

Alternatives

Each of the four lectionary readings today have the same underlying message...a message about alternatives...about choices and consequences of those choices. This message is especially clear in two of the texts—the passage from Jeremiah and the Psalm chosen for today. Today's psalm was chosen to open the entire psalter. It comes from the Jewish wisdom tradition; offering the world view that there are exactly two ways to go through life, but advising that only one of those ways is advisable. Verse 1: "Happy (Blessed) are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers." In other words there is the way of the wicked and the way of those who will be blessed. Jeremiah's text provides much the same view framing the choice as the way of folly verses the way of wisdom. That point of view, in fact, is the one consistent theme about choice found in all of our scriptures. When reading the Jeremiah text it is clear that the basis for that choice is based on one thing: trust. This weekend I have been volunteering with other members of my Coin club at a show in Charlotte. At that show coin dealers from all over the United States come to buy and sell coins—not just US Coins but coins from every country in the world. One reason I began and continue collecting coins is that they can tell us a great deal about the history of the country which mints them—through the figures who are represented and the inscriptions found on them. All US coins bear a motto now. I'm sure you know what it is. This motto did not appear on our coins until the two cent coin of 1864-1873. The motto, of course, is "In God We Trust." However, President Theodore Roosevelt who wanted US coins to more attractive did not approve of this motto being on coins because they were used for commerce. He felt it was sacrilege. Contacting the famous sculptor Saint-Gaudens to design the coin, two coins with the same design were minted, the \$10 and \$20 gold pieces of 1907. Saint-Gaudens felt the design was too crowded with the motto inscribed and so omitted it. Roosevelt approved the minting of the coin design without the motto allowing their minting in 1907. This resulted in so much opposition that the motto was re-instated shortly by Congress. Yet when I observe the behavior of so many who use any of these coins bearing the motto, I have to wonder if the motto currently applies to the residents of this country. By the actions of most folks it would seem that their trust is in the coin. The prophets of the 8th century before Christ had a difficult call—they lived in a period of great turmoil. These prophets were called to give folks God's message about the ways that God's ways were not being followed. The intent was to cause them to return them to placing their trust in the God who had delivered them from slavery; the God who had journeyed with them to this land and provided for them throughout the journey. Even though the rulers and people of Judah had seen the capture of their northern kindred through invasion so that the land of Israel was no longer independent but under the rule of those who had invaded; it seems they were determined to seek an alternative to listening to God's message for them. The people would rather form an alliance with the ruler of Egypt than depend upon God's provision to protect them from the threat of the Babylonians. The people chose to turn away from the God of their ancestors choosing instead to break their covenant relationship and worship other gods. At that time God used the approach of the Babylonian war machine and armies to still offer these covenant breakers a choice: the people can choose to trust in human might, to seek strength in mortals and flesh,

remaining turned away from God and all God offers or they can give their trust to God. Jeremiah 17: 5—Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.” Jeremiah describes this choice using much the same imagery found in Psalm 1 about the tree that is planted by the water. A tree planted near the source of water has roots that continue to be nourished even in summer heat or a drought. It will survive and bear fruit even during those unfavorable conditions. That tree is the one like those who place their trust in God. Those who place their trust elsewhere are like shrubs found in the desert that become parched and which do not survive. This passage with its description of the choice and the consequences goes to the heart of biblical teaching. The passage exhorts the reader to trust in the Lord. This issue of trust in the Lord comes up throughout scripture, in various ways and with many nuances. The terms “trust,” “have faith,” and “believe” reinforce each other. The saying found on many greeting cards and coffee cups give this sage counsel: “trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.” This comes from the Book of Proverbs, chapter 3, verse 5. This biblical view is given as an either/or situation but life and the scriptures also teach that life does not work out so simply. Jeremiah’s passage tells us that although the choice is “either/or”, the results are not that clear. The tree planted by the water will still find times when the heat is great and there is drought—yet the tree survives because the roots are fed by the water still present. For those people who trust there will still be difficult times, but those who trust will survive and bear fruit despite the poor conditions they encounter. Taken as a whole, scriptures teachings demonstrate that trust, faith and belief are complex. Trust does not ensure outward success. Trust enables the individual who trusts to rise above despair and cynicism, to move forward through fear, pain and doubt which threaten to derail our trust. Within this passage we also discover that God searches our hearts; that God understands our struggles with trust. Trust, however, is an invisible thing in many ways. You cannot really see trust like a physical trait. Trust is an internal disposition. It is the bent of your heart and mind. The final verses from this passage tell us that because God can and does search our hearts which is how God knows about our struggles. Within this truth also comes the clue which tells us that although we cannot see trust, when trust in God is the center upon which our choices are based they are consequences which can be seen. Our trust and reliance on God is shown according to the fruit of our doings. The context of Jeremiah’s words is that these people who have had far more reasons than any other people on earth—they have had every opportunity to put their trust in God alone, yet they have failed. They were given God’s blueprint for living in the form of God’s Law—the teachings of the Torah—but they kept finding ways around it. When it came down to a choice between doing something quick and easy to turn a profit or doing that something according to God’s ways which might not be so quick or easy, then it was the quick and easy path that was chosen. Convenience took precedence over covenant. In the midst of our lives the choices we have seldom seem as stark or simple as either/or. We muddle around in the mixture of choices that are sometimes good, sometimes not. We are all mixtures of the light and the dark. We cannot always discern where our light leaves off and the darkness starts to creep back highlighting Jeremiah’s words “who can understand the human heart.” But in the final analysis the sum total of the message of scripture is that the God of the universe is a loving Creator God who desires us to flourish. At the end of the day, we have either spent our lives

trying to lean into the goodness of this God through trusting with all our hearts or we have not. We do not and cannot make the right choices on our own. But by grace we have the chance to get caught up in all the goodness of God. In total, Jeremiah's words provides us with an indispensable witness to the complex reality, difficulty and often misguidedness of the human experience, as well as to an insight to our God who enters undeterred into and faces all the complexity and messiness of the human experience. The human life which Jeremiah sees and actually experiences included hardship and difficulty; the difficulty was often exacerbated by choices and inclinations emerging from the depths of the human heart. Rather than also turning away from those who choose to turn away from God, God chooses instead to interact with humans and work in the midst of, and often even despite, our choices. God has a vision beyond our often misguided choices and inclinations. No matter what, God never ultimately and finally turn away from those created in the divine image. We too live in a world of turmoil. If asked people on the street to identify the greatest problem facing the human race today, the answer might be: "global warming, racism and hatred, income inequality, domestic or foreign terrorism, international strife or any number of other issues that occupy the headlines and media talking heads. Chances are that no one will identify the human heart as the main problem at the core of all those other problems. Yet this human heart which Jeremiah proclaims as "devious above all else" is at the root of human sin and misery. Jeremiah says that are just two kinds of people in the world—the cursed and the blessed—and the difference is whom they trust. In a world like ours filled with differences and divided by those differences, that is a revelation. That says it's not black or white, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, Muslims or infidels, male or female, gay or straight that ultimately matters in the choices made. It is where the heart of each person places their trust. Those who "trust in the Lord, whose confidence is in God"; whose hearts rest in the Lord so that their security and hope and strength and righteousness and life come from the Lord are blessed. There is one God and it is how you relate to that God makes all the difference in the world. Those who trust in the Lord will continue to flourish and be fruitful even the times of troubles...which come to all. Fear may come and anxiety may linger, but abundant life is guaranteed. The key is to keep trusting the Lord with all your heart. Self-reliance, independence, autonomy, pride in self-idolatry will finally leave you cursed. God sees beyond our behavior and understands our hearts. But God also sees how our behavior reveals our hearts; whether or lives are oriented to our Creator and Redeemer or not. The teachings of our scripture tells us there are two alternatives and each has consequences which flow from them; if we fully trust in God we are able to follow the path of teachings God has provided for our welfare—for the welfare of all. Thinking about this, does that motto placed on our coins tell the truth about our choices...or is it the sacrilege that Theodore Roosevelt called it. Is our trust in God or in what can be gained through the coin? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.