

Blowing In The Wind

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 13, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Several times in the nearly thirty years of my ministry I've heard a member say of a loved one: "There's nothing more the doctors can do." Sometimes a parent says of their son or daughter: "We've done all we can. All we can do now is pray." I read in the paper about the divorce of a friend of mine. I had no idea. A few days after I read the divorce decree I attended a meeting with him. I heard someone ask him, "How are you doing?" "I'm hanging in there," he said. "That's all I can do." I imagine that when my friend looks on the earth it is waste and void; and when he looks to the heaven, he sees no light. There are some marriages which are irretrievably broken. There are some friendships that will, sadly, never be restored.¹ There are some church members who will never be reconciled or won back to active membership.

A little girl stayed out to play later than she was suppose to. When she got home her mother severely scolded her. "Where have you been? What have you been doing?" The child said that one of her playmates had broken her doll baby and that she'd tried to help her fix it - for two hours. Her mother asked her how in the world she could help fix a broken doll, and, in all of the innocence of a child, she said, "I couldn't fix the doll but I sat down with her and helped her cry." Some things are beyond fixing. There's some brokenness that we can't repair no matter how much time, money, and talent we have. All we can do is weep with those who weep. When this is all we can do, it's enough. (Butts, The Protestant Hour)

The prophet Jeremiah lived at a time in his nation's history where there was nothing more anybody could do to stave off collapse and defeat and downfall. The year: about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. King Josiah was dead, killed in a battle with an Egyptian army. Josiah was Judah's last great king. He had done everything within his power to turn Judah and God's people back to God. He torn down pagan idols. He put pagan priests to death. He sent Jeremiah and other prophets throughout the land of Judah to teach the law of God and to preach. But there was only limited success. There was only outward conformity at best. *THE PEOPLE SIMPLY HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF GOD*

"My people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good."

Jeremiah knew with prophetic certainty that there was nothing more that he or anyone could do to save Judah from the invading Babylonian armies. The invasion was still a few years away but Jeremiah could feel a hot wind from out of the bare heights in the desert coming toward his poor people, not to winnow or cleanse - a wind too strong for that. ^{BABYLONIAN ARMIES} With prophetic vision Jeremiah looked all around him and saw no hope, no light at the light of the tunnel for his nations long nightmare.

"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."

Jeremiah was living on the eve of the destruction of his nation. He knew it was coming. He could see it coming even when no one else could see it. It marked the end of an age, the end of the world as Jeremiah knew it.

"I looked, and lo, the fruitful land
was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in
ruins
before the LORD, before his
fierce anger."

There was nothing more he could do. There was nothing more anyone could do. Repentance was too late. Reorganization of the government was too late. Revival was too late. Nothing could prevent the seeds of destruction from bearing fruit. All that Jeremiah could do was weep and mourn.

This past week our nation sat riveted to the news to learn about the Starr report and our President's troubles which are not just our president's troubles, nor are they simply his family's troubles, but a national nightmare of historic proportions - possible impeachment proceedings. People are saying there's nothing more he can do. He can confess, he can act contrite, he can talk of repentance all he wants but it's not going to save him. The matter has progressed too far. President Clinton is feeling a hot wind out of the bare heights in the desert, not to winnow or cleanse.

We are living at a historic time not only in our nation's history but also in world history. We stand on the eve of a new millennium. "We eagerly await the dawn of a new century?" writes Frank Harrington, pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta Georgia in his book *First Comes Faith*. "The approach of a new era holds for some, great promise, for others, great peril, and thoughtful people are trying to discern just what the new century will bring." For example, I have one friend who withdrew all his money from the bank. He fears that all the computers will crash in the year 2000 and he will lose everything. When he looks towards the year 2000 he does not see light, but darkness.

Alan Bloom writes in the opening words of his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*,
ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL
"There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." The second thing a professor can be certain of is that every student believes that all morality is a matter of social convention. In other words there is no *True* truth and there is no right and wrong. Bloom is not a Christian. He is an old fashioned rationalist. He loves Plato and he believes our nations only hope is a return to classical philosophy. But he, like Jeremiah, weeps for the future of the nation. Bloom doesn't know if anything more can be done to rescue the nation from the judgment that comes to those who no longer believe there is truth or right and wrong.

Frank Harrington writes, "We have come a long way from Alexis De Tocqueville's assertion that America is great because America is good. There is great concern in the American public about the quality of life in this country. The list of worries seems endless: crime,

violence, drug use, pornography, divorce, illegitimate births, abortions, child abuse, poverty, teen suicides, and the breakdown of basic civility. In the ten years between 1984 and 1994, the prison population doubled to more than a million. The evening news is a nightly visit to chaos and the city in which I live, love, and serve was shocked one evening to learn that a small child had choked to death on a roach in one of our public housing projects." We are in a spiritual crisis in this nation and in the church. And many a family in this town and church are experiencing crises: spiritual crises, personal crises, emotional crises.

But in the midst of this terrible vision over the Lord's anger, there's one soft note of grace in Jeremiah's prophecy. It's so inconspicuous that it's easily unnoticed, yet it's there, hiding in verse 27: "The whole land shall be a desolation; yet *I will not make a full end.*" Some biblical scholars say that the Hebrew text is defective here and that it should read, "The whole land shall be a desolation, and I will make *of it* a full end." But there are hints of hope throughout Jeremiah's dour prophecies. Judgment will be overcome by restoration. Jeremiah knew Israel's God as have few mortals, and Jeremiah knew that the Lord's final word is not judgment, but redemption.

The winds of judgment will come and have come to our nation and the world and they will come again. No amount of rationalizing can get around the fact that the Bible, the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself spoke of God's judgment. Jeremiah spoke of the wind of judgment. He spoke of the coming of "a hot wind... out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse." He spoke of the wind of judgment. But there is another wind the Bible speaks of. Not a hot wind but the wind of God that comes down from heaven, a spirit of gentleness, a spirit of restlessness that will create in us and through us and for us a new heaven and earth. Open your hearts to God's spirit. Open your lives to the new life. "Spirit of God, stir us from palacidness. Awake us from our slumbers. Enable us to rise and serve you."