

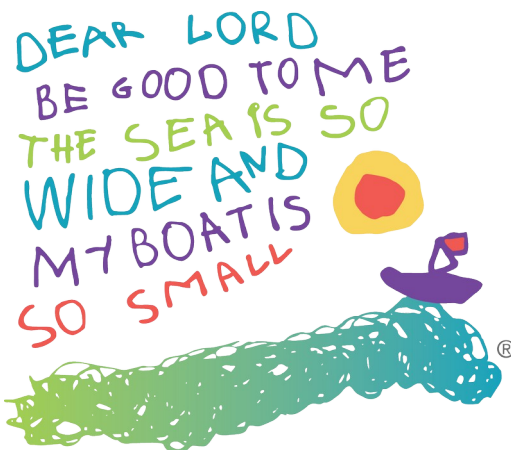
Children's Defense Fund

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SERMON RESOURCES



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TEXT RESOURCES: LECTIONARY

Jeremiah 31:27-34

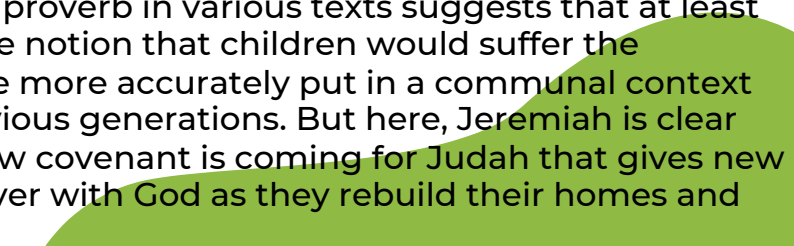
The book of Jeremiah is a multilayered articulation of faith in the face of crisis and destruction. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed, its temple razed. And in the wake of this physical decimation, families were consumed by grief and loss—separated in deportation; and for those who remained in Jerusalem there was a different disorientation and devastation. There were no resources left behind; no food, no tools, no infrastructure. This wreckage was not only about the present, the destruction of Jerusalem signified attempts by the empire to rob Judah of hope for the future.

The prophet, Jeremiah lived through the demise of everything that he knew. He would have watched the killing the royal family, priests, prophets, and majority of the population. So, he is called to be prophet in the midst of his own deep trauma. One of the reasons why this prophet is known as the “weeping prophet,” as he wailed in response to the destruction that he saw and Judah’s rebellion in its wake. So prominent is Jeremiah’s emotive response against the state of Judah that we have adopted in our own vernacular the term, “jeremiad”—defined by Anthea Butler as “a lament, a prophecy of doom aimed at the moral failures of a person, or a nation. Its purpose is to compel and propel the subject of the jeremiad to make a moral turn to the side of doing right.”

This pericope is situated in the “Book of Consolation,” a poetic pause in the midst of Jeremiah’s otherwise dismal articulation of the future of Judah. Here in chapters 30 and 31, we are chronologically looking at the impending destruction of Jerusalem, and yet the prophet offers a YHWH’s promise to restore Judah. Even as Jeremiah delivers predictive doom that God will destroy Judah and Jerusalem because of infrastructural injustice, he offers a reality that God will also restore. God had not abandoned the people.

In 31:27-28 Jeremiah offers the promise of God that lives through the establishment of “seed.” Human seed and animal seed speak to progeny. There will be new generations of Judah. And, just as God was there in the midst of the tragedy and trauma of Judah, so too will God be present in the new life that will spring forth. As is the case throughout the biblical text, children and generations speak of a hope for the future.

Maybe the most hopeful statement in this passage is found in 31:29. Here the prophet offers the same proverb found in Ezekiel 18:1-4, “the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The use in the proverb in various texts suggests that at least some portion of Judah was comfortable with the notion that children would suffer the consequence of their parents’ actions; Or maybe more accurately put in a communal context one generation will pay for the decisions of previous generations. But here, Jeremiah is clear that God is laying this held wisdom to rest. A new covenant is coming for Judah that gives new generations an opportunity to start their lives over with God as they rebuild their homes and nation.






SERMON POINTS/THEMES

- Unjust systems are not inevitable. Jeremiah wasn't proclaiming doom because it had to be that way, he was offering an assessment of the reality that God was still giving Judah a chance to change.
- Even in the midst of dark situations God offers hope for restoration
- Our children represent a hope beyond the death, destruction, and chaos that they have inherited.
- We are called to be proactive ensuring that new generations do not pay for the sins of previous generations
- We can be participants in a new covenant of hope.

RESOURCES

Kathleen O'Connor. *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

Mary E Mills. *Jeremiah: Prophecy in a Time of Crisis*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).





TEXT RESOURCES: LECTIONARY

Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is a part of a collection of psalms known as the “songs of ascents” (Psalm 120-134). This collection, frequently refers to Jerusalem and Zion as central, sacred places. Jerusalem sits on a hill, and so anywhere one would have entered the city they would have been going up, so it stands to reason that a collection focused on this holy city would have referenced ascent. These psalms are traditionally recited at the Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkoth), which celebrations God’s presence with Israel in the wilderness wandering.

Scholars have struggled to make sense of the tone in Psalm 121, wondering if it begins with a sense of struggle and defeat, or hope. It is possible to read the Hebrew as a question, “from where will my help come?” which many have read with a foreboding tone. Yet, others have read the question as a rhetorical, given that the psalmist almost immediately answers the question, “My help comes from the Lord.”

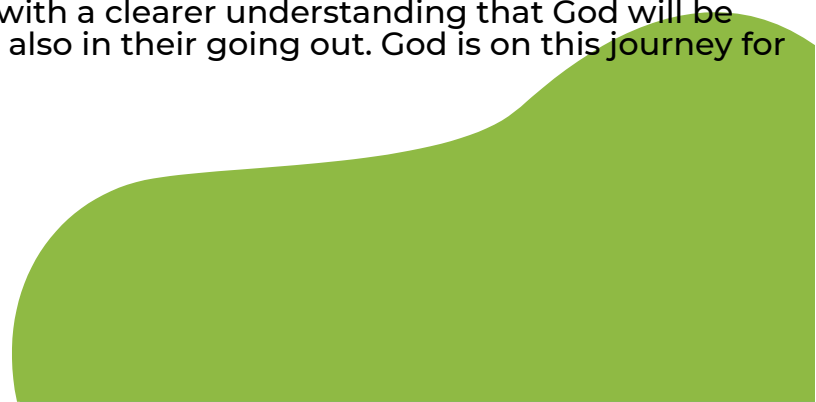
“Hills” in the ancient Near East often suggest a location where shrines of other gods were located. Deities sat in high places. This offering of a high place—“the hills”—around Jerusalem distinguishes the Lord from other deities. A note further emphasized by an articulation of YHWH as the “maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:2b). As such, the pilgrim is assured and assures the reader that this God will be a consistent presence in the journey, and has command over whatever the sojourner may encounter.

Verses 3-4 continue to set YHWH above other deities because Israel’s God “does not sleep or slumber.” This narration of God harkens the reader back to Creation to a God who systemically created order in the midst of chaos as distinct from other Mesopotamian gods who were ensconced in violence, drama, and disorder. Israel’s God is consistent, methodical and transcends the weaknesses of other gods. What we know of other gods in the ancient Near East is that there was an understanding that these deities “slept” during winter months and were revived in seasons of harvest. But Israel understood that the Lord did not sleep and therefore was vigilant in God’s care for the people, in this instance specifically for the pilgrims.

Following an establishment of who God is for the pilgrim, this psalm concludes with a blessing.

The voice of the community is represented through hope and promise for the pilgrim. God is identified as “your shade.” Anyone who has experienced the intense heat of Israel/Palestine knows that in an arduous journey up to Jerusalem shade would have been a welcome relief from

already fraught movement. And so, the psalm concludes with verse seven offering a final summary of Yahweh’s protection the range of evil that pilgrim may encounter with an assurance that “YHWH will keep you.” Followed with a clearer understanding that God will be with the traveller not only in their coming in but also in their going out. God is on this journey for long haul.






SERMON POINTS/THEMES

- Journeys of faith are always difficult AND God is with you.
- God is where you can see God.
- The journey is worth the reward.
- When people set out on sacred paths we as a community have a responsibility to offer blessing over them.

RESOURCES

Nancy L. de Claissé-Walford. *Wisdom Commentary: Psalms: Books 4-5*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020)

Andrew Wilkes and Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes. *Psalms for Black Lives: Reflections for the Work of Liberation*, (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2022).





TEXT RESOURCES: LECTIONARY



Genesis 32:22-31


Genesis is a book of beginnings. In the first twelve chapters we see the beginning of creation. Then we begin to see the beginning of a family—the family system that builds the foundation for the nation of ancient Israel. Here, in Genesis 32 we find ourselves in the Jacob cycle of these ancestral narrative. Jacob is an eponymous figure in the narrative, meaning he represents something about Israel's character, nature, and narrative.

Jacob, who began his story by stealing his brother's birthright. Thus, like many of the ancestral narratives in Genesis and throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Jacob's story violates the rules of primogeniture, which entitled the eldest male child to the inheritance of the father. In addition to this offense Jacob has now amassed a large family—two wives and dozens of children. The cunning trickster has been tricked by his father-in-law into marry Rachel and Leah. So now as he returns to his homeland with more to lose than when he left. As such, his initial move is to send word to his brother in an effort to make peace. At the beginning of Genesis 32, Jacob attempts to articulate that his desire to make amends with his brother. Jacob's fear is great so he prays to God and sends Esau gifts in hopes of reconciliation, or at least of safety.

Without any sense of his brother's response to his gifts, the drama and Jacob's anxiety continues to build. In this pericope, Jacob sends Rachel and Leah, and his children ahead of him in the path of his brother. But now it is Jacob's turn to cross. In the midst of his movement, Jacob encounters a figure—the mystery of the person is great but we know that Jacob "wrestles" (Hebrew *abq*) with him. Jacob wrestles at the Jabbok (Yabboq) River, and this seemingly divine figure nga his hip; this Hebrew word can mean to touch or strike, which means that we do not know power or force with which Jacob's divine opponent connected with him.

The drama builds as they continue to wrestle until daybreak and Jacob demands a blessing. For Jacob the battle no longer becomes about winning or losing but simply about demanding a blessing. He has decided that this struggle simply requires that he be tenacious enough to hold on until his blessing comes.

In the end this divine figure renames Jacob "Israel"—"he wrestled with God." Jacob's tenacity has earned him a new name. What he was named at birth did not define his path and will not shape his future. That is his blessing.





SERMON POINTS/THEMES

- The limitations that we place on children can not indicate who they will become.
- Everyone deserves a chance to be an agent in their destiny
- God will wrestle with us on our journey and bless us on the other side.
- So many people wear the scars/injuries of trying to get to a better life.

RESOURCES

Nahum Sarna. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

David Cotter. *Berit Olam: Genesis*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003)





TEXT RESOURCES: LECTIONARY

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5


2 Timothy is an epistle addressed to Timothy from Paul. This letter has a much more intimate tone than the first epistle. Paul is in prison awaiting trial, and wants to leave a final word has something that he wants to articulate to his “beloved child” before a sentence is rendered that may lead to Paul’s death. The theme of this letter is that “Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord, or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.” In other words, Paul wants to reinforce that there is nothing convenient about the Gospel or discipleship, and that anyone who takes this path should be prepared to encounter trials. Paul writes this with a hope that these difficulties will not prevent others from being fervent in their discipleship.

Posed within the confines of this text are the markers of the faithful and what is at stake in their faithfulness. The Pauline author wants the reader to move beyond the idea of Scripture serving as a line of delineation or gatekeeper. This is not a proof text. There is far too much at stake. Sacred texts, the tenets of our faith, and our rituals should lead us to see world as God intended.

A true engagement of Scripture should compel us to “proclaim the message;

be

persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” This is not a litigious marker for inerrancy or Bible beating and abuse.





SERMON POINTS/THEMES




- Our use of Scripture should be to draw people in now condemn or exclude them
- We should be willing to preach God's message of justice for those who have been marginalized in all seasons. It is not about convenience.
- We should approach the call for justice with a sense of urgency.

RESOURCES

Annette Bourland Huizenga. *Wisdom Commentary: 1-2 Timothy, Titus*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016)

Raymond F. Collins. *The New Testament Library Commentary: 1-2 Timothy, Titus*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012)



TEXT RESOURCES

Isaiah 11:1-10

Much like the many of the prophets, Isaiah's call is deliver a message of hope, love, and justice in the midst of a world filled with violence, terror, and trauma. Throughout the ancient Near it was understood that the gods communicated with their people through human voice. For Israel it was no different. The Hebrew word for prophet—*navi'* translate as "to bubble up." Prophets were conduits for God's word to bubble up and disrupt the status quo.

Isaiah translates as "the Lord/YHWH saves." Isaiah's prophetic witness is largely attributed to the 8th century BCE though the book is best delineated in three sections—chapters 1-39; chapters 40-55 which mark the conclusion of the Babylonian exile; and chapters 56-66 which likely existed during the Persian period restoration period in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. For this passage we find ourselves in 1 Isaiah, which likely reflects the earliest of Isaiah's work from the Assyrian period of the 8th century. During this tenuous time there are at least two major moments that influence the culture and religious expression of ancient Israel. First, is the Syro-Ephramite War, which marked a conflict between Syria, Israel (in the north), and Judah (in the south). Second, was the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE.

Consequently, Isaiah 11:1-10 juxtaposes a fear of God with fear of the Assyrian army. Here Isaiah proclaims that the fallacious empire of Assyria must be supplanted by a new tree will in Judah. This is tree will not only grow, it will also bear fruit (11:1). Isaiah acknowledges that those who have suffered at the hands of the Assyrian empire are wilted; they are tired, and beat down but the prophet also reassures the people that they will grow and stand tall again.

The visions of 11:1-10 are characterized by a remarkable dynamism that is at the same time the mark and guarantee of stability and peace. In the visions, the order of nature, political and social life, and the common life of humans and animals are organically linked and woven together.

The visions which begin with new growth, move on to provide rest and stability in verse 2, and on to triumph in 11:4. The scene then shifts from a tree to a pasture in Isaiah 11:6. We no longer look upon a tree but upon a pasture. In this pasture we see the tension of animals who have otherwise lived in tension existing together. The wolf—a predator--now sits among lamb. It seems irresponsible for these populations to co-exist. It almost seems abstract and fantastical until a baby is exposed to "hole of an asp"—we would never image putting an infant in proximity of snakes. And yet, the author wants the reader to feel a sense of safety and security.

The imperative in this text is to understand that difference does not have to be dangerous, and that those who are predatory can be equalized in God's economy. There comes a point when the people who trampled the city and the temple, and the very way of life you held dear, are no longer able to yield power over you. That is the hope of God, when all can co-exist without the most vulnerable being harmed.



SERMON POINTS/THEMES

- God's justice neutralizes predators
- In God's economy, power is neutralized and we live in harmony
- There is hope for community on the other side of chaos

RESOURCES

J. Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993)

Yoel Bin-Nun and Binyamin Lau. *Isaiah: The Prophet of Righteousness and Justice*, (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2019).

