

The God We Forsake

From the series: If God Be For Us...

Text: Jeremiah 2:13

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The word of God comes not only from those of ancient time whose words are recorded in the canon of the scriptures; there are contemporary voices, as well, that can set that ancient word in a context. These words, for example, by the well-known psychoanalyst, Carl Jung:

Among all my patients in the second half of life, that is to say over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of these fell ill because he had lost what the religions of every age have given their followers and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.

This, of course, has nothing to do with a particular creed or membership of a church. In 1953, Rollo May, a psychotherapist in his book *Man's Search for Himself*, wrote,

The chief problem of people in the middle decade of the 20th century is emptiness. The human being cannot live in the condition of emptiness for very long. If he is not growing toward something, he does not merely stagnate. The pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair and eventually into destructive activities. The experience of emptiness generally comes from people feeling that they are powerless to do anything effective about their lives or the world they live in.

Finally, these words from Hans Küng:

The whole development, including the problem of addiction, particularly of educated young people for quasi-religious ideologies up to the point of terrorist anarchy is connected in no small degree with a breakdown of religious beliefs and the abandonment of religious rites.

And from Jeremiah:

The word of the Lord came to me saying, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, 'Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness in the land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it became guilty. Evil came upon them, says the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, O House of Jacob and all the families in the House of Israel. Thus says the Lord.'

What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went at their worthlessness and became worthless? They did not say, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no one dwells?' And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things, but when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.

The priest did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who handle the Law did not know me. The rulers transgressed against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. Therefore, I still contend with you," says the Lord, "and with your children's children I will contend, for cross to the coast of Cyprus and see your sin to Kedar and examine with care: see if there has been such a thing: Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?

But my people have changed their Glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this. Be shocked. Be utterly desolate," says the Lord, "for my people have committed two evils: They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."

The word of the Lord.

In a week in which we have continued to witness the salvaging of the horror of TWA Flight 800, and a week which sees the Olympic Games disrupted by a pipe bomb, we are faced as a people with the recognition that we no longer live in fortress America, separated from all of the disaster that has stalked the world through the ages, from which we have been mercifully spared for so long. We recognize that our world is changing drastically and there is no safe place, and we can rail about it and we can speak negatively about it, we can throw up our hands in despair about it, we can condemn the perpetrators of it, but we will do well to take a moment to ask, "What in the world is going on?" And, "What time is it?"

I'm struck with the parallel between our present situation and the time of Jeremiah the Prophet. Walter Brueggemann, in his comments on Jeremiah, says that just as Jeremiah, in 587 BCE, the time when Babylon removed Judah from Jerusalem into exile and Babylon, had been announcing the End of things as they

had always been - the end of the Temple, the end of the dynasty, the return of Creation to chaos - and every one of these a symbol for a whole complex of social structures and meaning, and Jeremiah was the spokesperson to announce the end. He was saying, in effect, "Folks, it's over." And he was saying, further, that all of the frantic energy that you are expending to shore up these structures, to find some security, and to perpetuate, to preserve that which you've always known, that is not only futile, it is disobedient, because God is in this thing, and we happen to be at a time of dismantling.

The prophet of Israel, at its best, was a destabilizer, destabilizing the status quo, announcing the end of things, and the emerging of something on the horizon that was new but could not yet be fully conceived. The prophets were not popular. Jeremiah is spoken of as the weeping prophet, and one time he cursed the day that his mother gave him birth. At another time, he said, "The word of God I will no more speak," only to find that the word of God was like a fire in his bones that he could not contain. And so, he had to announce to a people not so unlike us that their whole religious structure, their whole social arrangement, indeed, the monarchy that had held them together - all of that was coming to an end. And that God was in this thing, and therefore, they should recognize not all of the surface symptoms, but the deep, underlying cause of it all.

Chapter two of Jeremiah documents how God had graciously brought them into the Promised Land and established them only to find the people having priests who knew not God, prophets who prophesied not the word of God, people who handled the law who knew not God. God said, "What have I done to you? Has it ever been such? Be appalled, O earth. My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken the fountain of living waters and hewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water."

What a vivid image. With all of the lakes around here, we can't begin to appreciate the image in its original context where water signified life so dramatically, and God being offered as the fountain of living water, the very source of life. And the people being seen as forsaking that living water scurrying about with great energy to hew out cisterns, cisterns that were broken and could hold no water. A fatal forsaking, a futile pursuit, a double folly. Jeremiah says to the people of his day, "The problem is we have forsaken God, and all of the rest of the chaos on the present horizon are but symptoms of that deeper, deeper loss."

As I was contemplating that, I thought about the contemporary prophets that speak in our day. I read the words of Carl Jung, who said that all of those who came in with deep neuroses were those who had finally lost the sense of meaning that their religious traditions had mediated to them, that sense of the transcendent. Not talking about a creed, not even talking about a particular religion, but recognizing that there is a spiritual dimension to life, that to which all of the religions would point us, that to which we must be plugged in if we would be fully human and know some measure of human wellbeing. And then,

thinking about our present situation, where in the words of Hans Küng, commenting on that statement of May, where he says that what we see, particularly among the educated young, is the seeking after pseudo, quasi-religious ideologies, but it ending in all kinds of addiction and finally terrorist anarchy. And we think about our world where the danger is not simply from without, but growing from within, and those who have studied the contemporary situation and the human person recognizing there a deep spiritual malady which probably can be expressed no more eloquently than in the words of Jeremiah: "Forsaking the fountain of living waters".

Another commentator in the same area spoke about how, when he was used to setting forth all of the problems that he saw, whether it be the gridlock in Congress or potholes in the highways or the infrastructure of society, or the tax system or the welfare system, or the miserable way that we go about electing our politicians - and you could name your own litany of horrors of our contemporary society - and incidentally, these are all the things that the Hebrew prophets addressed - but this particular person said, "When I was naming off those problems that I would see, I was always stopped short when somebody would look at me and say, 'Well, what's your solution?'

And he said, I sort of felt deflated and walked away, until I came to realize that it was not my responsibility to find a solution, a new arrangement for every particular problem that I saw about me. But it was enough right now to expose the emptiness, to at least say there is a problem, something is desperately wrong." And then he said to his friend, "We are like those who are singing under the balcony. We are the precursors of a day not yet arrived, but we see that something is happening. We are announcing the end of things," which is precisely what Jeremiah was doing, which is precisely what folks really don't like to hear, which causes us to get into that frantic activity to try to patch it up and hold it together, holding on with a kind of white-knuckled intensity, hoping that the world will stay together long enough at least for us to get through it.

I had always hoped that I could get through life without ever turning on a computer, but it's all going so fast now, I don't think that I'm going to be able to make it! But, it's a very normal response for us to say if we can just keep the present structures intact long enough, if I can just get through with my retirement without Social Security going bankrupt, if I can only get through my life without Medicare going to pot, if only we can hold on - you see, it's always that kind of reactive, that sort of fearful response to the fact that things are being chipped away, things are unraveling. Nothing is the same anymore; there's no solidity, there's no security. We live in a world that is blowing up!

And those who have observed, not simply just Jeremiah in 587 BCE, but those who have written in the last half of this century, have identified the human problem as a problem of meaninglessness and as one of them has said, ultimately the question of meaning is a question of God. Not a particular creed, not a

particular religion, but a particular spiritual dimension apart from which the human person is not whole, apart from which the human person becomes neurotic, apart from which human society becomes desperately ill.

And so, the image of Jeremiah is not only apropos for that day in Judah's past, but I think very apropos for our day, too, for we can see the symptoms all about us, and the sense of powerlessness, the sense of victimhood. And then the dimensions of the problem and the feeling of helplessness to do anything about it, to make any difference, any dent in it - all of that is characteristic of our day and of many of us.

I went to the *New York Times Book Review* section of last Sunday and found out that the longest running bestsellers have to do with the spiritual dimension. *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck - 662 weeks. In fiction, that kind of "New Agey", interesting story, *The Celestine Prophecy* - 125 weeks. *Embraced By the Light* - 96 weeks. And Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* - 131 weeks. Dear God, folks! Our contemporary society is starving, hungry and thirsty and, if we could move back in time about 36 years and I was preaching to you on this text, I would now begin to beat you over the head with it. I would begin to say, "That's your problem. Your life is empty. You have forsaken God." And I would have two or three simple answers for you, all of which would be rather self-serving for myself in this congregation.

But, it's very interesting to me that a Marxist, atheist commentator, sociologist, dead a few decades - (Modern atheism is the great critique of religion. If we don't hear the modern atheistic critique of the Church and of religion in general, we will miss the most profound insight into the problem of religion and the Church) - this particular man said, in his latter years,

"The problem with the Church is that it has failed in its representation of God to present God as the all-bountiful Creator. It has failed to sense the yearning in the modern person's heart for the holy Other, and rather than presenting God as the all-bountiful Creator, it has rather used its dominance, it has been marked by an exploitation by the darker instincts of the human person to inflict cruelties, crusades, witch hunts, and all of that darker side of institutional religion."

This atheist says the problem with us is that, in the face of the hunger of the human heart, we have failed to mediate this all-bountiful Creator, and so I recognize that I, in the past, have been part of that problem, too. Beating people on Sunday, that poor, struggling remnant that still come, decrying their godlessness, rather than all of us recognizing together that that which the world is hungry for, that which our brothers and sisters on the contemporary scene are longing for, whether consciously or unconsciously, is some sense that maybe there is an all-bountiful Creator.

This is the thing that Paul was so convinced of. That's why I speak of this series about God as, "If God Be With Us," or better translated "Since God is With Us." You see, everything is falling apart and there are lives everywhere that are meaningless, that are empty, and those most profound commentators of the human situation are telling us that that's what it is. That's not from a biblical text; that's from a contemporary analysis - meaninglessness, emptiness. And what do we offer? Well, I hear it all the time in the Church - Let's go back to the good old days. Let's go back home when it was safe. Let's turn back.

Folks - you can't turn back. You can't go home. It's only the future we'll be entering into. It is the future uncharted. It is a future that is unfolding with a drama and with a rapidity and with a profound change never yet experienced in the human story!

Now, how will you enter the future? Will you enter the future with hope in your heart, deeply trusting the God of the past, knowing that the future will not outrun the God Who beckons us from the future? Ironically, Jeremiah the prophet, who was the destabilizer and the dismantler, was also the great prophet of hope, because Jeremiah the prophet believed in God! Jeremiah believed in the God Who created and Who redeemed and Who sustained and Who would finally bring to consummation. Therefore, Jeremiah could say to the people of his day, "Will you let it go? Will you let the Temple go? Will you let the dynasty go? Will you let the whole social arrangement that's given you security go, and will you find your security the only place it can be, that is in the living God? If you will quench your thirst at the fountain of living waters, you will find, drinking deeply there, that you will be able to deal with all the symptoms out here."

That's the task of the Church. *The Care of the Soul* is not pop psychology and it's not fluff, and Thomas More cannot believe that it has sold so broadly and has hung on so long, because he says to people, there is no quick fix, but would you pause long enough to experience your own depths? Would you listen to what your body is saying? Would you listen to your heart? Would you take time out, take a step back and find out what time it is? And then rest in God? Trust Creation, dare to move with hope into the future?"

The God we forsake is not angry with us. The God we forsake pleads with us, "Drink deeply. You are a people with whom I contend, and I will contend with your children's children; I will be there for you; I will never abandon you; I will never give up on you. Return to me in your frantic chase, hewing out cisterns that can hold no water, leading to addictions and to emptiness and weariness in boredom. Come unto me and find rest for your soul. That's the all-bountiful Creator.

You may have forsaken the fountain of living waters, but God has not turned the fountain off, and He invites us to embrace our neighbors, as well, and together to drink deeply of living waters and find peace, even in the midst of a world that's

blowing apart, trusting that there is something out there that is emerging, and it will be good, because God would have it so.