

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for January 17, 2010  
Lessons: Isaiah 54:11-15 and Matthew 6:19-24; 7:7-12

## STORM-TOSSED

*O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted . . .*

The prophet was speaking for God to the Jews exiled in Babylon, addressing them collectively as Jerusalem, the city of people whose city of walls and buildings lay in shambles atop Mount Zion. To the point of stubbornly denying both the political realities of their world and the word of God warning them to stop being complacent, the people and their leaders had believed Jerusalem could never fall, no matter what. Was it not the holy city? Was the Temple of the LORD not its centerpiece? Had God not made covenant with King David that his heirs would rule forever upon Mount Zion? Had God not turned back the mighty Assyrian army when it besieged Jerusalem, sending its soldiers home with an outbreak of disease that ravaged their camp? Surely, no matter what some grumpy prophet said, the LORD would preserve the holy city, unshakeable forever. Besides, for every prophet who raised a warning, there were ten more prophets on the court payroll who countered the warnings with reassurances of God's favor and protection.

I am frequently amazed at how little human life and society change, even over thousands of years. In 2010 even more than in the Sixth Century B.C., it's easy enough to choose the view of reality that suits our fancy and supports our already-held beliefs. For every warning, there are any number of comforting messages that make alarm seem silly or cynical messages that make any responsible action appear futile. Pick your truth. A friend of mine, however, does like to caution us, "We're all entitled to our own opinions, but we are not entitled to our own facts." We carry that insight further because we have also been given the view from the vantage point of God's love for this world and its people. We have Jesus and the prophets to teach us to see truth in terms of God's grace.

In Jerusalem before the city's destruction, over-confidence had replaced faith and had led to an impenetrable complacency about God and about any possible consequences of greed and injustices. The people believed their way of life was secure because their teachers assured them it was underwritten by God. The leaders assumed a divine right to enrich themselves unfairly and do as they pleased. A true prophet like Jeremiah didn't stand a chance when the paid court prophets contradicted everything he said with their own word from God that offered reassurance wholesale.

Then came the crash. Jerusalem's fortifications did not keep out the Babylonians. The walls were breached, the Temple burned, the royal son of David removed cruelly and his sons killed before his eyes. A way of life ended. The peasants were left to fend for themselves in a war-scorched land, and those who had been the privileged were dragged to Babylon where they then lived in exile with no hope for return and no city to go back to, anyway.

This is a sermon, not a history lesson, but perhaps it can serve as a lesson for us from history. God does not underwrite self-serving human endeavors; neither does God guarantee privileged life styles, protecting greed from its own consequences. When the apostle Paul says God has turned the world over to its own futility, he's not kidding. Though I believe with all my heart and mind that, when we turn to God, God does intervene with grace to rescue us and redeem the choices we have made, I find no reason to believe and great reason to reject as false the belief that God guarantees anyone's success or underwrites the privileges of people who think life belongs to them and prosperity is theirs for the taking. The prophets insist God measures a society by justice not wealth, and God measures the level of justice by the injustices done to the people with the fewest resources and least influence.

Jesus promises us that God will be found by those who persist in seeking, asking, and knocking, and he insists that God delights in giving good things to us, but he never suggests that God is like a vending machine whose function it is to dispense goodies automatically. Yes, God wants us to flourish in life, but God's idea of flourishing and prospering bears no resemblance to the lusts of the greedy or the pride of the market-savvy, who (I seem to recall) were referring to themselves just a few years ago as "masters of the universe." The same Jesus who tells us of God's desire to give us good things in life also asks us, "What does it benefit a person to gain the whole world but lose his or her soul" – the very self that is created for relationship with God and with other people.

So, Jesus asks us, *What do you have your eye on? And how do you see life, other people, and yourself?* Is it all about "me" and my prosperity? He warns us that we cannot serve God and Mammon. Our version translates Mammon as wealth, and we really don't know exactly what the reference is, but it seems Mammon may have been a former deity, a kind of god that had been diminished within Judaism to representing the worship of wealth, power, and prestige – of self-made prosperity that does not seek the grace of God or justice for others.

We do not get through life without learning what it means to be storm-tossed. Nearly everyone at some time in life, usually more than once, experiences being emotionally torn loose from the moorings that had seemed strong and secure but suddenly gave way, leaving us "at sea" as we say, tossed by wind and waves until there is no sense of direction or of

being securely connected to anything that is holding. These days we have many in our land whose financial moorings have come loose and who are having a very hard time finding anything to tie on to again. Everything seems temporary, unstable, and often deceptive, and even paths that seem open are littered with hidden stumbling blocks. “Oh, I’m sorry, we can’t consider you because . . .” – this requirement or that one cannot be met. You live too far away, you don’t have a true residence, you have too much experience (they can’t say you’re too old) or not enough experience, etc., etc. There’s a box on the checklist that can’t be checked for you. Sorry.

Storm-tossed is people who can’t pay their mortgage but whose house isn’t worth enough to pay off the remainder, and so they have to list it as a short sale and hope the mortgage lender will take somewhat less than is owed. But storm-tossed right here in Bridgeton is also the young adult coming out of school homeless, who is really only pretending to have an address, but in reality has no place to take a shower to get ready for a job interview. Here in Bridgeton, it is quite common for children and youths to ask each other, “Where are you staying?” rather than, “Where do you live?”

Storm-tossed can apply also to the grief-stricken whose life has lost its moorings, it’s connection, because when love comes untied, so does life. Commonly people in the shock of grief say things like, “I just can’t focus; I can’t get things done; I forget what I’m supposed to be doing, but I don’t have the energy for it, anyway.”

We need to be clear about something in Jesus’ teaching. Storing up treasure in heaven does not mean caring only about another world, another time and place, another life that is not present, not earthly, not relational. That’s a dangerously false notion we have developed within Christianity. In Jesus’ teaching, “heaven” is most often a Jewish substitute for naming God. Storing up treasure in heaven means seeking, wanting, and doing the things that matter to God. It means sharing God’s concerns rather than following the desires of my own greed, fear, or prejudice. The contrast Jesus is making is with serving Mammon. We have learned to locate heaven in the sky, someday. Jesus came to locate heaven on the earth, this day. He calls us, not to flee from earth, but to love it because we love God who loves it so much, because we serve Jesus Christ who gave himself for it.

When people are storm-tossed, they need moorings, connections, places of understanding and support where it feels, if not good, at least better to be. They do not need answers posing as certainties in judgment upon their uncertain lives. As families and as a church, we are now challenged to be present, respectful, and welcoming for the storm-tossed, which comes much more easily and naturally when we too are seeking, asking, and knocking. Then we can seek together and encourage each other. The truth of human life is that, when it comes to being storm-tossed, we’re all in quite similar boats on the same sea. Amen.