power. If the victims die, the predators would simply move on.

Do you get the analogy?  
Kudzu supports itself at the expense of others, the weak.  
Jesus called such people "Rich."

Kudzu seems strong, but it is only a vine.

It appears mighty and dominant, ...in its time.

Yet, it withers in a drought and cannot tolerate cold temperatures.

**It cannot endure hardships on its own!**

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Two things needed to change.

The rich / the predators needed to be weakened and the weak needed to be strengthened.

Basically, liberation theology / Jesus justice.

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The Kudzu was diligently pulled out and the insects were sprayed with soapy water.

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The plants were weak because they were not getting enough water.

The stream was moving too fast now to allow good absorption and the parking lot construction dumped in clay by their roots.

We applied gypsum which breaks up clay.

It makes clay permeable.

The solution for water retention was to put in a pond next to the garden area.

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I received blessings for the project from the Director of Facilities. He thought a pond would be a nice gathering place.

I contacted the city to see if I needed a permit.

They loved the idea. They were all for anything that retains water and reduces drainage.

They said the pond should have a bank higher than normal water level in order to contain a flooding rainfall.

The pond was dug. Rocks and plants were put in place, and soon the pond began filling up. We even added fish.

>Scott, please show the picture of the pond<

The garden area in the Valley of Decision is just behind the pond. Beyond that is the parking lot.

The pond is not yet full, and you can see the outlet pipe is lower than the bank.

All the rocks and plants were brought in and placed.

Not visible are the frogs who somehow found it and the ducks who often landed there.

>Scott, please remove the image. Thanks<

The trees and shrubs were rebounding.

They now had access to water. As the text states, "They were trees planted by water."

In church language, this was salvation.

The pond was life giving!  
Life giving to all the plants around it, to frogs, birds and other animals.  
And it was life giving for people.  
The pond quickly became a gathering place.

The picture you saw is framed and hanging in my home office.

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A couple weeks after the picture was taken, I was summoned to the pond for a meeting with the seminary president.

Al Mohler was inserted as president when the fundamentalists took over the seminary, a year after I graduated.

This was his second year as president. My third year as landscape supervisor.

Most of the professors had been replaced, and President Mohler's mantra was "We are returning the seminary to the way it was." I suppose that meant, "back to the old days before the scrouge of progressive thinking."

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I waited 20 minutes by the pond. Al arrived with an assistant and his two children. He did Not introduce his children. I waved to them as they hid behind him.

He then went into a tirade about the pond. Apparently, he never walked around the campus because he just found out about it.

He proclaimed "The pond has to go. It must be filled in NOW."

I protested, presenting all the wonderful benefits of the pond.

He kept repeating his mantra about returning the seminary to the way it was. He stressed the pond is new and he was against change.

I pointed out that the parking lot was new, too.

Ah, but that was practical. The pond was frivolous. Again, he repeated that it does Not represent the past.

I suggested that I could call in the media. The positive exposure would be great publicity for the seminary since he had so much bad P.R. the past two years.

He did not appreciate that, and yelled, "Absolutely NO media."

The exchange ended with **fill it in tomorrow**, and he walked away. Borrowing from Jeremiah, I could not understand it.

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I did learn that the seminary board was meeting that weekend, and he did not want them to see the pond, for some reason.

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I did not have the heart to destroy the pond and asked someone else to operate the front-end loader.

I was deeply, deeply saddened by this outcome and so were many others.  
This was a dark time.

I consoled myself by remembering that I was for what is life giving. I nurtured life and that is a good thing yet there was destruction!

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A few days later, I received a call from someone in accounting. He did not give a name. He said the issue was the seminary secretly and illegally built the parking lot. The city had strict codes for controlling water drainage. Parking lots radically enhance runoff.

The parking lot was kept a secret to avoid the \$70,000 fee required. And, there would be added fines once the city learned about the parking lot.

That was why President Mohler was furious.

The powerful take what is not theirs to have, and do destruction in the process.

I did not report the seminary's crime. That would be revenge and serve no positive outcome.

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The next day, I walked into the facilities' office area. It is humorously obvious when you are about to be fired. Previously friendly people, said nothing and pretended I did not exist. I went into the director's office. He was uncomfortable. Before he said a word, I preceded to tell him that I was submitting my two-week notice. I told him that I had accepted the call to plant a Mennonite church in Ohio.

God has impeccable timing. ☺

I left the office with a smile but also with deep sadness.

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During my last day at work, someone from the library archives came to me with a large cardboard tube.

She said, "This was to be thrown away and so it is okay that I give it to you."
She gently pulled out the contents and opened it up.

Before me was Fredrick Olmstead's original drawings for the seminary. They included a pond in exactly the same location as I had placed it.

Al Mohler's illusion of the past was a lie.
Any call to return to the way things were is destructive deception used to grab power.

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I had the last laugh!      And an original Olmstead drawing.  
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There was some satisfaction with the ending of this affair.

Too often we are in the middle of dark times struggling to carry on.
This is why faith in God is so essential.
God redeems / God gives life.
There is hope.

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Most of the plants in that valley died, and that is very sad.  
Nevertheless, many people were inspired by the pursuit for what is life giving / what nurtures  
life and goodness.

I was greatly humbled by the experience.  
At the time my vision was too short. I only saw a pond and the destruction.

It was more than a pond. It was a lesson.  
The story, our story is Not over. God is at work. God is redeeming.

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Even in difficult and depressing times, choose what is life giving.
Be what is life giving. Nurture life.

We and all around us need lifegiving water to survive.
Water represents God's nurturing spirit.

Nurture what is lifegiving. That is the way of God.
That is God's doing.

Our stories/ our life is still unfolding. With God's there is hope.