

“Scorching Wind and Coming Chaos” Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-7

Would the real God please stand up? Sounds like a line from an old TV quiz show, doesn't it? But it's a fair question. Some would say the Bible can sound confusing as to what kind of God we have. When Jesus is accused by the scribes and Pharisees of welcoming sinners and eating with them, he tells them that God is like a shepherd who tends a flock of a hundred sheep. One is lost. Leaving the other ninety-nine—in the wilderness, no less—the shepherd goes after the one that's missing. When he finds it, he joyfully lays it on his shoulders and returns home. He calls all his friends and neighbors and throws a party. “*Rejoice with me,*” he says, “*I have found my lost sheep*” (v. 6).

What a wonderful picture of God; a loving God who welcomes his children back into the heavenly fold, who doesn't hold their wandering off against them. But that's hardly the picture we get of God in the fourth chapter of Jeremiah. This time, God is not portrayed as a dutiful shepherd or a loving father. God is revealed as a hot scorching wind that comes sweeping down from the barren heights, which means it will have nothing to impede it or slow it down. It will hit with its full force and leave nothing but chaos and destruction in its path.

Have you noticed that sometimes a good thunderstorm will clear the sky and bring in cooler, drier air? The next morning the sky is a brighter blue after a storm goes through. Sometimes a storm is cleansing. Or even just a wind. While our friends and neighbors to the southeast have to endure the brunt of Atlantic hurricanes, the only thing we normally get from a hurricane is a light shower that brings pleasant breezes.

The storm Jeremiah describes is neither a thunderstorm nor a pleasant breeze. That part of the world is subject to what are called the *sirocco* winds that sweep down from the Sahara Desert. A meteorologist would tell you they are caused by surface and upper-level depressions moving eastward across the southern Mediterranean or northern tier of Africa, producing hot, dry, and dusty conditions. But that's not what Jeremiah says. The prophet tells us it is a hot and devastating cyclone that takes no prisoners. Jeremiah tells us it is the vengeance of God. The purpose of this storm is “*not to winnow or cleanse;*” says the prophet. This wind is “*too strong for that.*” This wind is designed for one thing and one thing only—to destroy. This is how bad it will get. The earth will look as it did before creation. It will be waste and void. There will be no stars in the sky. The mountains will shake at the knees like a frightened child. And no birds will fly in the air.

Last summer a friend of mine visited the Culloden battlefield, near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. On April 16, 1746, the armies of Bonnie Prince Charlie and George II met in a boggy field. Charlie was trying to retake the British throne for the Stuart dynasty, but it was to no avail. He made a number of miscalculations, and the British took advantage of them. In less than an hour, the battle was over. But that's not the end of the story. The British wounded were repaired to a nearby farmhouse where they were treated as carefully as possible. The opposing wounded were taken to a barn adjacent to the field where the battle had taken place, and the barn was set on fire.

Since the British cavalry had not had the opportunity to be engaged in the battle, their commanding officer gave them the freedom to raid the countryside. Every man, woman, child, and animal within miles was slaughtered. The Scottish tartan was outlawed, and bagpipes were banned (some might applaud that edict!) as an instrument of rebellion and war. The British did everything they could to rid the land of its Scottish culture. However, it is said that in the ensuing years the British became so ashamed of their behavior that even now the military refuses to wear the colors of Culloden on their uniforms. And, it is said that to this very day no bird flies in the skies over Culloden.

Such is the land of Judah. *"Every bird in the sky had flown away"* (v. 25). *"I looked,"* says the prophet, *"and the fruitful land was a desert, and all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger"* (v. 26). Now let me ask you: which God would you opt for? Jesus' God or Jeremiah's God? The God who goes searching for one lost sinner, or the God who lays waste to the land and all living things? Will the real God please stand up?

Before you jump to the quick and obvious answer, however, consider another thing. Try to put yourselves in the place of the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus tells this parable. Though it had been some 600 years since the days of the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah's message is still as real to them as the evening news. They are as aware as anyone of what their ancestors had gone through to bring them to this place. They endured enslavement in Egypt, the wilderness wanderings through the Sinai wilderness, and then living in exile (twice). They knew that for a while those who had come before them had done what was right and good in the eyes of God, but they were very much aware of the other side of the story as well...how their fathers and mothers had committed evil in the sight of the Lord.

"My people are fools," (v. 22) God said to Jeremiah. *"They do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil* (the word "skilled" has the same root as the Hebrew word for *wisdom*, meaning they were "wise" at

doing wrong), *they know not how to do good.*” The scribes and Pharisees know this prophecy as well as you and I can quote John 3:16. They remember all that happened in the days of Jeremiah and are doing everything possible to see that it doesn’t occur again. Even in a place and time in which they are occupied by the hated Romans, they will keep their religion alive. They will not go after false gods. In fact, they will mark time until the day arrives when God will redeem his people from the hands of those who were lording it over them.

“The day of the Lord,” is what they called it. But until that day, they will be faithful to their God and will not walk in evil as did those who came before them. They’ve been down that road before and they won’t ever go there again. But then, Jesus comes along and keeps company with those who laugh at their way of life. He passes forgiveness around like candy and tells stories like this that draws a picture of God who appears to forgive sinners with ease. He welcomes sinners and eats with them. He spends time with those who, in their way of looking at things, oppose the will of God. We could say that if Jesus were to have his way, their way of life would be destroyed, and the scorching wind of God would blow down on them from the barren heights once again.

Barbara Brown Taylor explains it this way. She imagines Jesus at the plasma bank, standing in line with all the hung-over men waiting to sell their blood. Or maybe he’s down at the city jail shooting the breeze with the bail bondsmen who cruise the place like vultures. She sees him keeping time with a crack dealer, a car thief, a prostitute with AIDS. He’s buying them all a cheese omelet at the local diner when she comes in with her sixth-grade confirmation class where they sit a couple of booths away. “Is that who we think it is?” the children ask. “How come you warn us to stay away from people like that and there he is?”

“Then I imagine myself saying something to them about how those who are well do not need a physician or about how the good shepherd cares more for the one than for the ninety-nine, but the words get stuck in my throat. I could tell them this parable, I suppose, but I am afraid they might get the message: That to be lost is to be precious in the sight of God, and that their good behavior rates less joy in heaven than the alleged repentance going on at that nearby table. How do you tell kids something like that? It’s almost like telling them to *get lost.*” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1993, p. 149)

Do you see? The scribes and the Pharisees aren't necessarily bad people. They just don't want Jesus, or anybody else, telling them to *get lost*, to go back to the ways their ancestors behaved. Their main goal in opposing Jesus, in addition to their desire to maintain the status quo, is to ensure that God's scorching destructive wind doesn't come sweeping down from the barren heights again. They've had enough of that kind of judgment. If judgment is to come, they want it to come to their adversaries—to the Romans. Those occupiers of their land deserve God's vengeance for what they've done to God's people.

But now, Jesus comes along and with his stories of the kingdom has essentially told them to go *get lost*. According to him, it is the path to redemption. But they'll have nothing to do with him or his message. They have too much to lose. They've been down that road before, and the last thing they want to do is risk the judgment of God. All they have to do is recall the imagery of Jeremiah the prophet to know just how terrible the judgment of God can be.

Yet, it's like clinging so very tightly to something that the pressure causes it to slip out of our sweaty hands. What it shows is that redemption is not really ours in the first place. That is the message—the awful message—from Jeremiah too. It's the same message from Jesus, except it is delivered in what sounds like far more tender imagery. But what they say is the same. Judgment and redemption are the sole possession of God! God alone chooses *how* and *where* and *when* redemption takes place. But it's still worth asking once again if only because the question is such an obvious one: Which God do you prefer? Jeremiah's God or Jesus' God? For the record, I'm a firm believer that God's nature did NOT change from the time of Jeremiah to the time of Jesus. But rather, it's the message that changed. Or, better yet, it's the Messenger that changed.

We're all aware that today, 9/11, is the 21st anniversary of an awful day in our nation's history. Where do we find hope on days like 9/11? Because our God is a seeking God who will not let us go, there's one little phrase from Jeremiah's prophecy that holds a tiny flicker of hope: "*The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely.*" The One who comes searching for us in the rubble is known to us, not by his power and might, but by his scars. With his nail-scarred hands, he will take our trembling hands into his. And when he tells us that God will come looking for us, we can count on it.

That, my friends, is the "real" God. How do I know that to be true?

Because that is the real Jesus! Amen. (Thanks to Randy Hyde for sermon ideas)