

Sermon for 21 August 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17
“Rescue, relief, encouragement”

Reflecting on her parents' tense relationship, my mother said, “They just didn't ‘gee’ and ‘haw’ together.” Those are words teamsters used to drive a team of strong and willful mules, in case you all are too young and far-removed from non-motorized civilization to know. “Gee” means “Go left!” and “Haw” means “Turn right!” I think.

I start that out for color, but also to remind us that we're continuing on this tack of prophecy and obedience that became so prominent in the development of the Old Testament's message. There's bound to be big trouble if the people God has chosen on this second chance humankind gets to make something of itself doesn't shape up and fly right. Jeremiah was set and shaped before birth for his preaching points ... Do you get the point that you, in your unique way, are a messenger to your time and place?

Psalm 71's first six verses give us words to pray when things get rough and we have to take deep breaths and, as the old mamas used to say, “There's times when you just have to let go and let God.” Think of the loss of children we hear about every week towards gun violence, or to jail time, or drugs ... as well as to the all-too-common tragedy of divorce or, as in my grandparents' case, of a cracked and broken marriage that goes on and on into misery for all surrounding and dependent upon its character.

Hebrews, in its determination to elevate the experience of Christian confidence, runs roughshod over the Old Testament description of God-contact, where the people of Israel were so terrified of the power that saved them that they couldn't stand to touch the tent of meeting or look upon the vision of Jahweh that Moses saw and obeyed.

It was all too harsh, according to those who put together our readings for this season, for this mid-point moment in the heat and drought and, often now, the storms of August. So they let us watch as Jesus, in words just as stark as those of the rabbis, did something incredibly tender and unexpected, when he singled out a worshiping woman to transform, totally without her expectation or, as far as we know, even her will. Of course she wanted to be relieved of her malady ...how could she not, bent double for all those years, in all those circumstances that defined her existence? ... but there comes a time, as we all know, when hopelessness and even cynicism take over, and we lose sight of the expectation we are born with, and despair of the energy that makes us try again to grow and reach out and even attempt to serve the needs of others. As far as we know, this woman had reached those viewpoints, and although this may be Luke's version of the woman in

another Gospel who secretly reached out and touched Jesus' garment to be healed, this woman stands for those who no longer try, or dare, but simply plod ... to church, to synagogue, to all the customary trails and trials of simply living out a human term as we know it.

By inserting this example into today's readings, those who chose them balanced all this praying and church-going we do through the summer liturgies, as well as all this shushing and shooing the scriptures do through the prophets. We're here to celebrate! We're here to drink deep. We're here to respect, and bless, and trust, and expand upon all those characteristics that make us who we are, and that make our time unique and deeply influential of the rest of history that will follow us and ours. God is about loving what God has made and kept running. The universe is just that: a unified reality, that started from delight and heads towards rejuvenation. Jesus is about that, and no lecture from him or anybody else can slow down the energy that stems from such a viewpoint. Rescue, relief, and encouragement are the sacred words we're to take to heart and take home with us today. "Love one another" starts with loving the whole show: God ... and runs down through every seam and beam of our own physical being and our mental specialness and our spiritual tendencies And then overflows into the neighbor next door and around on the other side of the round earth. We have so much evidence of this in our time, with all the medical advances and scientific procedures and the heroes that, as we say on the outside of lots of hospitals and nursing facilities, "work here." And beyond that, the fact that, literally, we have seen a Black Death equivalent put to rout in these last three years, with the vaccines and masks and precautions that were never known or tried in ages before us... And then, in the horrors that we've witnessed in televised abuse, and the incredible scholarship that's blossomed to show us what we have suffered with in all the history of this nation of ours, in slavery, and indigenous divestment of personhood and land, that we have truly been able to publish and begin to deal with humanely And then the God-awful attempt we made to end war with atomic energy, we now confront, in the greatest opportunity to transform terror into fresh resources ...

I must stop before I show all my ignorance in my enthusiasm for what confuses and depresses and scares us so much these days. Talk about game plans! All this idiotic driving and stupid shaming and stubborn stonewalling and arguing that depresses us is not the whole story.

The good news is not just buried beneath the orneriness and trashiness of our moment. It's right here, in the words we're given in scripture for today. "You better take advantage of it this time," we hear; and of course, it's true. But it's true because it's real, and it's lovely, and it's in our bones, and even in our illnesses and contrariness. We are uniquely illustrating what this stage of human and earthly development has produced; and unless we're

just plain stupid, we are looking every night and day at new heights and greater skills, and larger expanded loving capacity, on every shore and turf. Whether it's new rain forests waiting to be started in South America, or better ways to handle manual labor everywhere, or serious leveling of expenses for all kinds of knowledge and medical care, or music and art not yet attempted, or food and trash collection and recycling better and more creatively done ... There's good news at every jagged edge, and Jesus is right there exposing it and shaming those who say it shouldn't be done on Sunday or inside or

Trust yourself. Say I told you to. Rejoice. Explore. You ... we .. are being rescued, and renewed, and extended in capacity to stand up straight and live into the next stage of reality in God's universe, through Jesus Christ, Amen.