

Blockheads And A Red Line, But Without a Full End
Jeremiah 4: 11-12; 22-28
Luke 15: 1-10

Our texts this week call to my mind the dynamics of an old Cagney and Lacey episode. I know that likely says more about me than about our texts. Some of you won't get the reference to the old cop show. Cagney was always the bad cop and Lacey the good cop. In our lectionary texts, both parts, Cagney and Lacey, feature God in the starring role. In Jeremiah, God is the bad cop; in Luke, the good cop. To be honest, this is one of my least favourite lectionary weeks of this year. This week promises destruction of the entire creation due to the sins of the people. Not a great note on which to start a new academic year.

Over the past couple of weeks, the media has talked about red lines being drawn. Many have said that President Obama drew a red line with Syria that he should not have drawn. Obama said he did not draw the red line; the international community drew it, and Syria crossed it.

Last Saturday morning, I listened to a discussion on CBC radio about red lines in history. One scholar referred to the Mongolian Invasions. The Mongols, he explained, had their own red line you did not dare cross. They would come to a city or community and say, "You have 'x' number of days to surrender to us, to agree to live under our total rule and authority; if you say "no," we will kill every single person living here." If the community refused to surrender, the Mongols brutally killed every man, woman, and child. They would send a group back in a few days to kill anybody they had missed. The purpose, said the scholar, was to communicate a message to all the other communities. Surrender and you will live. If you don't, you won't. Mongols promised a devastating and total destruction. This sounds a lot like our text today: "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I

looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled.”

This was God’s red line. Judah had crossed it. And now, as the Babylonian troops headed South, Jeremiah says God is about to deliver on a promise to destroy everything. God had established this red line at the time of Moses. God promised to bless Israel when Israel is faithful; but if Israel pursues other gods, God will bring destruction. As Deuteronomy 30 put it, “choose life so your descendents may live.” In the time of Moses, Israelite leaders used God’s red line as a motivation. It was the stick in the old stick and carrot. But at the time of Jeremiah 4, the red line was no longer a threat. Israel had not only crossed the red line, but irreversibly crossed it – which is what red lines are all about. So here Jeremiah announced God’s total destruction.

If you compare Jeremiah 4 with Genesis 1, you understand this is a complete reversal of creation. God, says Jeremiah, will eliminate all light, remove the foundations of the earth, end the lives of all creatures and human beings, and return the earth to complete chaos.¹ No one could do anything to stop it.

How did the Israelites cross the line? William Holliday has argued that the phrase “My people are foolish,” found in verse 22, is actually best represented today by the word “blockhead” – meaning “foolish talker.” In other words, my people are blockheads! “They have no sense.”² If they were wise, they would know the meaning of consequences. But they are blockheads. They pursue their own ends, their own gods, and convince themselves they are completely safe in doing so. They are certain they can save themselves. Verse 30, if we read just two verses further, says they dress themselves up as if preparing for a lover – and concludes, “In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life.”

The blockheads of Judah crossed the red line and there was no turning back. The Babylonians were coming and Jeremiah linked them to God's judgment. Today marks a dozen years since the planes struck the towers. Everyone in the room remembers where you were when it happened. As I thought about this text this week, I could not help but wonder what Jeremiah would have written after 9/11. Would he have sounded just like Jerry Falwell who linked the attacks to God's judgment on America: Falwell said, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, "you helped this happen."

Connections like these are still being made. In May, Michele Bachmann, Minnesota Congresswoman, mentioned 9/11 at a prayer breakfast and said, "It's no secret that our nation may very well be experiencing the hand of [God's] judgment." If you google 9/11 and God's judgment, you get 1,570,000 hits. Would Jeremiah, if he were a prophet today, have been among those hits? I sure hope not. It is certainly dangerous to connect God's judgments to human agents, whether invading Babylonians or suicide terrorists.

Perhaps, on 9/11, Jeremiah would have said what he said in verse 14 of chapter 4, which places emphasis more on the natural consequences of human action: "Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is!" Of course, Americans did not deserve 9/11. But they can act like blockheads and probably do share some responsibility for creating a terrorist climate. When North Americans live large at the expense of most of the world, and revel in it with every kind of excess we can imagine, whether of body or soul, there could be consequences. While the 99% protest with good reason, it is a fact that the bottom 10% in income in the United States is in the top 30% in the world in income distribution.

70% of the world's population is far worse off than the bottom 10% in the US or Canada. Someone who lives on the poverty line in the US is actually in the top 14% of income distribution in the world.³

To make matters worse, we also live in a world where drones kill innocent children and count them as collateral damage. According to Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute, as many as 98% of those killed by drone strikes are innocent civilians.⁴ The strength of terrorism today, in some measure, may be connected to these facts.

There can be little doubt that many of us in America and in Canada, have chosen other gods to serve with our lives. I wonder what Jeremiah might have said about us, and God's judgment heading toward us.

Our New Testament lesson, in which God plays the good cop, seems to indicate that Jesus would have sat down and had a meal with us. Luke 15 is set in the context of the Pharisee complaint that Jesus ate with taxpayers and sinners. That activity seemed contradictory and inappropriate, even unsavoury. Breaking bread with people in that time and culture meant full acceptance of them. Christ's response to their complaint is to tell three stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The first two are in our readings this week.

The most interesting thing to me about these two stories is that neither the sheep nor the coin can repent of anything. They are simply lost. The shepherd and the woman are the actors; they do the searching and the finding. Luke understands repentance connected more to the experience of being found than to any human act.⁵ In Luke 15, we have a picture of God who seeks those who are lost with no reference at all to their sins.

Walter Brueggemann points out that the later tradition of Jeremiah changes the prophet's tune. Jeremiah 31 describes God's new covenant; according to the text, "It will not be like the

covenant I made with their ancestors . . . because they broke my covenant . . . I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people . . . For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Jeremiah 31 reflects the grace found in Luke 15. For the good cop God, the faithfulness of God is not dependent on the repentance of the people. God simply “forgives their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Jeremiah 31 is, partially at least, the people of Judah making sense of the fact they are still around.

Even in chapter 4, verse 27, with all the talk of destruction, we find a phrase of hope: “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.” The “earth shall mourn and the heavens above grow black” – “yet I will not make a full end.” Here is a word of hope that resonates with the later word found both in Jeremiah 31 and Luke 15.

These texts speak to the faithfulness of God but also to the constant, nearly always losing, struggle to be faithful found among the people. In some ways, these texts are like the many Inuksuit that dot the landscape of the arctic region of North America, left by the Inuit and other native cultures. These piles of stones have been used through history to point the way. But, even more importantly, they mark the fact that someone has walked this way before. Each Inukshuk indicates that others have faced hardship and survived. They provide hope in barren places that we will also somehow make it through. They provide evidence that we do not make this journey alone.

We live in a time when people describe the church as nearing its end. The wringing of church hands all around us, the anxieties expressed in every corner of the church, are more about surviving as *our* church than about the gospel. And the church is struggling everywhere to survive.

In your work in years to come, you will encounter those who are convinced their form of church can save the church. Many are certain if we just adopt marketing strategies or meet people's needs or make our worship more contemporary or become the "emerging church" or if we just adopt "fresh expressions," we will save the church and prove ourselves faithful.

All these things may contribute something positive to church life – I suppose that depends on how we live into them and what we do with them. But the one thing I do know is that nothing we do secures the future of the church.

If you learn one thing and one thing only in your years here, I hope you learn that the church and its future belong to God, not to us. For that reason alone, I have every confidence that the future of the church is secure. We do what we can to be faithful. We are indeed called to work toward justice with all our might even when we don't see much improvement. We may be stewards in our time, but transience defines our lives. The bottom line shared by both Jeremiah and Luke is that, ultimately, the future, the church, and all of us, even those of us who have lost our way, are in God's hands, not ours. And, in the end, full end or not, that *is* good news. As Jeremiah may have put it, only blockheads think otherwise.

¹ Elizabeth Achtemier, *Jeremiah*, Knox Preaching Guide (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 33.

² Holliday, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 163.

³ <http://www.policymic.com/articles/2636/compared-to-the-rest-of-the-world-americans-are-all-the-1>

⁴ <http://web.law.columbia.edu/human-rights-institute/counterterrorism/drone-strikes/counting-drone-strike-deaths>

⁵ See Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 238.