

## Lenten Evensong 2017

A few weeks ago, we heard the Gospel account of the Transfiguration. Jesus has taken Peter and James and John up on the mountain, and he's transfigured before their eyes – radiant white. He's there with Moses and Elijah. and Peter wants to build booths for everyone. Peter wants to keep things as they are in that wonderful transcendent moment. And in the homily I gave that day at St. Paul's in Greenville, I talked about how we want things to change, but we don't want to change...

That's part of what comes to me about the readings we have this evening. Yes, we want the kingdom of God to come, on earth as in heaven. We want the world to be changed, but we don't want to change.

What we have in the reading from Jeremiah is a description of the destruction of Jerusalem, presented as God's wrath for the people's failure to follow the covenant, God's law as it was given to them. Several scholars interpret the first verse – about coming back to glean the last grapes from the vine – as God telling the invaders to keep coming back to get the folks remaining to take them captive, too – because there is no one listening. "See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen. The word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it." The prophet is "full of the wrath of the Lord...weary of holding it in." "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain...everyone deals falsely." And as I listen to the news of *our* time, I think Jeremiah's words may be a fitting description of the present.

But I do not believe, as perhaps the people of Jeremiah's time did, that we have a God who causes destruction or tragedy to punish people or to vent wrath. God, in that understanding, is outside our world, separate and aloof, an "outside" God, if you will. Rather, I believe we have an "inside" God – God who dwells with us, inside our world, inside us, whose greatest desire is that we come realize that we live "inside" God.

So, once again, let us turn to the Gospel to see what *Jesus* reveals to us about the nature of God.

Just before the scene we have tonight from Mark's Gospel, Jesus was in the boat with the disciples in the midst of a storm – and they wake him because they are afraid – and he calms the sea with the words, "Peace! Be still." -- This isn't the acclamation of "Peace, Peace" that Jeremiah mentions – "They have treated the wound of my people

carelessly, saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.” - No, this is a reassurance and an instruction. And the disciples were filled with wonder.

And then the boat gets to the opposite shore – not their home base in Galilee – to “the country of the Gerasenes.” We don’t have a lot of information about the people here, except that some of them were obviously raising and marketing pigs – dealing in what was “unclean” for Jews. And we know they had figured out how to deal with those they found different, those they didn’t want around them. They had exiled “the demoniac” to live among the tombs – another unclean place. They had deprived him of his humanity, tried to restrain him, and ostracized him.

And so, when Jesus steps out of the boat, and the man possessed comes to meet him, all hell breaks loose.

These people, too, you see, are behaving like those Jeremiah has described in the verses before the section we heard this evening. They are not caring for the poor or the sick or stranger among them. “Like fowlers, they set a trap, they catch human beings,” Jeremiah says. But instead of preaching the God of vengeance and wrath of Jeremiah’s day, Jesus again shows us a different vision of the heart of God, the nature of God.

Here, in the face of all that is wrong, Jesus reveals God restoring to this man his humanity – his nature as a child of God. The people finally have to see him as God saw him: Clothed and in his right mind. And coincidentally, the unclean business with the pigs has been dealt with, too. They’re gone!

Jesus reveals a God who calls us into wholeness and holiness, that is – a God who calls deeper into relationship, and into who we really are – in the heart of God. But that is also a call to change.

The man who was now restored wants to stay with Jesus – which, in this case, would mean *going* with Jesus. And Jesus tells him no – he is to live with and spread the news of the goodness of God – or as our Psalm put it – to bless the Lord at all times – right where he is, among his family and friends – which means among the very ones who had previously ostracized him. That will be no easy task. But by the grace of God, he is able to do that. He is able to pass on the “change” that he has experienced, by proclaiming in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.

But the other folks – the locals who had their lives pretty much set the way they liked it, ignoring the commandments they didn't like, - their reaction to the change Jesus wrought – and to the welcoming, inclusive and loving nature of God Jesus revealed – their reaction was not as positive. They were afraid. The change he brought about scared them. And they asked Jesus to leave.

No doubt if you asked them, they would have said they, too, wanted the kingdom of God to come. They, no doubt, wanted change. But they didn't *want* to change.

And that brings us right back to today. We are in the midst of a time where the values of the Gospel – the values revealed by Jesus as part of the nature of God – seem under assault. There is movement not to *welcome* the stranger but to turn him or her away, not to provide for the least among us but to take away Meals on Wheels. – Perhaps it is not possible for a government to follow the Gospel, to operate out of those values. But it is possible for us as individuals to keep striving to live that Gospel, and to encourage those values in our own families and communities and nation by the words we speak and the way we live our lives.

If we want change, we have to be willing *to* change. It's as simple as that. Let us be mindful of that as we continue our prayer of Evensong – especially as we pray the words our Deacon Nancy so lovingly wrote inspired by the Lord's Prayer. "Give us, O God, clear minds to discern the tasks you set before us, and courage to act in your holy name. May your hopes for us come to pass." Amen.

Jeremiah 6:9-15    Psalm 34    Mark 5:1-20