

**GOING DEEPER: THE GRATEFUL LEPER; JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-7; LUKE 17: 11-19;  
OCTOBER 13, 2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

This is the second time, last Sunday was the first, that Carol and I have been in a church in four months. Maybe your pastor shouldn't admit that he took a sixteen-week hiatus from worshipping the Lord. But I did.

And you know what? I enjoyed every single minute that passed on every single Sunday morning from Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire to Ireland, England, and Italy including Rome – of all places to be and not go to church!!

I remember doing my morning workout routine one Sunday in the park in Camden, Maine. The park overlooks Camden Harbor; the harbor is filled with all kinds and sizes of sailboats and not a few motor yachts. And I had a conversation with Edna St. Vincent Millay whose life-size, cast-iron statue was watching me do push-ups and sprints. "Lucky you, Edna" I said, "living in this town! No wonder you were such a fine poet."

It was a magnificent four-month journey together with Carol, and in Italy, with our sons, daughter-in-law and granddaughter. If we said it once, we said it every day – when we'd watch the sunset on Boothbay Harbor or walk the medieval city wall around Derry, Ireland or hike to a tern in England's lake district or poke around the colleges at Cambridge or marvel at the backdrop of the Alps at Lake Como or laze on the hammock overlooking the turquoise coastline of Cinque Terre – "Thank you Mrs. Lilly." And, we said, "Thank you Westminster for giving us the green light to go on the adventure and for taking your own journey with the poets this summer."

There's more to tell and I look forward to sharing some poems and pictures this Wednesday at noon and then again with Carol next Sunday for our luncheon in parish hall; and we are eager to hear what you've been up to listening to poetry in worship and exploring the waterfront and world of nature in WNY.

Turn with me to the lessons for today. As I think about it, Carol and I can relate to Jeremiah's community who were exiled in Babylon for a very long time – we were not in exile this summer, but we did experience what it is like to be a foreign land for an extended period of time. We actually felt we'd become citizens of Monterosso after 30 days supporting their economy and enjoying their beaches. As for the lesson from Luke, we felt grateful, as I said, every day for this once in a lifetime tour.

If what we are here to do is to become more and more like Jesus in our thoughts and actions, which unless I miss my guess is why most of us are here, then today's and next week's texts point the way to deeper insight, to a closer walk, as they say, with Jesus.

Indeed, could we hope for anything more for Eleanor today or for any of our children than to become deeply acquainted and familiar with the Jesus of history, the Jesus of Good Friday and Easter, and with the Jesus of peace and justice!

We think *we* live in complicated times, imagine the world in which *they* will come of age. Who will be their guide, their compass, their bedrock for the values they choose to live by? I was glad to be free from the news cycle for 4 months on our sabbatical. We'd check our phone apps to catch up occasionally. But in this ever-shrinking world, we can't avoid events that for good or ill shape our lives. How will we prepare our children to respond to the political/social/economic events that will affect them?

Both of today's stories offer an answer to that question. They are about the ability to discern God's purpose and presence either in times of difficulty as in the reading from Jeremiah or in times of blessing and joy like the ten lepers who are healed by Jesus. And then, based on our discernment, to choose or not to respond to the path God opens.

That probably sounds too ethereal and complicated. What these stories ultimately, finally are getting at is how to live most fully in the moment. Because we are human and are free agents we often miss the mark and make choices in moments of hardship or joy that work against or keep us from our best.

What the texts imply, one of the great operating principles of the Bible, is that our best and happiest life is none other than the abundant life God offers. This challenges the old stereotype that to be a Christian is to be somehow a "religious" person and lead a life that plays it safe, is boring and looks to the world like we are trying to be holier than everyone else.

Just consider the pantheon of the heroes of Christian faith: St Paul traveling the known world starting churches, feeding them with his letters of encouragement and instruction, shipwrecked, imprisoned, finally executed for his faith.

St. Aquinas and his magnificent *Summa Theologica* who said, "I have seen things that make all my writings look like straw." In our day: Martin Luther King, William Sloane Coffin, Letty Russell fighting for civil rights, women's rights, a world free of nuclear weapons; Jim Wallis, the evangelical social justice prophet; Marie Fortune and her movement to prevent domestic violence and sexual abuse.

These are not wall flower people; they are risk takers, game changers, not without human flaws, but constantly tuning-in their decisions and actions like members of an orchestra to the perfect pitch of Jesus' example.

The reading from Jeremiah – in which he counsels the people to plant crops, build houses and to marry and have children – is a portion of a letter he wrote to the Jewish community after they'd been taken into exile by Babylon.

Despite what sounds like domestic advice about living in a foreign land, Jeremiah's letter was considered treason by everyone. The Babylonians loved his advice to be at peace in what was the Jews' new homeland; but to many of them, Jeremiah was selling out, capitulating to the enemy. Some had already attempted a revolt and were ruthlessly put to death. When do God's people resist tyranny?

That was certainly a life and death question for the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto and for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. No one would condemn their decision to fight back but the story from Jeremiah says that sometimes resistance is not the will of God. It was God's will that the Babylonians descend upon Judah; the people had wandered astray and rejected their covenant with Yahweh; the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar was the agent of divine judgement. The exile of the Jewish people was *God's will*.

Jeremiah was not counseling the people to oppose it but to embrace it. He reaffirmed that in time God would allow the people to return to their homeland.

Indeed, that homecoming occurred during the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia who conquered the Babylonians and liberated the Jews from exile and let them return to Jerusalem.

Until then, the people had to wrestle with Jeremiah's prophesy and determine if they were called to revolt or make Babylon their new home.

The story of the grateful leper is another story of discernment and action. What would you do if you were facing social rejection and isolation, living in pain and suffering and were suddenly given your life back?

Nine of the ten lepers, who were faithful Jews we suspect because they went immediately to their priests to be declared healed of leprosy so they could return to society, all nine disappear as soon as Jesus heals them. They don't think twice about what just happened to them other than they can now return to family, work, social acceptance and a life free of disease. That's understandable but failing to acknowledge the source of their good fortune suggests a profound disconnect from their relationship with God if not from life itself.

But the one who does return to thank Jesus, who happens not to be a Jew but a Samaritan and thus already something of a second-class citizen and social outcast even before his leprosy, he is the one we least expect to stop and bow before this miracle working rabbi who heals him.

Both of these stories from Jeremiah and Luke, have this in common – they are occasions when God's people are called upon to be open and responsive to the presence of God.

One account is about being in the midst of hardship, disappointment and grief. The other describes being the recipient of amazing good fortune, in the midst of almost unspeakable joy.

It is interesting that both the Babylonian Jews and the nine lepers struggle to see what God is doing in and through their circumstances; they lapse back into looking out for themselves – easily forgetting, in their Babylonian exile, that it was their corruption in Israel that fulfilled Jeremiah's prediction that they would be carried into exile and now they want simply to be free of the holy retribution they brought upon themselves. As for the nine ungrateful lepers, they want nothing more than to be declared clean and to go home. Fine, well and good but were it not for a generous, compassionate rabbi they'd still be untouchable beggars on the outskirts of the village. Their failure to acknowledge the miracle that clearly came from God reveals a poverty of spirit.

It is easy to judge from our 21st century perspective how slow these people are to get it; how self-centered, self-absorbed they are. But their stories actually hit close to home.

We are probably the busiest, most distracted generation in history. 24/7 technology means we're never out of reach; we're always checking our phones and computers to keep track of responsibilities at work and social engagements.

Life sprawls across the days into the nights and weekends; the old boundaries of work and home, play and work get blurred; keeping some 'balance' in life becomes more and more difficult. We know we're spiritually hungry but we don't know how close we are to spiritual malnutrition. The effect, studies suggest, can be emotionally numbing. This kind of retreat into our online silos and echo chambers erodes the capacity for compassion and empathy and caters excessively to the wants and needs of the individual while it ignores the life and needs of others and the community. Real life and virtual life merge; we're connected to untold numbers of online friends but feel strangely lonely. We buy products from companies that pledge to send a few dollars to protect the rain forest but feel somehow unfulfilled and empty.

One of the benefits of stepping out of the pressure cooker life I just described for four months was that I started listening to myself rather than reacting to emails and texts. I wasn't aware how plugged in and tuned out I was until I got away; making calls to staff and volunteers all the way down I90 on my way out of town. How hard it is to let go of the addictive feeling of needing to be in control.

But once I crossed over into Vermont there was a shift. You were immensely helpful by honoring the terms of the Lilly grant – to let me make a clean break for four months.

What I am saying is that I had the perfect opportunity to rediscover myself and my family – who bear much of the burden of my hyper focus on work and suffer my lack of presence in their lives. I don't think what I am describing is all that unfamiliar to many of you who are busy professionals and parents. How do we conduct such busy lives and stay connected to each other, to our faith, to the Holy Spirit, and to Jesus?

Inevitably life intervenes. Whether we plan for it or not we experience our own Babylonian exiles – at work or with regard to a health diagnosis or some family event or loss or grief. And we certainly encounter blessings – moments of unexpected joy when our hopes and dreams are fulfilled.

Being open and responsive to the presence of God in those circumstances is what today's readings are about.

Once I started paying attention to my life and to the presence of God in our travels amazing things happened. I was led to a scholar of Romantic poetry who guided my reading and has become a close friend; I got to spend an afternoon with a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and a morning with a Pulitzer Prize winning American historian. I signed up on impulse for a poetry workshop at the Robert Frost museum in VT and met a young SUNY/Albany poet who is now a friend and reader/critic of my poems. Carol and I met and were given a three hour tour of Trinity College Dublin by the University Registrar. We had lunch with the director of Rydal House – Wordsworth's house and gardens after he married. I started calling these unsolicited gifts 'breadcrumbs' dropped by God leading me, leading us deeper into an immensely rewarding sabbatical.

Now the test is how to sustain this connectedness to myself and to others and to God back in the so-called 'real world'. And not just that but how to stay connected in the valleys of life – the grief and loss and pain.

We are on this journey together; we need each other to stay in touch with our best selves and the presence of God in our lives – sometimes through circumstances like the Babylonian exile that seem anything but the presence of God and sometimes when joy breaks into our lives.

Last Friday I participated in a celebration at UB of Dr. Bob Genco's legacy. He was as amazing a person as he was a scientist. Eight scientists from UB and around the world offered tributes. Every one of them either shed tears or struggled to hold them back. It was a moment of unsolicited joy – a God moment. I was expecting long boring speeches. Instead, the speakers revealed their humanity and love for Bob. Life is filled with such moments if we open our eyes to them. God saying through a person or situation – here I am, open your heart, trust the life I offer to you. Amen.