

## LIFE AND DEATH IN CREATION

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18 Jeremiah 18:1-11 Sept. 8, 2019

There was a show that ran for a long time on PBS called “The Joy of Painting.” It starred a man named Bob Ross who would paint a picture while you watched. Anyone watch or remember that show? I actually think it’s on Netflix if you want to check it out now.

Anyway I didn’t watch the show a lot, but I’ve seen enough of it to be amazed at this guy. It was amazing how with just a few brush strokes he could create a tree. Or a bush. Or a mountain. And what was even more amazing was what would happen when he would make a mistake. He’d start something and halfway through notice that it wasn’t turning out the way he wanted it to. So all of a sudden, he’d change gears and decide to turn his mistake into a stream. Or a tree.

Thinking about this artist and the text for today I decided to ask Kay Hornick to help us out with her artist perspective. Many of you have seen her beautiful paintings and admired her talent. But how does that process work for her? How does a painting come to life from her imagination to the canvas? What happens when she needs to reform or revisit a painting? Perhaps she will share some of that process with us now.... *Kay Hornick comes forward to where there is a painting sitting on an easel, covered by an artist’s smock. She begins to share...*

Thank you so much, Kay, for that dramatic visual and explanation of how an artist works to create the final product...although in Kay’s case, much of her work evolves as she goes along and what we might consider a final piece is in the process of being recreated!!!

Last week we read the prophet Jeremiah’s words to ancient Israel as he called them out for their unfaithfulness to God. We read God’s charges of covenant breaking against the people. We read of Jeremiah declaring God’s judgement on the people. And we closed talking about how the people had become broken cisterns that could not hold water.

In the hands of novices, broken pottery is simply broken pottery. However in the hands of a master, like painters like Bob Ross or our friend, Kay, or a master potter, mistakes can be fixed, can be remade, can be made beautiful. So today we have another message from God through the prophet Jeremiah. Though separated by many chapters, this message resumes the theme of broken vessels. But this time, we hear what can happen to broken vessels when put into the master’s hands.

This week, Jeremiah resorts to an overt warning. He tells the people about God’s leading him to visit a potter. The vessel the potter was attempting to create got spoiled, so the potter reworked it into another vessel, “as it seemed good to him” (v.18:4).

A potter uses her hands carefully and sensitively. It’s a delicate matter to shape a clay pot on a wheel. This is truly the work of an artist. A slight change in pressure—or a change of mind—can result in the pot becoming ruined. Nonetheless, the potter can still turn the clay into something else.

“Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?” God tells Jeremiah. “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it: (vv. 6-8). The image of the potter is appropriate, for God is also a creator. Like potters in particular, creators (and the Creator) can destroy what they have made and turn the material into something better.

This sounds like one of those “smiting” passages that lead some Christians to ignore it because they say that they “don’t believe in the violent God of the Old Testament.” Yes, God is pretty severe in this book. Don’t we, however, get angry when we learn of children being abused, the elderly being neglected, the many deaths from this opioid epidemic, or yet another massacre by a disturbed individual with a gun? I hope that we the faithful are angry about the damage being done to God’s good creation. Earlier in Jeremiah, we learn that God is angry about similar evils: the greed of religious leaders; false claims about peace in the land; oppression of strangers in the land, orphans, and widows; murder; lies; and the abandonment of the god who saved them in order to follow false gods who offer them nothing of real value. We know these evils still exist today, and I cannot imagine that God is any more accepting of them than we are.

Even when we acknowledge God’s distressing rage and threats of violence in this book, the threats are always accompanied by the offer of a second chance. Twice in this short passage (in vv. 8 and 11), God says the people still have a chance to avoid punishment if they turn from their evil ways toward God’s ways of compassion and justice. This God may be angry, but this God also repeatedly offers the people chances to repent and return.

“What we do matters to God, and God’s challenge of our particular sins can seem destructive, but God’s ultimate goal is creation and healing, not destruction and devastation,” say Bruce Epperly. He continues, “Our consumerism and anthropocentrism have led to forest fires and floods, symptoms of global climate change. Our greed has led to economic inequality. Our racism has led to ‘two Americas’ and ‘dog whistle’ politics that polarize rather than untie and render any forward movement an impossibility in the halls of Congress. God wants us to see the error of our ways, and while the celestial surgeon’s antidote may appear harsh, as we are forced to be downwardly mobile, it is aimed at the healing of creation and the transformation of the human heart from greed and alienation to generosity and compassion (“The Adventurous Lectionary,” Aug. 26, *patheos*.)

As we begin another school and program year it is imperative that we remember today’s lesson from the scriptures!! God tells us that he is the potter and we are the clay. And just as a potter can take a pot that has become marred and remake it, God can do the same with us. God can do the same with our hearts. God can do the same with our souls. God can do the same with our lives.

God can take your heart, your soul, your life, and like clay in the potter’s hand remold and reshape it. God can make it perfect once more.

But the prophet isn’t just talking about individuals here. The prophet is talking about a whole community, a whole nation. If there’s brokenness in your family, God can take that and remake it. If there’s brokenness in your school, God can take that and remake it. If there’s brokenness in your neighborhood, God can take that and remake it. If there’s brokenness in our church or in our nation or in our world, God can take that and remake it. God is shaping and molding all aspects of our life, of our world. What in your life needs to be remade?

Reshaped? What in your family’s life or your friend’s life or your coworker’s life? Now that question gets dangerous because it sounds like I’m inviting judgment but all I mean is can you see something that needs God’s hands?

But now comes the really important question. How do we get that done? How do we get to reshaping and remolding our lives?

WARNING !!! You might not like the answer?!?!? But the first step is that we have to give up control. You see Scripture even tells us that the potter reshapes the clay as he sees fit. As the potter sees fit! The clay doesn’t get to decide. The first step in being reshaped by God is giving up control over the shape that your life takes. You let go and let God reshape you as God sees fit.

That’s very hard. That’s more than a bit scary. We all want to remain in control to make sure that our lives or our families or our communities or our churches go in a direction that is suitable for us. We want to be in line with God,

yes, but so long as God doesn't go too far away from where we want to be. But if the clay is fighting the potter (which I know doesn't make sense because clay is an inanimate object that doesn't have any will of its own but stay with me) then it's more likely the resulting pot will be flawed. It won't turn out quite right. Only in going with God, working with God, cooperating with God, and ultimately giving up control and being molded by God can we become the perfect vessel God wants us to be.

After that, frankly it's kind of easy. Giving up control is, I think, the hardest step. After that it's simply doing the things God tells us to do. Pray. Worship. Experience the sacraments. Be part of a small group. Read your Bible.

Make use of the means of grace. Meet God at the places where God has promised to meet us, fill yourself with the things God has told us communicate his grace and let the hands of the potter mold you.

As we begin a new school year, what can you do over the next few months to meet God where he has promised to show up?

By the way, as a quick promo, being a part of a church gives you entrée into a number of things that help reform and reshape you into the person God created you to be. We aren't always explicit about why we do the things we do and how we think they work. We are sometimes tentative about our core beliefs as Christians, as Methodists, and as Christ's disciples. Beginning in October I will start a sermon series called "Heart Centered Discipleship" where we will look at stewardship and visioning as disciples, called by God to be His hands and feet in the world. Where will that lead us? We have no way of knowing but we know who will be walking with us. May we have the courage to trust Him to lead us into an unknown future as his Family of Faith, His Body of Christ!! Amen and amen.