

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sunday, February 16, 2025**

**“Roots by the Stream”  
Jeremiah 17:5-10**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Our Old Testament Lesson, from Jeremiah, is a poem from a thirsty world. The prophet Jeremiah was from the Kingdom of Judah (present-day southern Israel), a region that was usually “desperate for water” (Brueggemann). And amid that arid landscape, he wrote this poem about a tree and a shrub, one thriving and one dying—and, in the contrast, Jeremiah teaches us about trust in God. The poem begins:

“Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the LORD” (v. 5).

Jeremiah cautions against trusting in human power. Think of all the things that, supposedly, offer us security: technology, popularity, success, wealth (cf. Davis). Now of course, there are lots of tools we embrace to preserve life—seatbelts and smoke detectors and all that; as a group, we Presbyterians are particularly fond of safety features. The problem isn’t benefiting from tools meant sustain life; the problem is when we misplace our ultimate trust. As one theologian puts it: “Every time [we] put [our] ultimate trust in a job, a friend, an employer, or [our] own [...] plans, [we] risk grief and confusion, for none of these objects [are] eternal or stable” (Driver).

Human power can make us feel very secure, but Jeremiah cautions us against placing our ultimate trust in that which is not God. And here’s where he offers that image of dry, shrivelled shrub. Those who place their ultimate trust in human power, Jeremiah says,  
“shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.  
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land” (v. 6).

Those trusting in human power, Jeremiah says, are like a shrub left to a waterless waste. Everything about this image is dry and lifeless; it’s even been suggested that this shrub is already dead, and has only “the appearance of life” (Calvin). I remember someone telling me how, when their entire office was sent home when covid hit, nobody thought they’d be gone so long they’d have to bring home their plants; months later, when the office reopened, the staff found their potted plants bone dry, brittle, and dead. That’s a bit like what Jeremiah pictures here: a shrub in some arid

salty ground, or a tropical potted plant dried out in a sealed office—it's about life cut off from the source of life, roots “searching for water that could [never] be found” (Martin).

Then after that image of an arid shrub, Jeremiah imagines a thriving tree. In Canada, we tend to take trees for granted, with our large forests and countless trees; but in Jeremiah's world, in that arid region, a tree was a powerful and hopeful symbol. To see a tree thriving in that dry landscape—that represented an almost mysterious resilience. As one writer puts it: “To [...] people desperate for water, the tree was symbolic of life that could withstand drought [...]. We see trees, their trunk, branches, and leaves; but the secret to the life of a tree is not what we see, but what we cannot see: the roots, [...] reaching deep into the earth [...], finding hidden moisture. [Because of] marvellous processes [...] operat[ing] [unseen,] we find shade, [...] fruit to refresh our bodies, nests for birds” (Howell).

And *this* is how Jeremiah imagines people whose ultimate trust is not in human power but in a trustworthy God. He writes:

“Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit” (vv. 7-8).

Jeremiah imagines those who—instead of handing their trust to human powers and privileges—who instead place their “radical trust in and dependence upon God” (Davis). These people are like a tree growing beside a stream, Jeremiah says, sustained invisibly by the water flowing past its roots. The hot sun beats down on that tree, but its green leaves and shoots continue to grow; drought descends and dries out the earth, but this tree remains watered and offers still its life-giving fruit.

It's a compelling picture: it's beautiful and appealing—especially compared to the dried-out shrub. Given the choice between the two—between a tree growing by a stream or a shrub shriveling up a dessert—of course we'd want to be like the tree, the one trusting in God...

And yet—and yet, if we're honest, there's a tension between Jeremiah's poem and, well, our experience. A question to ask is: what this poem describes, is that how we've really seen things play out in this world? Our experience doesn't really match up with Jeremiah's poem, does it? One biblical scholar lays out the contrast like this: “The prophet insists that those who trust in human assertions of power will suffer in hard times, while those who trust in God possess the deep resources necessary to

flourish [...]. [H]owever, we know that [t]he politically or economically powerful [...] make out pretty well, while the pious [often] do not enjoy [any] discernible reward” for their trust in God (Davis).

If anything, it seems like the *opposite* of what Jeremiah teaches is more often the case: we see those who trust in human power succeeding, just as we see those who trust in God perishing... Jeremiah’s poem is beautiful and compelling; but if we’re honest, we might ask if this is more a dream of the world as it should be rather than a depiction of the world as it is...

But if it seems like this poem offers a false promise, a pretty picture but not the real world...then I think it’s because we have misunderstood what it means to trust in God. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that trusting in God means everything will work out in our favour: it’s thinking, ‘Oh, I know everything will work out just the way I planned, because I trust God.’ Yet trusting God simply does not mean that things will happen the way we want: trusting in God is not an assurance that we will escape hardship or adversity; in fact, trusting in God is sometimes what *brings about* hardship and adversity.

And the thing is, Jeremiah does *not* claim that trusting in God means being shielded from adversity. To the contrary: in Jeremiah’s poem, those trusting in human power *and* those trusting in God—they “both...experience drought” (Tucker). Trusting in God does *not* mean that we’ll be shielded from things going wrong; and the real risk in thinking that trusting God prevents hardship—the problem is, if you think that way, then you lose your trust in God at the very moment when you urgently need to turn to God, which is in the moment of setback or disappointment. If trusting God is supposed to be a guarantee of personal success, then how could we lean on God amid failure?

Yet trusting God is a deeper reliance on the goodness and kindness of God, even—no, especially!—when everything goes wrong. In Jeremiah’s poem, the one who trusts in God, the one “like a tree planted by water,” this one “shall not fear *when* heat comes,” he says; it “is not anxious” “*in* the year of drought” (v. 8).

If we thought that trusting in God meant a guarantee of personal success, then we’d be left alone and cut off amid our failures; yet if we recognize that trust in God runs deeper than our personal successes, that we need to trust in God more than ever amid our failures, then we can learn to trust in God when we are thriving *and* when we are struggling, when we succeed and also—inevitably—when we fail.

I think trusting in God means recognizing that we don’t know whether we’ll fail or succeed, whether we’ll live visibly successful lives or be left reeling by some unexpected hardship. But the promise of Jeremiah’s poem is that—as

we place our trust in God—we will yet be replenished when we are fading and renewed when we are failing, as God promises to sustain us in ways that we may never understand.

Jeremiah's poem is deeply hopeful, but in order to take hold of this hope, we need to do something that isn't easy—which is to trust in God, not because it means things will go well for us, but simply because of the kindness of God revealed in Christ, simply because our loving God is more trustworthy than anything or anyone else, simply because of the promise that God will lovingly sustain us, like a tree planted by a stream. Amen.