

February 17, Epiphany 6C (Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26)

Trusting in God is fruitful, says Jeremiah. But what about when it isn't?

Sunday's Coming Premium
January 16, 2019

It is winter. The scene outside your window might be a gray sky with snow-covered trees, or a sunny sky with bare trees. Trees are indicators of life. Their seasonal changes have a curious connection to our own seasonal emotions; they seem to mimic how we feel in winter, spring, summer, and fall. Want to know the season? Look up. Check out the trees. Notice the leaves. The trees will tell you what it feels like outside, and they might even reflect how our own hearts and lives are shifting, too.

Trees reach down and up; they send roots through the ground and trunks and branches skyward. They are both grounded and growing, stationary and on the move. They stretch, they reach, they seek what gives them life—water, soil, and sun.

God so often uses nature to teach and witness to faith. All of creation is connected in the Creator; the love of God is revealed in all that God has infused with life. So it should not surprise us that images of trees, shrubs, water, and earth appear throughout our scriptures. These images are of God and of God's relationship with us.

The Jeremiah text this week compares a shrub in the desert to a tree by the water. Those who rely on the flesh and "whose hearts turn away from the Lord" are cursed with a life that resembles the shrub—no way to grow or thrive, alone in a parched wilderness. But those who "trust in the Lord" are blessed like the tree—green and perpetually fruit-bearing. In this depiction, trusting in the flesh is fruitless, while trusting in the Lord is life-giving.

But what about when it isn't? What about the moments, the months, the years when our trust in God doesn't feel fruitful but rather leaves us feeling empty and barren, like that desert shrub? Are we just not trusting in God enough?

In our Gospel reading, Jesus preaches the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Plain. For each present reality—poverty, hunger, weeping, hatred—Jesus offers a promise that is to come. The poor will reap the kingdom, the hungry will be filled, the ones who weep will laugh, and the ones who are excluded will leap for joy. There is no indication that the present painful reality is magically lifted away, even for those who are in Jesus' presence and hear his words the moment he speaks them. The promised gifts of life and joy will come, but likely not today.

It is this future that Jeremiah paints, too. The green, fruit-bearing tree shall be our hope and future. That tree shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green. Even in darkness and drought, the tree shall grow. Even when everything around it tries to take away its life, the tree shall not die. In the Lord's care, the tree will live.

The future is a difficult place to put our trust. So is the present. And the past just gives us multiple reasons not to trust in the present or future. These words from Jesus and Jeremiah remind us that it is not the future itself in which we trust; it is God. We don't trust in ourselves. We trust in the God who blesses us through our troubled present and leads us to the other side—to a future of hope. In our despair, we hope in that phrase *shall be*, promised by a God who holds the past, present, and the future—a God who knows intimately the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, the excluded, the defamed. A God who keeps promises, and who has so much more in store for us than the chronic afflictions we presently bear.

Yet the promised future also has another side that we can't ignore. At the end of the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus continues to speak of a future—but this time, a future of woe for those who are rich, who are full, who are laughing now. Their promised future shall be filled with sorrow and emptiness. It's an uncomfortable, even scathing promise. In Jeremiah, those whose hearts turn away from the Lord "shall be like a shrub in the desert," parched and alone in the wilderness. The other side of the blessing is the curse. The other side of promised hope is the reality of lived suffering and despair.

For the reality of life is that we will inevitably live in both conditions—trusting in God, and trusting in ourselves. Hungry and full, weeping and laughing, hated and loved. And Jesus reminds us here that there is always another side to what we experience. When we are full, we can be sure that we will one day be empty again, and that the only true fullness that endures is from God. When we are weeping, we can be sure that we will one day laugh and rejoice, and that our joy is from God. For every part of life, there is another angle that God holds before us, ensuring that we do not forget God's presence and power infused in everything we do and through everything we live.

As the changing seasons remind us, God's promise is that there is always another experience and always a reason to hope. It is winter, yet spring will come.