

A Desolate Vision – Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 – September 4, 2016

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Ever since I was a young child, and saw the movie Earthquake, starring Charlton Heston, I have been a fan of disaster movies. These are the movies where volcanoes erupt and destroy a local community, or tornados are destroying Midwestern towns. Films where massive tidal waves hit the coast, or a comet the size of Rhode Island is about to strike the Midwest – the same type of comet that killed the dinosaurs. Or maybe it's not a natural disaster, but instead is a swarm of killer bees coming, or a horribly contagious and lethal virus is on the loose, or maybe a toxic dump site has contaminated the ground water creating deadly zombies. Or it could even be a host of aliens coming to colonize our world.

Of course, outside of Hollywood filmmaking, disasters are nothing to laugh about. Especially for the people who have to endure them. The people of New York City understand that. The people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast know that. The civilians in Syria certainly understand as well. They live disaster every single day.

The prophet Jeremiah understood disaster. Not only did he live in an unstable social, political and economic environment, he would also, in his later years, live through the destruction of Jerusalem. But for Jeremiah, things were even worse. Because he knew that more was coming. He saw the desolation on the horizon. God gave him the visions of what was to come, and it was a bleak picture indeed.

It's not a hard leap for us to believe that Jeremiah hated his job. Being a prophet was not his first choice of career goals. Remember, he was recruited as a kid. And honestly, could he really tell God "no?" He was loathed by his peers, and he was haunted by the message of destruction that he had to deliver to the people of Israel and Judah.

The people refused to believe him. They were caught in this arrogant attitude that God could never let them be destroyed. They were, after all, the chosen people. "I mean, come on, God's on our side. We're the righteous ones. All others will fall by the wayside." Even when the northern kingdom, was taken over by the Assyrians, the southern kingdom, still didn't get it. Oh, they got the text, but they immediately deleted it. Quite a dangerous trap to fall into. A trap that is repeated throughout history when people seem to believe they have a monopoly on righteousness or keen insight into the mind of God. Or believe that God is on their side over against everyone else.

If we listen to what Jeremiah has to say, clearly the people were in for a rude awakening. The passage is laced with anguish, both the anguish of the prophet, who is having to share this message with a people who don't want to hear it, and anguish from God, who laments over a foolish and stupid people. Hear again these words, "For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good."

They have completely forgotten how to do the right thing. They've gotten caught in the cycle of sin. And they can't figure out how to get free. When we take a close look at corporate sin, we can see how it can corrupt a community. Evil systems get into place, and once that occurs, it is hard to break free. Once sin begins to creep in, a downward spiral invariably ensues. When sin and evil overtake economics, politics and social structures, how can the individual fight it, when it becomes a natural part of the system? Is it simply a losing battle?

Sin has consequences. We all understand the principle of cause and effect. When we sin, our actions affect more than just ourselves. As much as we'd like to hide it, that doesn't usually work. Sin has its costs. And when sin has permeated a social structure or institution, it's hard for anyone to stand against it. It's easier to go with the flow. Like God said in the passage, "They are skilled in doing evil, but they do not know how to do good." And we get sucked into the sin that occurs around us, and it becomes a natural part of how we live our lives.

Take for example racism. It is such a deep-rooted problem within our society, that unless you're a person of color and have experienced the effects of racism first hand, you may not even realize how ingrained it really is. The internet and social media have exploded recently with scores of videos showing acts blatant racism, but instead of acknowledging there is an ongoing problem, many white people ignore the reality and attempt to justify the discrimination. Their attitude is, the system works fine, so quit trying to mess with it.

The people to whom Jeremiah was preaching were caught up in this type of corporate sin as well as their individual sins. As a result of this sin, they were going to face some pretty dire consequences. Jeremiah proclaims the arrival of invaders from a distant land who would lay siege to the cities of Judah. Then later in the passage, Jeremiah presents what he saw in a horrible vision, using poetic words and phrases to get the vision across. In some ways it's almost an anti-creation story. The language used here is reminiscent of the language used in the first two chapters of Genesis which describe the Creation of the world. But here Jeremiah, shows the opposite picture. The earth laid waste and void. The mountains quaking. No humans anywhere, and all the birds gone. Lush lands now deserts. Cities laid to ruin. It's a

horrible vision of desolation. No wonder Jeremiah hated his calling. To live with these images in his head. Quite dreadful.

And no wonder both Jeremiah and God were in anguish for the people. God loves humanity so much that when we sin and turn away from God, it breaks God's heart. And so these poetic images of complete destruction mirror the anguish and despair felt by God when humans turn and go on their own way.

It's not really a stretch to imagine that the sins of humanity can impact the world. We know that sin has consequences. Those consequences affect not only other people and systems but also impact our environment. It is probably hard for us to envision this type desolation. It seems like something out of one of my disaster movies. But consider that there are people living in this world today where devastation and disease, violence and fear, dirty water and no sanitation are a regular part of their daily lives.

This is not to minimize the tragedies that we experience in our own lives, because we do face difficult times. Yet it is important for us to recall that there are those who live in this world where ongoing tragedy is a way of life. Not surprising, oftentimes it is human sin that contributes to the horror. So I wonder if Jeremiah's desolate vision is really that far-fetched?

Just yesterday I was reading a story about how a county in South Carolina was attempting to halt the spread of the Zika virus by spraying a pesticide to kill mosquitos. The county government neglected to inform the community of the spraying and a local bee keeper lost 1.5 million honey bees. As more communities across the country take steps against the Zika virus, how many more unintended consequences will occur?

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/01/health/zika-spraying-honeybees/>

I read another story about how, in the 1940's, the U.S. relocated the residents of Bikini Island in the South Pacific so that nuclear tests could be conducted. Testing went on for years, while the island residents struggled to survive in exile. Some 60 years after the nuclear testing had been completed, radiation levels make the island still uninhabitable. Descendants of the islanders long to return home.

<http://www.iflscience.com/environment/bikini-island-is-still-very-radioactive-five-decades-after-atomic-bomb-tests/>

Yesterday, Oklahoma experienced an earthquake measuring 5.6 on the Richter scale. Five months ago, scientists in Oklahoma had expressed concern that oil and natural gas drilling had made the area more susceptible to earthquakes. Other states that practice hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, now face similar risks. <http://money.cnn.com/2016/09/03/news/economy/oklahoma-earthquake-fracking-oil/>

When we begin to consider all these things, it is easy to become overwhelmed. I know that for me it is quite daunting to think about the sin and corruption in our world and its impact on humanity and the environment. It is not healthy for us to dwell exceedingly on these things, but neither should we ignore what's going on. I think we sometimes feel helpless, because like the people of Israel and Judah, we feel trapped in the system. Our institutions are permeated by corrupt practices, and it seems impossible to break free of them. And maybe we even begin to feel some of the anguish that God feels, when we begin to understanding the pointlessness of the suffering that is going on all over this world.

I wonder, is that the lesson for us. We certainly can't fix everything that is wrong. But we can begin to open our eyes to the horrors that are going on in our world. We can begin to see the desolation that so many people experience as part of their daily existence. We can look at a world through the eyes of God and understand the traps of corporate sin, recognizing how our institutions and structures of economics, politics and social systems are corrupted. And when we begin to recognize this sin, we can start to make changes.

In looking at this passage from Jeremiah, you might wonder if there is anything positive to bring from it. It certainly paints a bleak picture. And we can understand why Jeremiah didn't have a big fan base. But notice one little verse, tucked away among all the others. Verse 27, "For thus says the Lord: the whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end." Hear it again. "Yet I will not make a full end." Some scholars wonder if that verse should even be there. Or they wonder if perhaps scribes copied it down wrong. It really doesn't seem to fit. All this talk of total destruction, of the reversal of Creation. And here is one tiny glimmer of hope.

But I don't find it strange at all. All is not lost. This God of Jeremiah is the same God who gave us Jesus Christ, who showed us a better way to live.

Sin has mighty consequences in this world. The passage from Jeremiah attests to that. It is a warning for all of us, to become alert to those consequences. As we see the ways that sin affects the world, both individually and corporately, we can begin to make changes in how we live. And by doing that, we will begin to effect positive changes in the ways others have to live. Will we speak up for those whose voices are ignored and advocate on their behalf? Will we take a stand against government and corporate practices that result in adverse consequences? Even though Jeremiah paints a picture of desolation, the good news is, we know that that is not God's final word.