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Our Skinful Natures

Jeremiah 13:15-23

St. Andrew's Church – Jacksonville, Or

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“Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken.”

Wow! If the human race could simply heed these words and stop right here we would have no need to hear the rest of our reading today. But we are proud and we don't respond to what we hear do we? Our lesson from Jeremiah is tough to hear for no other reason than it still hits home even today.

Jeremiah was often in difficult situations as he spoke the truths God put into his heart. He was tasked with a difficult calling. He had to chastise a rebellious people who did not want to hear what he had to say. Imagine yourselves standing in front of a television camera, millions of people across America watching as you step up to address a rebellious nation: Here is my rendition of a modern reading of today's lesson from Jeremiah

“Listen to me and pay attention, be not proud for the Lord God has spoken and gives warning. Turn and give glory to God before your eyes can no longer see the truth and your condition becomes terminal. You have hope for good things but you seek the pit instead. If you stuff your ears to avoid my words I will weep secretly for you, but I must speak boldly for you are being led away willingly to your own prison! Tell your leaders they must take a lower place for it is God who is on high, it is God who must be sought first. Their God-fearing justice has succumbed to pride and arrogance and there is no more trust between you and them. Look and see from whence you have come...where has your faith gone...who do you follow now. The time is now upon you that your leaders will cause dissention within families, friends will attack from the shadows and even the brotherhood will turn against itself. The pain will be unbearable and when your confusion requires you to ask ‘why is this happening’ you will see that your guilt lies in your willingness to expose yourselves to be manhandled by those who lead the deception. You will take your sides, but none have chosen God.

Where is your hope? Where is your faith? Can you, as an unrighteous people, change your ways after so much wrong?"

...it seems as though not much has changed since Jeremiah's day. Life is an arduous endeavor that requires us to work together, form hierarchies and find our place within our particular societies. In doing so it is easy to give in to covetous ways and find our views and support going in a different direction than the ones leading to our Heavenly Father. Even beyond our verses for today Jeremiah doesn't seem to give much hope. He continues to chastise and point out every evil committed by the people of God. As a matter of fact by the time we get to Chapter 15 Jeremiah is in despair himself and cries out:

"Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. So let it be, O Lord, if I have not entreated thee for good, If I have not pleaded with thee on behalf of the enemy in the time of trouble and in the time of distress" (Jeremiah 15:10-11)

Poor Jeremiah...also one crying out in the wilderness. It would seem that if the people are lost and the voice of God only a burden that there is no longer any hope for reconciliation, no chance to change course, no way to find favor with the creator...maybe those of us sitting here today don't feel this separation from the Father, but church attendance is at an all time low and many in the world today are experiencing the division Jeremiah is speaking of. So many citizens, so many peoples of nations and even the leadership of the world councils are too proud to give ear and hear what the Lord has spoken. And even if some do pretend to listen, their actions only show their callousness to the Truth.

In all of this, verse after verse after verse of condemnation, hope seems to be lost. Is there no way out of our sinful path? Is there no way in to the heart of God? There is! There is one line in the midst of Jeremiah's chastisement that stands out to ears willing to listen. It's a satisfying verse that only a true listener of God's Word would see as a break in the narrative that gives hope:

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil."

This is kind of a mysterious one-liner that seems to allow a little breathing room for those concerned about Jeremiah's words. But let's make no mistake, can the Ethiopian change his skin? No. By nature he is what he is. Can the Leopard change his spots? Also no. What you are born into is yours to bare. Is this good news? What good can come to us or from us if we are not able to change? We are sinful by nature and accustomed to do evil. And I believe that is the point...in and of ourselves we cannot attain righteousness outside the grace of God. We cannot change the natural mode of our existence. The Old Testament paints a vivid picture of man's sincere attempts to follow the will of God only to find his failings inevitable. Mankind cannot change his spots...at least not on his own.

As we read Jeremiah and the other prophets we are aware of our failure to be righteous. But its also through this awareness that we find another story sidelining the narrative. This story is found in the covenants of the Old Testament where we see God answering our needs before we are even aware of them. The **Noahic** Covenant was God's grace and mercy rescuing us from judgment. The **Abrahamic** Covenant was the promise of hope found in a new family line. Being redeemed from our slavery to sin, the **Mosaic** Covenant is our redemption by a Creator who loves us despite our sinful disobedience. And the **Davidic** Covenant is the promise of a new king by whom we will be established as God's people.

Here's the point: We cannot change our outlook to reflect a snow white purity while sinful natures persist within. We own our skins and the spots that come with them. In the covenants of the Old Testament are pictures, God telling us that while we are running around aimlessly, pursuing our own ways, He has interceded and prepared a way for us to find our way home. So let's take a brief look once again at these Old Testament Covenants.

The Noahic Covenant rescues us from judgment. The people of God found salvation in the Ark sealed by pitch within and without. The Hebrew word used here for the 'pitch' is Kaphar and it means to make atonement. In this covenant we see a picture of Christ were we are in Christ's body and sealed by His blood. And we see the fulfillment of this covenant in Romans 5:9 where Paul exhorts, "*Since we have now been*

justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him." Salvation is found in Christ, the true ark of salvation.

In the Abrahamic Covenant our hope becomes real. We have become a family living together to the same end. In Luke 1:17 we hear an angel speaking to Zachariah concerning his son John, "*And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" And Paul, in his letter to the Phillipians, reminds us that our citizenship is in Heaven (Philippians. 3:20). We are a united family in God.

And if the covenant God made through Moses set God's people free from its earthly slavery, how much more does the blood of Christ set us free from our bondage to sin. "*For we know (Romans 6:6) that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.*"

Finally, in the Davidic Covenant we see an everlasting kingdom that finds its eternal reality in a God who entered the human race to overcome sins debt that we may, in the words of St. Peter, "*receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:11)...the true King!

What Jeremiah was really doing, whether he knew it or not, was preparing us for a new covenant, a new relationship and a new understanding...making us ready for the coming of Jesus Christ. Like the Ethiopian and the leopard, man cannot change who he has become, but God can enter our lives and from within transform our outward appearance into a reflection of His glory. Today we continue that transformation as we enter the ceremonies and rituals of church worship where we come together at the Table of the Lord to receive his most precious body and blood. May we never take for granted the work of the Father "*For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen*" (Romans 11:36).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.