

October 9th, 2022

Year C; Proper 23

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

Psalm 66: 1-11

Luke 17: 11-19

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Tim and I love to travel by car, he is an excellent driver. And as I have had the pleasure of meeting Richard Petty, I do not say this lightly! My job in our

travels is to be the navigator and I love maps and setting a course, and making changes as needed.

With the popularity of the GPS, we added this tool to our road trips. And I, as navigator, took under advisement the opinions of the GPS voice. Early on I would still follow our course on the maps, and yes, I might argue with the GPS voice. Tim, as the driver, would get exasperated as I would explain that he had options, to follow my directions or the GPS lady.

One memorable trip he laid down an ultimatum, either the GPS lady or I had to get out of the car!

In case you are wondering, I stayed in the car. And as GPS navigation got more reliable, I gave up second guessing, and now allow Waze to make all our decisions.

One recent trip, we were on Route 30, heading home from appointments in Richmond. We had set Waze to not choose interstates, looking for a more relaxing route than Interstate 95 or 64.

The Waze lady, who has an Australian accent on my phone, told us we would turn left in 1 mile, onto a road we did not know. She is good at finding shortcuts, so we followed her advice, and plunged off of Route 30 onto a beautiful side road. This road alternated brightness and shadows, taking us from the brilliant sunshine on the fields of corn and soybeans on either side, to deep shadows created by the sheltering arches of tall trees.

We both commented on our delight in finding this shortcut, and we agreed we would like to drive it again when the autumn colors were at their peak.

However, despite our enjoyment of the road, as we continued on, I began to see how unforgivingly narrow the road was; how the road had no guiding lines in the middle or on the edges, and how the road had absolutely no shoulder, no space to pull off. The forests and fields grew absolutely to the edge of the road, affording no room for error or pausing, no room for slip ups.

As we drove on, the thought came into my mind that this road had no grace, no room for mistakes, no hope if you were distracted for a moment, no mercy if you slipped up or needed room. No grace at all.

Our opening collect and our readings speak of grace. The collect implores:

“Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...”

We ask for God’s grace to travel with us in our lifetimes, going ahead of us and following behind us, God’s grace enfolding our days. And we yearn for God’s enfolding grace, as that grace will encourage and inspire us to do good, to be vessels of God’s compassion.

We speak in the church often of God’s grace, and we love to sing of it too, God’s love that we have not and cannot earn. And when we drift off or swerve off the road, at our very worst, God is still there, not with rage, but with love, always seeing more promise in us, than we can see ourselves.

The writer Frederick Buechner speaks of God’s grace, as God’s interest in us, God’s connection to us, “....not because of who you are, but because of who God (is).”

Our gospel tells the familiar story of Jesus stopped in his travels by ten lepers, those considered, because of their illness, to be on the absolute, the farthest fringe of society, outcast further even than the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the untouchables. The ten men shout to Jesus asking urgently for mercy, for grace, for compassion unearned and undeserved. Jesus speaks to them, and healing occurs shortly after.

And nine of the ten run off, while only one man makes his way back to Jesus to offer thanks for his mercy, his grace; a grace that so stunningly changed his life, the man realizing he did nothing to be treated with such care, such

compassion, such hope.

And then, that short sentence about the one man who offered thanks: “And he was a Samaritan.”

These few words ratchet up the unbelievable quality of the story even more. These ten men, all lepers, the ultimate outcasts, untouchable. And then we learn that this thankful one was also a Samaritan? This Samaritan man, along with his leprosy was also wholly unacceptable to Jesus and his friends, as devout followers of Judaism.

The Samaritans were the worst kind of enemies, enemies in one’s own family. The Samaritans were also Jews, but they did not agree that the Temple in Jerusalem was the center, the heart, the home of their faith.

And it is this untouchable man, this leper, this Samaritan, who is the only one to return and thank Jesus, the only one to realize that what he has experienced is God’s grace.

Finally, we turn to our Old Testament lesson. The Jews in exile in Babylon, though living ages before the Samaritan man, might relate to him a bit as they too are on the outside, defeated in war and stuck as foreigners in a strange land. Struggling to understand, feeling deserted, as God did not stop their misery.

The prophet Jeremiah sends those exiles words of encouragement from their God who they think has left them far from home. Jeremiah offers them guidance, of how not just to bear the exile, how not to waste their days, their lives, waiting for exile to end. Instead, Jeremiah tells them that God, “the Lord of hosts” says, don’t wait, don’t stew, don’t despair, live, live where you are. In living is grace.

Build homes and live in them, plant gardens and eat from them, have children and live. And most of all hope and seek and help to bring goodness—children and gardens and life—to your place of exile, pray for this foreign place to be well and good, and within that you will be well and

good. The road will widen, even in a foreign land, and you will see God's grace.

Again, Frederick Buechner said of grace, that it is God's interest in us, God's connection to us, "...not because of who you are, but because of who God (is)."

We all need God's grace, more than we can possibly imagine. God's love, God's compassion God's mercy, when no one else will give us a chance, a hope, a bit of room on a narrow road.

Amen.