

“We Shall Not be Moved”

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Jeremiah 17: 5-8

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*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.
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.*

*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.*

Jeremiah 17 is a classic moral illustration of the good that comes from a life of faith. It basically says: *If you hang tight with God you'll be blessed ... and if you don't, you won't.*

This theme is repeated throughout the Bible. Psalm 1 is almost identical to Jeremiah 17, also using a tree as an illustration, and there are others. A couple of weeks ago we read in the service the story of the house built on the rock instead of on the sand. The message in Jeremiah is that life, resilience and strength come from a life of faith.

The question is, is it true? Or is this just some kind of children's story with the moral “Be good or else”?

I do think it's true — and I do think we need to meditate on this scripture and what it means, but before we do, there are a couple of caveats. Let me start by telling you what the scripture does not mean.

a) This is not a Prosperity Gospel. Prosperity Gospel says that if you follow in God's Way you will be rewarded in earthly ways: you'll be successful and you'll be financially blessed. While God does sometimes bless us in earthly ways, there is no correlation between following God and having earthly success. In fact, if you look at the lives of those following

Jesus in the early church, if there is a correlation it's sometimes in the opposite direction. The apostle Paul was a very 'successful' guy... until he met Jesus. After he started following Jesus he was tortured and imprisoned and ended up being killed because he followed Jesus. But I'll tell you if Paul had to do it over again, he would have. In fact I'm sure his only regrets were not having found Jesus sooner, and having participated himself in the persecution of the early Christians before he had his famous conversion on the road to Damascus.

b) It's not a report card either. I just got my kids' report cards this week, and I can see how they measure up in math and how they compare to the class average. Plus the teacher usually gives notes that tell us how that child could improve and what they should do to get a better mark. This illustration is not like a report card that if you pass, you'll be blessed and if you fail you won't be. It's not like a check list: "Did she come regularly to church?" check. Did she volunteer? check. Did she unload the dishwasher? -check, check, check-. Did she refrain from nagging family members? -X- ... 'Kimberly could use some improvement in this area!' We don't get a report card.

c) Remember last week's story about grace where Jesus turned water into wine? We don't earn God's love by what we do. God's blessings are freely offered not because we *do* but because of who we *are*. You are God's child and made in the image of God, and God longs to bless you and give you life.

Here's the thing. I believe that grace and life are all around us, but it's up to us to tap into it. It's the old story of 'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.' God has provided living water that will restore us and strengthen us, but God won't force us to drink.

What does drinking from this living water look like? What I have experienced is that carving out time to connect with God makes a big difference. In the Recovery community, Step 11 is about developing a "Conscious Contact" with God or your Higher Power. For me having a morning devotion time where I read from the scriptures and spend time praying makes a big difference. My goal in that time is not simply education. I do learn more about God, but this is not just a 'head' time. I show up so that I can speak to God and so that I can hear God speaking to my heart.

How do I hear God speaking? Sometimes a verse or story from the scripture will jump out at me and I know that God is speaking to me through it. That's how the Bible comes alive. For example, on Friday one of the scriptures I was reading was about Moses who was leading the people

through the desert. He was spending long hours from morning to night solving all the problems of his people. His father-in-law saw this and said 'This is no good! You will burn yourself out doing this'. 'You need to appoint people to help with the smaller problems and then they will bring the bigger problems to you.' Moses was wise enough to take his father-in-law's advice. As I was reading, I was hearing God tell me that I also have a tendency to take on too much, and that I need to trust lay leaders to do some work and not be involved in all of it. It's not just in reading the scripture, but also in listening to music or in a time of quiet, like meditation, that I can hear God speaking to me.

I'm not special. There were a lot of years in ministry when I didn't spend that time with God. I read the Bible, but I read it more to figure out what I was going to preach on Sunday. Actually, it can be a hazard for clergy because you can spend so much time doing the work of God that you don't get around to actually connecting and building a personal relationship with God. God doesn't just speak to clergy; anyone can hear God speaking to their heart.

God speaks and encourages and refreshes anyone who is willing. As Revelation 3:20 says "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock ... if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.*" *If anyone...*

Life is not easy. To use the illustration of the Tree and the bush, storms will come. Seasons of drought will come. I can't read this scripture without thinking of my time living in southern Alberta. There were long periods of drought as well days and days of incredible wind. Only the trees that managed to develop deep roots survived. And then you compare that to the tumbleweed that you'd see whipping by. The tumbleweed started as a little bush, but the drought and the wind would uproot it and send it rolling across the prairies.

Daily connecting sends down deep roots. It lets you know that you are not alone. When you are deeply rooted you know what you are called to do. When you are deeply rooted you can not only weather your own storms but are able to see past your challenges to the struggles of others. You can make such a difference knowing that it is God who calls you and God who empowers you.

This is Black History month. Black people were systematically de-humanized for centuries. In order to repair that systematic de-humanization we need to systematically raise those people up. The same can be said for the Indigenous peoples in this country and other groups also who have

been treated as less than human, not just haphazardly, this person or that group, but systematically — by education, by churches, by government.

Some people complain about the campaign “Black Lives Matter” and they respond by saying that “All Lives Matter.” It is very true that all lives *do* matter, but for centuries the ‘have’s’ said “Your life does *not* matter.” In order to make repairs, a spotlight is needed on the one group to lift them up. We need to respond to the great injustice and systematically humanize groups that have been de-humanized. So it is important that we celebrate Black History month.

When I think of this scripture reading in Jeremiah my mind goes to that wonderful Spiritual that the Choir sang. “I Shall Not be Moved”.

*I shall not be, I shall not be moved
I shall not be, I shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the water
I shall not be moved*

This old song became an anthem of the Civil Rights movement and was changed to “We Shall not be Moved”. It is so clear that the deep-rooted faith of many in the anti-slavery and later the civil rights movement allowed them to do the incredibly difficult work of fighting for justice and equality.

I think of Harriet Tubman who was an escaped slave and who became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She led slaves to freedom before the Civil War, all while carrying a bounty on her head.



In 1849, Harriet and her brothers

Ben and Henry escaped their Maryland plantation. The brothers, however, changed their minds and went back. With the help of the Underground Railroad, Harriet persevered and traveled 90 miles north to Pennsylvania and freedom. There, Tubman found work as a housekeeper, but she wasn't satisfied

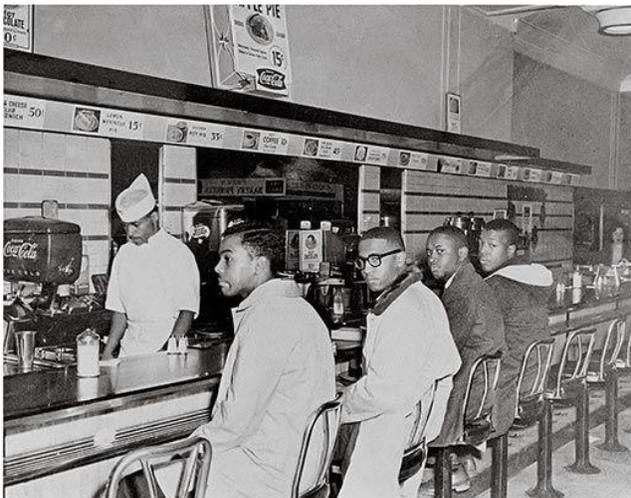
living free on her own—she wanted freedom for her loved ones and friends, too. She spent years helping family and others to be free. Harriet was a strong Christian and was said to see visions from God. She used hymns to help send secret messages to others who were escaping. The song “Wade in the Water Children” (Matt Wilson has a great arrangement of that song!) was a gospel song but it was a song to tell those escaping in that area to

get off the road and to take to the river so that sniffing dogs couldn't catch their scent.

It's believed Harriet personally led at least 70 slaves to freedom, including her elderly parents, and she instructed dozens of others on how to escape on their own. She claimed, "I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

More than 100 years later, on Feb. 1, 1960, four college students went to the local Woolworth store in Greensboro, NC, purchased some items, then sat down at the lunch counter to order coffee. They were denied service because of the colour of their skin. The manager asked them to leave. The students decided to stay, seated, politely waiting for their coffee, until closing time.

The next day, the four students (Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and David Richmond) returned, ordered coffee again, and were refused again. While they sat there, patrons and others jeered and heckled them. They called the police ... but as the youth were not in any way disturbing the peace, they couldn't arrest them. Going into this protest Franklin McCain remembers thinking: "If I were lucky I would be carted off to jail for a long, long time. And if I were not so lucky, then I would be going back to my campus, in a pine box." McCain also remembered an older white woman approaching them, thinking she would say or do something to them, like the other hecklers. She walked up behind them, and she whispered in a calm voice, "Boys, I'm so proud of you." McCain said: "What I learned from that little incident was *"Don't you ever, ever stereotype anybody in this life until you at least experience them and have the opportunity to talk to them."*



The four students, who would eventually be called the Greensboro Four, would be joined by 20 other students that day, just sitting there, reading books and studying while White customers continued to heckle them. On Day 3, more than 60 students joined in. On Day 4, there were 300 people at the lunch counter. After one week, the sit-ins spread throughout North Carolina, and soon the movement spread to other

Southern cities, then states. Five months later in July, Woolworth finally

relented and black employees of Greensboro's Woolworth's store were the first to be served at the store's lunch counter. The next day, the entire Woolworth's chain was desegregated, serving blacks and whites alike. In 1964, The Civil Rights Act was passed, mandating desegregation in public places.

Because of the courage and the faith of some, slavery was abolished. And much later, because of the courage and faith of others, the U.S. was de-segregated. But we know that racism still runs deep in the U.S. and in this country too. It is still harder for visible minorities to cross borders or to find meaningful employment. Visible minorities face all kinds of overt and subtle persecution. We need more people of faith and courage today.

Our banners read *De Profundus* and *Extra Muros*. “From the Depths” and “Beyond the Walls”. As the Church we are called to dig our roots down deep into the power of the love of God. As you do this you will find your life renewed, you will find strength in your storms, you will find purpose for your life and you will be empowered to do more — to make a difference beyond yourself. If we do this as a church, we will make a mighty difference in this community and beyond.

Thanks be to God.