

## The Forgotten Land

Jeremiah 2:4-13

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I have never called myself an environmentalist, and I have long had some fundamental issues with the environmental movement. This reluctance and frustration has arisen, in part, because in a time when “green is the new black” and “consumer activism” isn’t seen as a problematic phrase, I am neither hip enough nor wealthy enough to be an environmentalist. The almost pharisaic list of requirements for admission into the temple of environmentalism includes things like buying a certain car, shopping at certain stores and not others, and eating specifically labeled expensive food. Ironically, a movement focused on simple living often seems incredibly inaccessible to me and other folks with limited resources.

Fortunately, caring for the earth is not necessarily a preoccupation of the privileged. We as a culture have done this to this cause. In an effort to make every justice issue into a specialized academic field of study and every ideology into another consumable lifestyle we have made environmentalism feel like something for a few. I suppose knowing this is our doing is a small relief but it is mostly a great sadness...particularly for Christians. We’ve always had a specific land ethic that applies to and should be accessible to all the children of God.

Jeremiah lays out what we must remember about the land in our passage for today. And of course the whole bible is full of instructions about how to live faithfully on the earth. But we have throughout history and continue to this day to read those passages with particular emphasis on words like “dominion” and “subdue”. We have read it so wrong for so long that non-Christians don’t even think we care about the planet and we don’t know enough to correct them. Instead we find ourselves reading “In our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations” (an Iroquois value now printed on the back of plastic dish soap bottles produced by a multi-million-dollar corporation) or “The earth belongs to our children. We are merely borrowing it” (a quote attributed to native elders, printed on bumper stickers, and plastered on hybrid and non-hybrid cars alike) and wishing we were from a culture that had values like that. All the while we are ignoring the edict that Jeremiah’s contemporaries knew. Because while it is true what our friends from Walk for Our Grandchildren shared with us—future generations will inherit this ravaged earth—this land doesn’t belong to them any more than it belongs to us. It belongs to God...a frightening reality indeed.

So what did Jeremiah have to say about this belonging of God’s and the people who were using it at the time? In chapter one, God tells Jeremiah that he is being commissioned to “pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant”. But I have to be honest, there is limited building and planting and a lot of plucking up and breaking down. By chapter fourteen God tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people any more. Jeremiah has met God when God’s patience for the people has grown very thin. But at the beginning of chapter two there is a remembrance of what it was like in the good ole days when Israel took the covenant seriously. So I want start there, in verse two, just before the lectionary reading for today.

*Go and proclaim this to Jerusalem, said the Lord:*

*I remember the devotion of your youth*

*Your love as a bride*

*how you followed me in the wilderness*

*In a land not sown*

*Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of the Lord's harvest.*

*All who ate of it incurred guilt*

*disaster came upon them.*

*And then the Lord said this:*

*What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me and went after worthlessness and became worthless?*

*They did not say where is the Lord who brought us up from 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 and in which 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 priests didn't say*

*Where is the Lord? Those who handle the law didn't know me; the shepherds transgressed against me and the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that don't profit.*

*Therefore I still contend with you and I will contend with your children's children.*

*For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever 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 doesn't profit. Be appalled oh heavens at this be shocked be utterly desolate.*

*For my people have committed two evils.*

*They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters and hewed out cisterns for themselves that are cracked and do not hold water.*

This passage is so desperately sad and so interesting. It begins with Jeremiah mostly just delivering a message on God's behalf. "Israel was holy to the Lord...the first fruits of the Lord's harvest." However, as soon as Jeremiah moves into how Jerusalem has transgressed against God the voice changes. "What fault did your father's find in ME? You defiled MY land!" Surely, Jeremiah is still speaking but God's heartbreak is so immense that Jeremiah can't help but change the level of intimacy from speaking on God's behalf to speaking as God. They needed that directness.

God is wounded by Israel's willful defiance but also by their forgetfulness. We can just make out Jeremiah imploring the people to remember in the spaces between each forlorn proclamation. I brought you into a plentiful land. Don't you remember? Those who handle the law, the ones who should know me best...they didn't know me! You forsook me...the fountain of living waters who quenched your thirst in the desert. Don't you remember?

Remembering is much harder than anyone lets on. It's incredibly easy and often convenient to forget. That's partly why we are sent prophets. Prophets' primary business is remembering. The real work of being a prophet is not divining the future but rather it is calling up a people's past with new insight. Jerusalem society and or our own society benefit from our forgetting. So in both these culture remembering is subversive. The Israelites are being influenced by outside cultures, worshipping their gods, and in general believing they have the ability to save themselves. They have completely forgotten how greatly they were and are favored by God.

As the earth is pushed closer and closer to total destruction we look very much like the folks being addressed in this passage. We don't remember a time of wilderness and certainly we were never afraid of it. We know how to irrigate deserts and develop them into subdivisions, large scale farms, and tourist attractions. We don't need anyone to lead us through the woods. We have killed off most of the major predators, mapped every inch of forest to avoid any mystery, and if we were honest we would admit that there's not that much wildness left anyway. We prophesy by the gods of technology who will save us from ourselves all the while forgetting that technology, "progress" is what got us into this. When Audre Lorde said "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" she was right. But it does profit. Doesn't it? Sure we exchanged our glory, our memories but we have built dams and irrigation systems and privatized water sources and our cisterns aren't cracked.

In my mind, Jeremiah is a prophet for today. Right now, we don't need a prophet who says change your ways and you will be saved. Jonah had his hour. We need Jeremiah. We need more than a change. Using toothbrushes made out of recycled yogurt cups won't cut it. Our biblical ancestors farmed small plots because the earth was made unpredictable by God. They let their land rest on the Sabbath and the Jubilee year. And there is not one biblical record of an Israelite selling their family land on the open

market. To our ancestors, mobility was not as valuable as the three way covenant they had made with God, the land, and their family to stay and care for this most precious gift. What they did was more than stewardship. Wendell Berry says that the most appropriate term for the relationship they had with the land was usufruct meaning "the right of temporary possession, use or enjoyment of the advantages of property belonging to another so far as may be had without causing damage or prejudice to this." The people in Jeremiah's passage, as disobedient as they were, were still farming small tracts and weren't selling their land to move on to a more profitable and predictable lifestyle. We don't even do that anymore.

So what is the solution? I wish there was a pat answer. But there isn't. I think part of the answer is recognizing that there isn't a pat answer and grieving what we've killed and squandered so very much. We must realize that by forgetting the gift of land we have also begun to forget the Giver. I think John Dear offers a model for the rest of the solution. In Arizona in 2007, John decided to explain how to choose nonviolence over nonexistence...another dire, seemingly hopeless situation. Instead of saying we just have to meditate on peace more or read the Sermon on the Mount before bed he gave an incredibly long list of concrete actions that included everything from ending the war in Iraq and military aid for Israel to welcoming every immigrant into the US and feeding every starving child.

I think a speech like that, that answered the question of how to treat creation like it belongs to God would go like this: Tear down every hydroelectric dam, coal plant, oil rig, and nuclear power plant; no more pipelines, strip-mining, or clear cutting; leave the mountaintops alone; stop believing the lie that we will end world hunger by mono-cropping and genetically modifying food and start believing that it is your responsibility to make sure your neighbor is fed not an agribusiness'; end the chemical pesticide and fertilizer treatment of plants to ensure that every person regardless of income can afford food that doesn't make them sick; remember your ancestors land ethic and practice it; stop spending money on space exploration and put it into healing the plant we already have; treat animals like they have inherent worth; bring an end to the economy that requires people to drive a car into a city every day to do a job that keeps them away from their family, their community, and their land; indulge children's wonder for nature; and stop creating more stuff to end a problem that began with the plundering, fabrication, and worship of stuff.

And when we have done all that, we should fall on our knees and say God we are so sorry that we forgot who we are and whose we are. We forgot that we are made in your image and that you loved the land and called it good before a single thing was ever done to it. And we surrender everything, knowing that we have become so dependent on the economy of destruction that our time on this planet may end today. But if you make a new covenant with us as you did with our ancestors at the end of the book of Jeremiah, then you are more merciful than we ever imagined.

During John's speech he was interrupted multiple times by people clapping. Though I watched this presentation on DVD and wasn't in the audience I imagine that each time they clapped they were saying to themselves "this is cute but it isn't practical, can't he just move on to a list of things we can actually do". Some of you may be feeling the same way right now about my monologue. But regardless of how you feel, this is not a matter of simply making our current lifestyle greener but of abandoning our current lifestyle. We are just too far gone. We have to stop with the hubristic outlook that we are going to "save the earth" with a collection of inventions, the same earth which we placed in peril. This understanding of the predicament, this reading of the text may seem apocalyptic and it is. But it is also a relief to me and I believe offers relief to other folks who have felt ostracized by a movement that often puts forth the idea that we can consume or logic our way out of this. Poor people, indigenous folks, small scale farmers here and around the world do not profit from our current lifestyle of overconsumption and rootlessness, our chasing after worthlessness. I imagine they would all like to see us abandon the unsustainable way of life we have adopted. The earth certainly needs us to. And I know that God is so ready for us to remember the fountain, the land and our covenant.