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Jeremiah 23:23-29

Wild and Precious Life



Once again, we encounter God's rage over the prophets' lies. They have been fabricating dreams to please the kings and placate the people but have no truth in them.

God has been upset before. Previously it was the prophets of the Northern Kingdom who led the people to worship Baal. God's punishment in that case was a destructive fire of judgment consuming all of them.

But God believes these prophets are much worse, earlier in our chapter:

*In the prophets of Samaria I saw a disgusting thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness... (Jeremiah 23:13-14)*

But their greatest sin is found in our verses, *They plan to make my people forget my name.* (Jeremiah 23:27) Remember how important the divine name is to the people of God even to this day. Faithful Jews will not even speak it. It is one of the greatest treasures given to them. God never told it to Abraham. Jacob asked for it but did not receive it. It was not until Moses, the greatest prophet of them all, that God finally gave this sacred gift.

Today people will jealously guard their name, in court if necessary, to ensure it is not being slandered or misused. God covets the proper use of the divine name; in fact, it is one of the big Ten Commandments. "Thou shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord thy God."

For a name is power. To know a name is to be connected to someone, to be able to call on them when in need. In ancient times (and even to this day) as a sign of respect (or hierarchy) we don't call certain people by their name. *Sir, Ma'm, Madame, Queen, Mr. President.*

To be given the name of one so lofty as the *Creator of All That Is*, is a sacred trust. If people believe you have the ear of the mayor, the governor, or the president, suddenly they will listen to you, bend over backwards for you.

In the prophets' abuse of that name the people were being led astray. And it was leading them to destruction, worshiping false Gods that were as empty of life as that piece of straw that God spoke of. To chew on the straw is to feel as if one is eating and gaining nourishment, but alas it brings no life, no energy. It only stirs up hunger inside.

This is our hunger even today. It is my hunger. It is your hunger. It is the hunger on the streets leading to violence and hatred. It is the

hunger in the guts of our youth for a life of meaning and purpose. It is the hunger in the soul of our nation for a purpose greater than ourselves. We have questions and we want answers. Where will I find happiness? How can I feel safe in this world? What is my purpose in life? What can we do to change the world?

God was and is cut to the heart because we have forgotten where the answers are, that God's Word is the true bread of life, and replaced it with the soul equivalent of diet soda and potato chips. It is so easy to try and fill ourselves up with things, or appearances, as if they will satisfy. But like that soda and chips, they only make me want more, and the more I eat the emptier I feel.

So, God's wrath burns hot over these false prophets. For they have made the people forget. For the answers are so close to us we need not scour the earth to find them. "AM I not a near God and not a God far off!!!!" Rather than a phone call away God is just a name away.

So, God has given us this name to call upon anytime, anywhere and God indeed will be right there. In calling upon this name we indeed will find God everywhere we go. And suddenly the happiness, the hope, the purpose; they will all come to us as well. But as Jesus told us, we must seek first the kingdom of God and all else will be added to us. It will all make sense.

The turn of the century English explorer Edward Wilson said, "*A happy life is not built up of tours abroad and pleasant holidays, but of the little clumps of violets noticed by the roadside, hidden away almost so that only those can see them who have God's peace and love in their hearts.*" The irony of an explorer telling us this

must not be lost. A man who pioneered risk and adventure through blazing a trail through frigid Antarctica tells us God is not found on tours abroad.

But in fact, I would think it is something different. In Jeremiah God tells us not only that He is near, but that He fills heaven and earth. So, the true joy of adventure is that wherever you go you can find the beauty, wonder and peace of God. But as Wilson suggests you cannot see it without God's peace and love in your heart.

There is a very real lived human experience in which at times we feel God is very close and others in which we feel God is very far off. When God feels far off, we feel like Israel – abandoned and afraid and we are susceptible to all types of temptations and depression, anger, and even hatred. We cannot see beyond our own needs into the hearts of others.

But if we call on the name, we will find what we seek. All the answers can be found, for in this name is all.

Yahweh as you know means, "I am". God tells us many times in the Old Testament what this means. I am...merciful; I am...your peace; I am...healing; I am...with you. But being a God who will go to the ends of the earth, or rather come to earth, to make this ever more clear God came as one of us. From the Son we discover more about God...

I am... the light of the world.

I am... the good shepherd.

I am... the resurrection.

I am... the bread of life.

This is the bread that satisfies. And it can satisfy anyone's hunger for a life, a true life.

A few years ago, I went around the country and asked people to share where they found God. The response was very strong. When they sought the Holy, they indeed found God and they knew peace in their hearts. And when they did not, they knew anxiety, fear, and anger. But there was not one right way to find God.

Some found it through serving those in need. Others through quiet walks in the park. There was one man who found it listening to loud music while riding his bike. It was not dependent upon being especially "religious". You did not have to sound or think like a pastor or pious parishioner you just needed to try.

It did not depend upon being liberal or conservative nor any of the traditional ways we divide people; none of those were drivers. People only need to look and suddenly they could spy those clumps of violets on the roadside or wherever they went.

And the sense of peace, of wholeness, and joy was overwhelming.

Lauded poet Mary Oliver could spy those violets when she wrote her poem "Summer Day":

*Who made the world?*

*Who made the swan, and the black bear?*

*Who made the grasshopper?*

*This grasshopper, I mean—*

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,*

*the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,*

*who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-*

*who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.*

*Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.*

*Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.*

*I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down*

*into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*

*how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,*

*which is what I have been doing all day.*

*Tell me, what else should I have done?*

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do*

*with your one wild and precious life?*

Our near God of grasshoppers and violets wants us to call upon the name knowing that I am...is everything. And we too can answer Mary Oliver's questions with hopeful zeal!

Amen.