

Repair or Replace

A sermon expositing Jeremiah 18:1-11

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At Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota the plans were set for volunteers to gather, prepare food, and serve it under a tent outside. Their grateful recipients would be the delegates to the 2009 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Churchwide Assembly who were convened across the street at the Minneapolis Convention Center. They had important decisions about the future of the entire denomination before them that week and the volunteers at Central Church wanted to make sure they were well cared for and nourished for the task at hand. But...at 2:11pm that Wednesday afternoon a tornado touched down just South of downtown Minneapolis and wound its way through neighborhoods and across major intersections right through to the lawn of Central Church, right through to that tent set up to serve those people serving at the convention. The wind whipped the tent from its moorings casting the canopy across the lot, scattering the poles, and tossing the tables and chairs in every direction damaging the church building. Thanks to advanced warning systems the volunteers knew the storm was coming and took shelter in the basement of the church. The cause for this tornado is quite clear, said one celebrity pastor whose name you would know if I were willing to mention it, this tornado was a warning and a punishment to the Lutherans for the evil they planned to do in their assembly.

Evidently that preacher is quite the watchdog for God's righteous anger. Two and a half years later a tornadic storm system ripped through the Ohio valley destroying \$3.1 billion worth of property and infrastructure and taking the lives of 41 people. This too, he said, is an example of God's "righteous anger". What was God angry about this time? The preacher wasn't really sure, he just knows that God was angry.

In Texas another celebrity preacher tells the story of the destruction of his own church – the intentional destruction to make way for a new building. Though the purpose was constructive he tells the story to illustrate what he says God will do to the United States if we do not turn from our evil ways. God will set off a carefully calculated set of explosions that will leave the place in rubble having imploded on itself. God will destroy the US he said.

Another storm, a social media storm in 2016 caught on to the fact that the home of yet another celebrity preacher had been destroyed by flooding in Louisiana. The collective agreement online seemed to be that the flood was God's way of punishing that preacher through the means of a natural disaster for the sin of having said that God punishes through the means of natural disasters.

Destruction and punishment! Not a small number of high profile preachers say that's what God craves when humanity has strayed. And because no small number of high profile preachers say so, no small number of their followers agree. And as it turns out no small number of their detractors believe that God craves destruction only in punishment for believing that God craves destruction and punishment. What is a bit harder to grasp is that one of those high profile preachers who says that God craves destruction and punishment is the prophet Jeremiah. Today we read that God sent him to the potter's house where he would witness a kind of live

metaphor for the life of the nation of Judah, the working of a clay piece going awry. The potter's response to the malformed piece would be to smash it, break it down, and bring its miserable existence to an end. Destruction, punishment! It would appear that God is a replacer.

I spent some time a few years ago working as a handyman between pastoral posts. Almost everyday I would be asked my opinion on something that had broken in a home or business. "Do you think we should fix it or replace it?" A faucet dripped, a roof leaked, a deck sagged. Fix it or replace it? So many it seems, in our current culture understand God to have a "replace it" kind of mindset. "That hurricane wiped out those people, because they're broken they must be wiped out and replaced."

"The earth quake was because they're an unfaithful people."

"The tornado..."

"The droubt..."

"The war..."

God is a replacer. There is cause for concern in this reading of course. We could ask ourselves, "Who among us is righteous? What nation, tribe, or tongue has served God in humility and justice earning the right to remain?" None. There have been none, there are none who have lived entirely up to God's standard of justice. But save that and simply look at scripture, the whole of scripture. The idea that God is not a fixer, but a replacer simply is not born of scripture!

The Psalmist proclaims in the 19th, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight oh God our rock and our _____ [Redeemer]." If God is anything among us, if God may be summed up by one image (God can't be, but if God could be summed up in one image) it would be Redeemer! God's ultimate expression of self from a Christian perspective was a man who did not tear down and destroy and replace, but instead repaired the tears in the fabric of creation!

Yes, read in isolation we could hear Jeremiah telling of a God who loves punishment and is hellbent on destruction, a smiter of people. But Jeremiah is not intended to be read in isolation, none of the Bible is meant to be read in isolation. The canonical witness, that is the witness of all the Bible is of a redeeming God. "Oh, but pastor don't you think that some people, some things in the world are beyond repair?" Unequivocally, YES! I believe there are things in the world that are beyond repair – and I believe that I am one of them. I believe the universal church is another. Human systems and economies are others. The physical world we live in, the planet, the rivers, and trees...all beyond repair. That's the point! We wouldn't have such an outstanding God to worship if God were a fixer plain and simple. No, God is the restorer of all things beyond repair! This is the canonical witness.

Clearly we need a new reading of Jeremiah – a reading that notices what isn't there as much as what is. We've looked at the action of the potter with the mired clay. We've seen what happened in the story, but did you notice what didn't happen?

The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, [and he tossed it out].

That is what *didn't* happen. The potter didn't destroy the vessel. He reworked it as is so often necessary in the process of creation. Some of the greatest works of art, some of the greatest paintings our world knows are hiding layer upon layer of works in process, other paintings that took a poor course during their creation. That's necessary, that's part of the creative process. Few if any masterpieces we've known simply developed out of thin air, no prototype, no process. No, the artist needs to visualize first, to see how the colors compliment one another, to see how the light falls across sculpted lines, where shadows fall. She needs to understand how the properties of the materials, where they will stand and fall, whether the clay is best worked soft and wet or firm and dry, where the blemishes lie, how and if they might enhance the piece. Reworking is simply a part of the creative process!

If you have the kind of direct line to God, ultimate prophetic authority spoken of in biblical texts then you might even be able to name what events in history, what parts of our lives are the "reworking" parts and which are the building up and the tearing down. Failing that kind of perfect understanding of the character and will of God, it may be best to leave aside the labeling of events and circumstances as either "building up" or "tearing down" and simply recognize that every moment, every word, every life that we encounter is a part of God's process. And what a joy that you and I are not only subject to, but participants in that creative process!