

God in a pocket: Jeremiah 23:23-29;

Psalms 82;

Hebrews 11:29-12:2;

Luke 12:49-56

by [Martha P. Sterne](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

*"Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off?"*

*Jeremiah 23:23*

There was a land of great beauty and promise, flowing with milk and honey. And people wandered there, struggled through the wilderness to get there, were surely led by God there. The people came to form a nation where the stranger would be shown hospitality. They came to build a holy land where children could laugh and play without danger and old people rest and remember in safety. They came to build a just community where the able could work for fair wages, the sick receive care and the frail eat their fill. All of that was promised in this land that God gave to be a light to the nations.

But the people forgot. They forgot that the good life in the promised land depends on promises made and kept to God and to each other. They forgot the first promise: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, which is inextricably tied to the second promise: Love your neighbor as yourself. They ignored these promises, which are not just religious lore, but are as much a part of the will and purpose of the Creator as DNA or the law of gravity or the speed of light.

And the ones who were supposed to remind them of the promises--the leaders, the priests, the ones to whom much had been given--they forgot too. And so there was no vision, and without a vision the people perish. The weak and poor and marginal perish first but not last, because anger and hopelessness mingle into rage and the perishing spreads.

Into the amnesia came the voices of prophets, those individuals who interpret the past, clarify the present and point to the future. And some of their voices spoke truth, although not whole, not seamless truth.

Nobody likes prophets; there are other, more soothing, more entertaining voices uttering less demanding words. These are the voices of dreams, claiming to speak the will of God but not holding the dreams up to the light of the promise; few people ask if the dreams speak to love of neighbor. Instead they listen to voices of blame raised against whoever is not the listener and voices of painless solutions saying peace when there is no peace, but only cheap grace.

These soothing voices seem to know God very well. They even seem to carry God in their pockets. They preach the god of the nearby, who is a controllable presence. A god who is a manageable commodity.

Jeremiah heard something different and spoke his piece of the truth. And he told the people that God said: "Am I a God near by and not a God far off? Who can hide so that I cannot see them? Is not my word like fire? Is not my word like a hammer that breaks in pieces?" That's what God said to Jeremiah, who said it to the people. And they didn't like it at all. They laughed at him and he kept on. They threw him down a well and he kept on. They put him in jail and he kept on. And all the while trouble was coming from Babylon. So Jeremiah kept talking--hollering, really--irritating everybody. Until the trouble came. Then there was weeping and fear and ruin. The land of promise lay desolate, a land that God had forsaken. Or rather a land that had forsaken God.

It turned out that God was not in their pockets or in the corner of the tent. But God was far off because they would not turn back to the promises and to the One who loved them. What word now for the land of promise?

You remember. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, but was not soothing, not entertaining at all. Jesus, being the very Word of God, said to the people, "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, not peace but rather division!" Not soothing at all.

The Word can divide traditions and loyalties long held sacred. No tradition--even religious--is as sacred as the one beyond all our traditions. And no loyalty--even familial--can stand in the way of the promise to love neighbor as self, which is to act with both justice and mercy in the best mix you can figure out at the time. Jesus knew that, taught that, lived that, died that. And out of his very being came the word of promise spoken afresh.

All this happened a long time ago, but not much has changed. Trouble and weeping and fear and ruin come when the people forget the promises of God that bind us inextricably to each other--the hungry to the overfed, the city to the suburb, the innocent to the cynical, the triumphant to the brokenhearted. All over God's round earth, trouble comes when the people forget the promise. And God is far away.

So we try to help each other remember the promises which are our way and our truth and our life. We try to help each other stop expecting faith to be soothing. We stop trying to mostly entertain each other in church, and instead help each other find faith that will deepen into sacrificial love.

We try to help each other listen for truth. We remember the wisdom of humility, which is to claim not whole, seamless truth, but some truth, some vision of the common good.

Finally, we try to point each other toward life, the really good life. Can we imagine ourselves seeking together the good life in this land of promise? Can we see ourselves as a great cloud of witnesses, willing to run the race that is set before us, following Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith? Through that dream is the way and the truth and the life of the One who is both very far away, beyond our grasping, and very near, to hold us up and lead us on.

We live in the land of promise.