



## **A SERVICE OF HEALING (For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, August 29, 2010**

**Cynthia Rembert James, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Psychologist and Pastor Landmark Ministries Church of God, Anderson, IN affiliation

**Lection - Jeremiah 17:14** (New Revised Standard Version)

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

On this Sunday, we set aside time to give special attention to persons in our congregations and in our communities who are suffering emotional distress of any type, particularly those who are suffering from the grief brought about by loss, whether the physical loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of a marriage or the loss of their balance of health due to a physical ailment.

#### **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 17:14**

##### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

The book of Jeremiah is a narrative that details the imperial moves of Babylon against Jerusalem and the cries of the victims in the narrative. Today, some see the United States as an imperial power. Others would like to see all countries subjected to or styled after U.S. “democracy” and a free-market economy. Those who have fallen victim to the free-market run amuck, as evidenced by sub-prime mortgages, bank closures, a skittish market, and unparalleled joblessness, are suspicious of expansion as increasing the risk of political and economical corruption. Much like Jeremiah, victims of the 2008-2009 recession cry to God for healing in our land. In addition, calls to expand our military efforts and to pursue seemingly ever illusive peace agreements increases the sense of national desperation, not unlike what existed in the days of Jeremiah. Healing is needed in so many instances.

## Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The book of Jeremiah invites us to view imperial action through the voice of the victims of political power, i.e. those persons most displaced like exiles.

Following a prose theme of the Lord's judgment Jeremiah issues a passionate prayer asking God to heal him and to save him. The preponderance of evidence documenting man's deserved punishment for disobedience in no way dampens the Prophet's confidence in God's willingness and ability to heal and to save. The situation in Israel is most dire - Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse - who can understand it." This text underscores the depravity of man's heart and emphasizes that the heart of man is "gravely-ill," dangerously sick, and to the point of seeming incurable. Nevertheless, Jeremiah falls in the lap of God seeking divine help. The reader is immediately caught by the urgency of the prayer and the sense that there is no other recourse other than the Lord's faithfulness. Jeremiah lifts the Lord's power as a sail hoisted high - only the Lord can heal - only the Lord can save! The sense of the text is that other solutions are partial and tentative at best, but if the Lord heals - we are healed indeed. The reader is struck by the comprehensiveness and implied infallibility of this God whose actions are without fault.

The healing and salvation under appeal is for more than personal, physical needs but encompasses both the moral and spiritual fabric of the nation. Deliverance is needed for the land from its enemies; thus the exclusive nature of the appeal to the only true God.

Jeremiah asserts his faithfulness as a prophet of God, but it is the reliability of the Lord's character that grants great assurance, thus he says, "For you are my praise." The scoffers scoff, and in today's vernacular - the haters may hate, but Jeremiah stood firm on the Word from the Lord. This is a message to us to do likewise; stand firm on God's Word for ours is the God who was with Jeremiah and ours is the God on whom we can always depend.

The fall of Jerusalem had not yet been fulfilled. The long-suffering nature of God caused some to doubt Jeremiah's prophesy of the fall. Jeremiah, like so many other men of God before him, does not want to be left without a divine witness before his enemies, so he seeks the Lord's protection through prayer. "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved." The repetition of heal and healed, save and saved suggest the wonderful extent to which the response matches the appeal and underscores humanity's need and frailty over against God's provision and omnipotence. Save us from deception and wickedness in high places, from economic distress and natural disasters. Save us from abuse and misuse running rampant; Oh Save us Lord. Save us from ourselves, when we would cooperate with corrupt systems and hold our peace out of fear of reprisal. Save us from stress, toxic relationships, strange diseases, violence and all that grieves us; save us, Oh, Lord.

The Hebrew word used for heal means to heal by mending or stitching which gives emphasis to the depth and longevity of God's work in our lives. There is also a hint of imagery which offers that God's work is his art. Like a Master Artist, God majestically moves throughout the seasons of our lives painting, repairing, encouraging and healing us. What's more the Hebrew word for heal suggests that God's healing is a cure and thoroughly makes whole. God cures the seemingly

incurable and defies comprehension by the highest of human efforts and thoughts. It is on this power, this power alone, that Jeremiah calls. Jeremiah abandons his well-known style of lament and with a voice void of anger he makes his confession and petition known. The succinctness and crispness of Jeremiah's words are poignant, "Heal me"..."Save me." They stand in contrast to the more elaborate prose of verses 5, and 8 describing the complexity and total entrenchment of Judah's sin.

This text also suggests how exiles should think and act in times of distress. In view of contemporary times one is encouraged in this age of options and god-like technology to cling to the Lord. We, too, can be viewed as exiles alienated from our formerly strong family values and communal sensibilities and victim to frequently depraved social media and over-commercialized lifestyles. Despite the use of homeopathic remedies, chemicals and mind-altering strategies – the only medicine that can totally heal us ultimately comes from God. If even doctors bring part of it, God sends all of it.

This is a text of competing chords, harmony then disharmony. The idea of opposing voices represents the turmoil of the time. Jeremiah represents one truth – that of a healing saving God while the times present another view just as true – that of an oppressive political power. The sense of struggle is felt at every turn in the text. Only to be resolved by the fact that God is true to his word concerning impenitent Judah but faithful to those who trust in Him.

This text is in keeping with the prophetic book's reputation of searing the soul while healing both body and spirit. Jeremiah's words attempt to come to terms with Babylon's conquest against Jerusalem and move beyond the turmoil and upheaval to a knowledge and confidence in God. This confidence overcomes all of the human and theological chaos mentioned or implied in this scripture. Jeremiah is unwavering while others question if the political and military derision meant that Jerusalem would not be rescued. He is faithful, and his statements embody the text's theme of "survival and healing" and theologically offer a defense of God (whose actions need no defense) from the charges of injustice and unconcern from unjust men.

This is the Good News of the liturgical voice that our God is a defender of the just. Jeremiah says it best, "For you are my praise." Jeremiah's prayer, known as a confession, converts to personal praise. The prophet's voice echoes the words of Deut.10:21, "He is thy praise. And he is thy God that hath done for thee these great and terrible things." Jeremiah answers his mockers and the Lord's critics. Jeremiah's words - "You are my praise" also mean you are my prayer. Jeremiah's Good News is that His God Sees, Jeremiah's Good News is that His God Rewards and Jeremiah's Good News is that His God ANSWERS!

Although times are turbulent, Jeremiah's hymn still rings loud and true. The throne of God's glory remains in tack. It is true the Lord will not abandon the people of God. Our Creator is the water and sower of life - the refreshing water of Jeremiah 2:13. So, whatever it is that ails us this day or in the days to come, our God is faithful to heal and to save.

## **Celebration**

The message is timeless. Jeremiah boldly proclaims that God Is The God of the Cosmos, Superior in every way. There is no god beside this God. He says, “I wound and I heal.”

His power is supreme! His will prevails! He is our Deliverance! He is all our Salvation! HE IS OUR GOD! Heal us Lord, and We shall be Healed! Save us, Save us, Save us, and we shall be saved!

Heal our land, O Lord; You said you would! Save our souls; we know You can and we know You will! And If you heal us, we will be healed and if you save us, we shall be Saved!

The gears shift in Jeremiah’s voice as he says, “For you are my praise.” It’s no longer about the nation but it’s about a God who gets personal and up-close when we’re in need. The gear shifts and Jeremiah forsakes his formal voice and lays claim to his God who is worth shouting about. If he were in the 21st century black church, I imagine Jeremiah would say, “Make Some Noise – Somebody,” “ HE IS OUR PRAISE,” YES HE IS. YES HE IS. HE IS OUR PRAISE!

### **Descriptive Details**

**The Stage on which the Story is Set:** Jeremiah is not written in chronological order. The ancients conceived of the past, the present, and the future to be proceeding simultaneously. The past shapes and is alive in the present, and future blessings and curses impinge upon the present.

The book is about the pain of being exiled.

This is a book about empire written from the voice of the victims of empirical expansion.

The fabric of daily life was disrupted; supportive systems collapsed.

Turmoil is all around and the community questioned God's faithfulness.

Both the community and Jeremiah endure a roller coaster of demise and restoration.

**Images:** Small groups on the street corners, on balconies, huddled all giving their spin on the facts of the day; and

**Sounds:** Hear the community mock Jeremiah because his prophecies haven't been fulfilled.

Speaking voices overlap which builds energy in the text. The fusion of voices, gives a literary style that mirrors the chaos in Jerusalem. The struggle to make sense of the times is reminiscent of the confusion and discordant symphony of voices we hear today - all blaming another for the suffering mess we’re enduring.

The array of overlapping speaking voices are a biting backdrop for the competing theologies in this chapter of Jeremiah. When there is economical and political upheaval the talking voices we now call pundits increase all trying to make sense of the collapse of familiar structures.

