

JEREMIAH 8:18-9:1 or AMOS 8:4-7

PSALM 79:1-9 or PSALM 113

I TIMOTHY 2:1-7

LUKE 16:1-13

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 18, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Peace and Quiet!

It is so very easy these days to see what is wrong in our world and our little corner of it, so easy to find fault, to place blame, to whine and complain. In so many ways, there is so much that is disconnecting, disconcerting, and disturbing, so many things that are offline or out of line, overwhelming and troubling. It is easy to become dejected, despondent, or depressed, if not clinically, at least temporarily in a surface, fleeting, momentary kind of way. It is equally convenient to become negative and jaded, skepticism abounding, even becoming so angry or annoyed that we are left to wallow in our own toxically laced cynicism, losing all the fragile optimism we can muster, a hope that is often buoyed by only the shakiest, slightest, belief “that things can only get better.” Shout out to Howard Jones for the popular 80s song by that same title! Challenges are all around us that confront our personal preferences, the beloved biases reinforcing the safety of our comfort zones, threatening to obliterate, to steal the support systems that feed our joys and celebrations, the sources of our rarest of real rejoicing, all that gives us relief, reprieve, and even the briefest respite for our troubled spirits and our weary souls. Yes, this the locus of all the malaise and minutia that lays us bare and leaves us with the rhetorical, but not-so hypothetical question, yes, in the vortex of all that is selfishly ugly and petty, childish and petulant, “Where is our joy?” “Where do we find our happy place?”

Obstacles such as job stresses, illnesses and deaths, world trauma, unresolved grief that suddenly and mysteriously wells up from sources unknown, the myriad things that debilitate our being from places within our spirits that we cannot even begin to define, that we cannot even begin to label, all combined to spawn our irascibly cynical outlook. Just what is it that drives our restless discontent, fuels our passionate dis-ease, spurring various levels of depression all caused by all kinds of individual and systemic dysfunction, a very real and constant companion. All these things inflict their derogatory influence, save, thank God, for when they do not! After all, if we are fortunate, we will get a break every now and again, a time to heal and recover, to rejoice in, to bask in, all that is good and makes life worth the living. **Wouldn't it be nice, just wonderful, if we would be so fortuitous as to get a little**

peace and quiet, to bask in some spiritual solitude? The question before us is, “Would we know it if we heard it, saw it, felt it, or experienced it?” If only we could be so lucky or blessed!

The ancient writers who composed the biblical narrative, especially the older part we once negatively called the Old Testament but now expansively and inclusively call the Hebrew Bible, faced the same kinds of trials and tribulations that we are forced to confront. Yes, our faithful forebears suffered the same fate, experienced the same wounds that Shakespeare once poetically called “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune!” In our lection from the Hebrew Bible today we are allowed more than just a microscopic glimpse of their misery, yes, we are privy to an up close and personal look at the individual and societal conundrums that often made the life of the Israelites a living hell. In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we are graphically exposed to the palpable pain inflicted on the Israelites! The prophet Jeremiah describes in detail their experiential dark night of the soul! We can both empathize and sympathize with their plight as they became a captive people once more, taken in bondage by the Babylonians, as we are allowed into their world through the transparency of their stories, the “narrative” or “salvation” history now recorded for perpetuity in the voluminous collection we now know as the Bible. Once upon a time, these were simply verbal stories told around the campfire or the dinner table, all a part of the oral tradition of a people on an adventuresome journey together. Each epic tale was carefully embellished and exaggerated, legends stretched almost beyond capacity in their larger than life telling and retelling, as the perceptions in their biased recollections were passed down through the exciting medium of storytelling. It was an ancient artform that served as a source of engagement, education, and entertainment, all combined as every juicy tale was, all of these stories channeled through the vivid imagination of chroniclers who wrote, edited, and compiled these popular memoirs, eventually recorded as creative journals documented into the annals of a people describing their interwoven remembrances emerging in their factual and fanciful experiences. These stories were steady companions, constant reminders recalling to this people a proud heritage in what was a richly unfolding legacy, the gift bequeathed them by their forebears from generation to generation, as they settled their land of promise, embracing their new day while honoring their history, all the while building their future as a people in what became a nationalistic societal juggernaut, emboldening and empowering a sectarian people who came to believe, drinking their own Kool Aid that they alone were select, uniquely set apart as chosen by Yahweh their monotheistic and intimately named and known God. Yes, in the Hebrew Bible we read of their passionate travails in numerous Psalms of lament, wisdom stories including the likes of the Book of Job, and one of the most beautiful collections of poetic prose anywhere to be found, the often forgotten or ignored Book of Lamentations, a linguistic masterpiece, the ultimate guide to language befitting raw and rough-edged emotions, gut-wrenching feelings hewn from the many disasters that challenged the legitimacy of Israel and their sense of entitlement as newfound property

owners in their seized land of promise. These are the human dilemmas that unfortunately off too often are prone to accompany human misery, affliction and atrocity, all the things that diminish our humanity and threaten to steal our joy. All of which brings us to today's homiletical journey as we seek pastoral settings, longing for the peace that passes all understanding, yes, yearning for peace and goodwill, what the writer of I Timothy describes as leading a quiet and peaceable life, full of godliness and dignity, yes, even as we wish for some collective contentment, yes, some much needed peace and quiet! During what can be described as a cacophony of noise at every level of our complicated lives and our oft conflicted living, the oft futile bane of our existence. With every excruciating aspect of our harried and hurried lives, when life itself is at its nadir, its absolute worst, truly it is the heart and minds' desire for the blessed bliss of a restful reality. We long for a contentment that is the missing link in our lacking and limited arsenal devoid of an overflowing rest and relaxation, peace and quiet, as we live and move and have our being.

I was profoundly struck today by the laments found in Jeremiah's prophecy, a lection we did not include in today's readings. My hunch is that Jeremiah's poignantly painful musings could describe any period, pick your favorite, in any generation, a languishing landscape befitting all peoples transcending time and space. Jeremiah writes during a time of exile, the Israelites once again taken hostage, this time indentured to their Babylonian tormenters, a time of upheaval in the Hebrew Bible we call the Babylonian captivity. What was new about this when we read the stories of their struggles, the struggles in their stories! This was a time of greatest despondency and hopelessness, the enslaved children of Israel now sucked into the chaos of the worst civic nightmare believing they would never see their homeland again, and for many, this indeed was their most unfortunate fate, their dreaded lot in life, the horror of dying and being buried in an alien land. In fact, elsewhere in his pointed prophecy, Jeremiah will tell his kindred to marry and have children, instructing them to live as if for the long haul because it would be, to live as if this would be their permanent lot in life because it was! The prophet cries out on behalf of the people, lamenting that there was no healing, only grief and a broken heart. Jeremiah implores a God who seems detached and distant, uncaring and devoid of compassion, absent and inattentive, to "Listen to the weeping of my people all across the land," raising the pivotal and anything-but-hypothetical question that was on the mind of everyone, "Isn't the Lord in Zion? Is her king no longer there?" Was God missing in action? Was God sleeping or even worse, dead? Jeremiah already knew the answer to these rhetorically sobering questions! Jeremiah laments, perhaps better said whines and complains, "The harvest is past, the summer has ended, yet we aren't saved." This has nothing to do with salvation but with freedom, liberation from bondage at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar, a ruler who would be universally legion, an archetype for any and every evil, power-mongering, power wielding, despot lusting for authority and absolute control, ruling with an iron fist. **No wonder the biblical writer once asked, "Why do the heathen rage? Why do the wicked prosper and not perish?" Let me count the ways, uh, villains! Jeremiah adds for effect,**

“Because my people are crushed, I am crushed! Darkness and despair overwhelm me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then have my people not been restored to health? If only my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, I would weep day and night for the wounds of my people.” Oh, if only for a resting place for weary souls, lovely, picturesque, pastoral, surroundings, all designed to sooth our souls and assuage our spirits, perhaps like the kind of surreal settings the Irish call “thin places,” places where a luscious landscape meets a beautiful clear blue sky, yes, an uncloudy day, settings where heaven and earth touching and kissing, caressing on another, perhaps colliding, lush and green, nourished by a trickling spring or babbling brook, all coming together, meeting as one. Perhaps warmest images come to mind like David’s Twenty-Third Psalm, written about 200 years prior to this corrupt conflagration! “The Lord is my shepherd in whom there is no want, making me lie down in green pastures beside still waters, restoring my soul, my cup running over with goodness and mercy that follows, passionately nips at my heels, all the days of my life, a foretaste of glory divine in the eternal heavenly places.” Yes, that’s it! That will do just fine! That is exactly what we imagine, what we picture it to be, what we desperately need, the hopes without fears, the dreams, for years to come. Ah, but is it only a dream, a pipe dream, a mirage, a fantasy, or false hope? Could it ever become something tangible, touchable, realizable beyond our wildest imaginations?

Most of the time it seems as though these pastoral images are light years away from any delusional possibility, far removed, vaguely conceived conceptions, nowhere in sight. For the prophet Jeremiah and his downtrodden and tormented people, a nation torn asunder, a people separated in all their varied and now segregated ways, the brightest and best of them captured and bound for Babylon, an ancient version of “Sin City”, the worst possible outcome had now come to pass! Yes, Jerusalem had fallen again, but this time as an Israelite enclave, the city of Zion with its opulent Temple built by Solomon, now utterly and completely destroyed, leveled to the ground. Oh, what a horrific day! No wonder this people’s anger was palpable, raw nerves frayed beyond repair, vengeance the only solace available in their seething minds. The Psalmist in the 137th captures the spirit, the very essence, of their wrathful wishes, portraying the retribution in their understandably but fanatically fixated, their demonically driven obsessive hopes and dreams. “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormenters asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” I detect some serious attitude here! The word of the Lord?

No, the word of an angry victim seeking vindication and vengeance, that which only the Lord possesses! Yes, it is a long way from Babylon to the green pastures and still waters of Zion, Jerusalem, the holy city of God. You cannot get there from here and vice versa! In this imprecatory Psalm, so called because it is a prayer advocating divine violence against one's enemies, this lament over the destruction of Jerusalem poignantly describes the deepest hurt feelings, the rawest of raging emotions, the pinnacle of vengeful desires, retributive justice giving the Israelites-in-exile a well-deserved, a normally expected reaction, a highly anticipated response, inducing an intoxicatingly self-righteous individual and communal high. Most nations have experienced some degree or level of the kind of raw emotional backlash, the kind of upheaval, the Bible frequently forces us to face in a plethora of graphic texts: Pearl Harbor, England during the Nazi blitzkrieg bombing, 9-11, Ukraine, and let us count the many countless ways! It is the dark side of our humanity, representing the worst, the bane of our human existence all made manifest when we fail to live together as one, finding ways to bask in blessed harmony and unity! Yes, it is a long way from bane to blessing, from heaven to hell, from blissful nirvana to the pits of life, from the peace and quiet of pastoral and colorful green valleys to the black and white landscape of the seemingly unlimited number of Babylons that are an ever-constant threat to our global village's desperate, but seemingly vain, prayer for peaceful civility, the longings for a quiet and peaceable life, yes, peace and quiet, the tranquility of the peoples of all nations of the world rejoicing as one, their oft troubled minds and hearts put at ease, their souls and spirits sated as a gracious gift from the One eternal Spirit.

Into the midst of very similar travails comes the writer of I Timothy, an epistle credited to the hand of the Apostle Paul, this composer who writes to his protege against the backdrop of all the upheaval confronting the newly minted followers of Jesus who were harassed, constantly threatened, hunted like animals, their bloodthirsty Roman pursuers always a door knock away, nipping at their very vulnerably compromised heels. Despite the evils leveled against these earliest Christians by the most wicked of imperial Roman conquerors, this unbeknownst biblical writer dares to suggest to his constituency that they are bound to dutifully pray for kings and everyone who is in authority. In other words, pray on your life, even swearing allegiance to the narcissistically praised Caesar in power, an insecurely vicious authority figure who is literally out to get you, no paranoia necessary, who wants you dead not alive! This surprising, shocking, admonition constituted perhaps the ultimate irony! Pray for those in the other political party? Now I have gone from preaching to meddling! In other words, in the immortal and challenging words from the Gospels, words attributed to Jesus, love and pray for your enemies, real and perceived, your number one and so on and so on and so forth adversaries, unlimited, infinitum, seventy times seven. Turn the other cheek, again and again and again! And we are not talking our backsides, if you get my drift! Turn a blind eye? Evidently, apparently so! And this massively naïve writer has then the audacity to suggest that if you will turn aside and pray for those in power that you will reap the reward of

being allowed to “live a quiet and peaceful life in complete godliness and dignity!” And the farmer hauled another load away! This is nonsense, yes, total BS on steroids! You know it and I know it! Life’s experiential pangs has proven otherwise for many, if not most, among the masses! Pray for them all you want, all you can, but in the final analysis, at the end of this very long day, they, and they are legion, they are still looking to get you, to have you executed, to wipe you off the planet, right off the face of the earth, and more frequently than not succeed. Surely, this writer was not naïve in believing this stuff, knowing this was not true, but wishful thinking, privy to the palpable persecution, watching up close and personal, replaying horrific images as if in slow motion, the atrocities being carried out one by one in this freeze-frame death march, a sadistic slaughter of the innocents. Even so, this is, this remains, the gold standard, as in the Golden Rule, this is the goal, the supreme command to this frail and fragile people, saying, “This is right and pleases God our savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth!” Yes, these pleasant promises even apply to the likes of Caesar and his ilk, then and now, even applying to the worst dregs of humanity in the demonically infused North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, along with any and every other nasty contemporary despot whose sole existence seems to be devoted to making life a living hell for those under their spell, forced without choice to live in evil regimes, all of them abused to some degree and, of course, manipulated as loyal subjects for the cause of state, dissent not recommended or allowed. Put that in your Taliban and smoke it! Yes, the heathen still rage and prosper!

In so many ways we are no different from our forebears in the Bible, not so far removed from their reality because it is all the stuff commonly inherent in our humanity, woven into our human DNA! There is no escape from our being human! And in the nadir of the worst that life has to offer, disturbances that appear and are manifest in so many disturbing forms, as we count the many ways, we long for the same things that those who came before us. We are and left with such a rich legacy that is the hope and prayer for the quiet and peaceable life advocated by the letter writer of I Timothy, yes, some much needed peace and quiet. No matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey, there are certain things we all hold dear, substantial elements we all aspire to have as part and parcel of our daily living, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Why in the world can we not get along? It was the quintessential question then! It is the quintessential question now! No matter the outcome or results, no matter the givens or the consequences, we all long for a measure of the good life and the good life begins when there is no strife, no negative residual, when we begin to find ways to live in peaceable places among peaceable people. And always remember that peace is far more than, never merely the absence of war! Yes, community is our baseline, relational receptivity, building bridges in the spectrum, the rainbow of human relationships, the minimum of a divinely required expectation, yes, a basic requirement for our survival, our sustainability, our sustenance, and all manner of succor and success! It is such a low bar, such low hanging fruit. Peacefulness begins with a generosity of spirit, a sense of abundance

overflowing, all of it producing basic needs, goods and services, for all the earth's peoples. It demands a graciously respectful welcome and hospitable inclusion, not just tolerance, but accepting and affirming of all persons, yes, peacefulness as the proverbial biblical equivalent to our ever-elusive balm in Gilead, a healing fountain as it were, a soothing physician that restores us to health in body, mind, and soul, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually, individually and communally. Yes, the human capacity does indeed exist, can be manifest in our human being and doing, ready, willing, and able to create metaphorical green pastures beside still waters, springs of water welling up to cleanse and refresh, to restore our souls, shunning the dark shadowed valleys of death and dying that are never far removed from our morbidly vivid consciousness, realities that haunt us like a 365-day nightmare of Halloween proportions. We simply need to engage and enact, to set the wheels in motion, embracing our own accountability and responsibility! With all that information forming the content of I Timothy, this Pauline weaver of words maintained a consistently calm demeanor reflected in his salient and sobering narrative, a continuous metronome of righteous thought, a constantly endearing theme, imploring his people to take the high road no matter! No matter what obstacles and struggles they faced, whatever torture or martyrdom they watched in horror or painfully experienced in their terrorized psyches, they were still implored to pray for those who inflicted such colossal damage, whose brutality was without equal. He begged of them the possible during the impossible, of abject impossibility. Now and with every day following, the baton has been passed to us, the ball now in our court to go and do likewise. Indeed, we are called to a different alternative, to embody a radically opposing narrative, to do the very opposite, to embrace the radical polarity, the opposite of all the negativity that seems normal, routine or ordinary, expected, excusable, or justifiable in our finite, mortal, minds. We are to be, in the immortal words of Michael Jackson, lovers and not fighters. We are to be lovers and not haters, peaceniks, peacemakers, peace mongers, never peace breakers or deniers. Oh, what a challenging, difficult forked road we confront every day, each day, we claim Christ and follow Jesus. Yes, then, and now, when everything seems to go against us, the old adage remains true, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going," even when it means the potential for our own demise, metaphorically or realistically! Oh, the danger of signing up for this Jesus' stuff! Indeed, we walk by grace and not by sight! There but by the grace of God we all go, whether we believe or not, whether we have faith or not! After all, God never fully relies on us, surprisingly so perhaps. The Holy One never completely depends on our ability or lack thereof, but always counts on the source, holy presence, making up the difference with grace, buying into every wonderfully loving, divinely inspired, equation!

The prophet Isaiah once envisioned what we have come to call the peaceable kingdom, an allegorical possibility steeped in the most grandiose metaphor, the deepest glorious symbolism, a worldview in which every person is valued, an egalitarian society in which all people are treated with equity and justice. This fanciful image allows for God's peace and tranquility, yes, imaging a quiet and peaceful life, peace and quiet the order of the day.

Swords are beaten into pruning hooks, the lions lie down with the lambs, the children play over the den of snakes, and no one is harmed on the holy mountain that is God's realm on earth. Isaiah prophecies of a new day dawning, a new day on the horizon, in which a new world order immersed in loving grace, kindness, mercy, and peace becomes routine, ordinary, as if almost secondary in nature. The problem probably begins and ends with us, with the humanly divine, divinely human, creation, wanting, perhaps demanding, of God to do for us what we are expected to do for ourselves. My hope and prayer for all of us in this little corner of the world called Eagle River, in this bastion of Christian welcoming and inclusive hospitable hope called the First Congregational United Church of Christ, is that all of us will find ways to take deep breaths, to breathe in and breathe out God's goodness and grace, yes, God's gracious goodness, and find spiritual succor, rest for our struggling spirits when our souls are weary, and by all means strength when our voice and action is needed. Yes, may we be or become peacemakers! May we attain the quiet and peaceable life the Pauline writer intended for his protégé Timothy, mentor to mentee, even with and including, "complete godliness and dignity!" Yes, may it be fulfilled in our lives, granted to each one of us for our enjoyment, yours and mine, our gift, a lasting and everlasting legacy, ours for the taking. May God grant us some serenity when everything seems to be way out of whack, when going wrong exceptionally wrong, when life seems to be going to hell in a handbasket. May God bless us with much needed peace and quiet even as we demand it, seeking to make it so for all God's creatures, the human ones included!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and could probably use some peace and quiet as well! Amen and amen.