Rooted for the Future

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Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-8

Before I begin Eric's sermon this morning, he asked me to share a brief word with you. As many of you know, Eric is in Omaha this weekend, helping Melanie and Arianna as they recover from their recent breast cancer surgeries. He is deeply disappointed not to be here with us, especially on a Sunday that marks the beginning of a new year in the life of our congregation. He also wants you to know how grateful he is to our Executive Leadership Team and to me (he wrote that, not me!) for encouraging him to remain in Omaha, where he most needs to be right now. And while he cannot be here in person, he is very much with us in spirit this morning.

Here is Eric's sermon.

Friends, we're not the only ones celebrating a new year in the life of our faith community this weekend. Our Jewish neighbors are observing Rosh Hashanah—which literally means, "Head of the Year."

One of the things I love about the Jewish celebration is that it names something important about God that is best not forgotten when we face a future full of unknowns and uncertainty: **God sees—and remembers—everything.**

As much as the Jewish celebration is about looking forward, it also begins a season of looking back, of *teshuvah*—of self-examination, repentance, and return. Our Jewish friends acknowledge that their lives, like ours, contain "the good, the bad, and the ugly." And they acknowledge that God sees, and remembers, all of this. Of course, that's both good news and bad news!

The *better* news is that God sees *more* than they can see. In one of the great prayers of Rosh Hashanah, called *Zikhronot*, or "Remembrances," they remember that God remembers not just their lives, but the *whole story*—creation, generations past, covenant, promises, deliverances. Human beings remember fragments; God sees and remembers the whole. It is this "more than" that brings hope.

What is the "more than" that God sees and we don't? We'll get to this shortly. Because Jeremiah's vision is deeply steeped in it.

In our scripture reading, Jeremiah speaks metaphorically of two types of people, whom he characterizes as a tree and a shrub. While both experience the same struggles—in this case, hot sun and drought—their responses could not be more different. The shrub withers while the tree flourishes and bears fruit, despite the heat.

According to Jeremiah, the difference between these plants—or people—is trust in God. If you trust in God, you are like a tree that sends its roots out and taps into a flowing stream. But if you trust only in your own wisdom and strength, you are like a shrub trying to grow in soil that is not only parched but full of salt.

Now, do you buy this?

I'd like to push back on Jeremiah for a moment. Because, on the surface, Jeremiah seems to be preaching the same message that Prosperity Gospel televangelists preach. If you have enough faith, all will go well. That's great news when your life is going perfectly well. It's a sign that you've been faithful and God is rewarding you. But what does the Prosperity Gospel say when your life is turned upside down? When the job promotion does not come … when the diagnosis isn't what you'd hoped for … when tragedy befalls you? According to this same line of thinking, it's because you didn't have enough faith.

This is where I'd like to push back. Hard.

[Remember: these words are Eric's, not mine:] When our daughter Arianna underwent surgery for brain cancer eighteen years ago, some Christians credited our family's strong faith and trust in God as contributing to her successful outcome, recovery, and continuing health. While faith made an enormous difference in how we weathered the experience, I would note that this same faith did not protect Arianna from the tumor to begin with.

I would also note that our faith has continued to grow and deepen over the years, yet our faith did not prevent Arianna's tumor from growing back and requiring medical intervention – twice. Nor did it prevent either Arianna or Melanie from developing breast cancer.

Last week, close family friends gathered in remembrance of their own daughter, Hannah, who died of breast cancer recently at age 35. Are we to conclude that Hannah's death was the result of either Hannah's or her parents' lack of faith?

That conclusion seems about as far from Reality as concluding that Arianna's or Melanie's health somehow depends on our family having greater faith than Hannah and her family had.

If this is what Jeremiah is claiming, then I could not fault anyone for writing him off. And I would be among the first.

Yet, Jeremiah's own life is devastating evidence against this reading of his message. You may remember something of Jeremiah's life from the Spiritual Oxygen series a few weeks ago. Jeremiah was full of faith and trust in God. Yet Jeremiah was also rejected by his peers just for doing what God asked of him. He was also threatened, beaten, put in stocks, imprisoned, thrown into a cistern, accused of treason, and forced to watch the catastrophe unfold that he had spent decades warning about.

If Jeremiah 17 means, "trust God and things will go well for you," then Jeremiah himself is Exhibit A against Jeremiah!

So let's take a closer look at our passage to see what the televangelists overlook.

Here's the passage again. This is how Jeremiah characterizes those who place their trust in God versus those who trust in mere mortals. What do you notice on a second reading?

Regarding those who trust only in mortals:

They 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.

Regarding those who trust in God:

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.

Pop quiz on what you've just heard, twice now:

Question 1: Which plant experiences severe conditions that make life incredibly difficult: the shrub or the tree?

Answer: *Both* do.

Jeremiah makes it unusually explicit regarding the trusting tree: "when the heat comes" … "in the year of drought." By implication, both can experience a brain tumor, breast cancer, or any number of major challenges.

Question 2: To which plant does relief come: the shrub or the tree?

Answer: Relief comes to *both*.

Yes, the shrub, too. Did you not hear it? "*When relief comes* …" says the passage about the shrub. In fact, the Hebrew makes the point more surprising. The word translated as "relief" is Hebrew *tov,* which literally means "*good*." So, Jeremiah is claiming that *good comes both to those who trust in God and those who don't.*

Then, what is the difference?

The shrub trusts only what it sees. Under drought conditions, it can't see any reason to send out its roots, so it doesn't. The shrub thus allows the drought to define its world and misses out on the relief that's coming.

The tree, on the other hand, does not trust only what it sees. Rather, it trusts the gifts God has already given it. The tree has been given the ability to send out its roots, whether or not they find water. It uses the gift regardless of the outcome, not knowing whether water lies ahead.

We read in Jeremiah 17 that the trusting tree is "planted" beside a flowing stream, toward which it sends out its roots. Yet the Hebrew word for planted, *shatul,* commonly means more than just "planted." It means "transplanted"—planted in a *new location.*

Imagine being transplanted from the tree's perspective. It has no idea that it is being transferred from a confining pot into a place where its roots can stretch out and find nourishment. Perhaps, too, the tree is being moved to a location to join other trees—trees whose roots have already found the water source that the tree so desperately needs. All the tree actually knows is that it has suddenly been uprooted. Displaced from its home. A home that might not have been very comfortable but at least was known.

If we were going to provide counsel to this tree, we would advise it to "Trust the Gardener." Whether the Gardener has transplanted you, or life's random circumstances have forced you into a new situation, the Gardener sees the larger context, and you do not. Now is the time to continue sending out your roots.

Jeremiah says that the tree that experiences drought and displacement "*shall not fear* when the heat comes … in the year of drought *it is not anxious*."

Are you beginning to sense how deeply the concept behind Rosh Hashanah resonates in Jeremiah? Rosh Hashanah acknowledges that God sees a larger context than we do—the good, the bad, and the ugly … and then some. It takes trust to remain open to that "and then some"—to possibilities for life that our present circumstances do not allow us to see.

Sometimes that "and then some" becomes visible precisely in times of disruption and displacement. A situation we never would have chosen may open us to possibilities we could not see before. If we continue using the gifts God has already given us—even when a situation feels hopeless—we become like that tree, sending out roots without knowing where they may lead.

We see what this kind of trust looks like later in Jeremiah's life. With Jerusalem under siege and Jeremiah himself in prison, he does something astonishing. He pays his cousin seventeen silver shekels—well over a year's wages—for land in his ancestral hometown of Anathoth, even though the Babylonians have already taken it over.

Why on earth would Jeremiah do that? Because he trusts that the devastation he sees is not the full picture. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land," he predicts. Jeremiah cannot see that future. But he is willing to invest himself in it.

Trusting in God is not about avoiding hard times. It's about acknowledging that there is more to life than you can see. It's about continuing to send your roots out.

This weekend we, along with our Jewish friends, are celebrating the beginning of a new year, with plenty of unknowns ahead. Where is the war in the Middle East taking us? What will be the results of the midterm elections? Where is our economy headed? How will our health fare? Will our loved ones be healthy and safe?

While our celebrations look different, both raise questions about how we will enter the year ahead. If Jeremiah were here this morning, he might give voice to the questions this way:

"What future are we willing to be planted in now, both as individuals and as a congregation?"

And "What future are we willing to invest ourselves in before it can be fully seen?"