

Proper 16
Cycle C RCL

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah's career began in the same year (627 BCE) as the death of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria. Under the Judean king Josiah, Judah experienced a brief rebirth as Assyrian power over the Middle East began to wane. This revival, however, ended with the death of Josiah in 609 BCE at Megiddo where he unsuccessfully tried to hold back the Egyptian army that was headed north to finish off the last vestiges of the Assyrian army, an army Josiah saw as a buffer between Judah and Babylon. During the course of his ministry, Jeremiah watched the Babylonians take his neighbors off from Jerusalem to Babylon twice, in 597 BCE and in 586 BCE. Shortly after this second expulsion Jeremiah fled to Egypt. Jeremiah's prophecy is unusual for a southern prophet because of his interest in the Exodus and Conquest traditions and his relative disinterest in the so-called "royal theology" associated with the kingship in Jerusalem. The current passage is a "call narrative," in which the editor tries to relate the nature of the prophet's ministry. These first verses reveal him to be the reluctant prophet he turns out to be elsewhere in the book.

Psalms 71:1-6

The first three verses of Psalm 71 closely resemble Psalm 31:1-3a. Indeed, many phrases in the psalm are reminiscent of other psalms, including Psalms 22, 25-26, 31, *etc.* The psalm resembles most closely the *individual lament* form, but there are also elements of the *hymn* as well (Psalm 71:22-24). The present *lament* is more explicit than most in emphasizing the problems of old age (Psalm 71:17-21); but as often occurs in the laments, the psalmist begs relief from the activities of enemies (Psalm 71:4, 10-13), including the accusations made by the psalmist's enemies. Today's reading (Psalm 71:1-6) consists solely of material of the *lament* form.

OR

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Some interpreters find at least two literary divisions of Isaiah 58: verses 1-12 and verses 13-14. In verses 1-12 the practice of fasting (verses 4-12) speaks to the question as to why the Lord has ignored the attempts of Jerusalem to be faithful to the commandments (verse 3a). The problem, explains the prophet, is that those who fast continue their exploitation of their own workers even while they observe this religious duty (verse 3b). The parody of the worshiper who mortifies the flesh expressed in verse 5 is put in tension with a true fast that together with one's acts of piety would also include the relief of the needy and oppressed (verses 6-7). Verses 13-14, on the other hand, appear to enjoin the people of the city to observe the Sabbath correctly. Bernard Childs holds, though, that the verses about the Sabbath recapitulate the teaching about fasting, thus making verses 13-14 a part of the oracle that contains verses 1-12. In support of that is the fact that the Sabbath is designed to give relief to those who work, *i. e.* proper Sabbath observance is principally a matter of social justice.

Psalms 103:1-8

This *hymn* is an "enthronement psalm" that celebrates God's kingship over all things. The psalm joins the refrain of heavenly beings with that of humans to celebrate the quality of justice and mercy with which God exercises this rule. Although it is a *hymn* in structure, many interpreters have pointed to the similarity of this psalm to the *thanksgiving* psalms as well, especially in verses 3-18.

Hebrews 12:18-29

The author of Hebrews constantly makes comparisons between events in the earthly history of Israel and events in the heavenly drama of salvation. Here the writer contrasts the sojourn of Israel at the foot of the holy mountain of Sinai with the possibility Christians have of entering the “rest” of God in the heavenly world. If Israelites were not able to ascend to the earthly abode of God on Mt. Sinai, how could Christians expect to enter God’s heavenly abode, the new Jerusalem? Yet there is a possibility of entering God’s heavenly city, but that possibility will not last forever. Christians must take the opportunity they have now to enter the heavenly Jerusalem or lose that opportunity forever. Although the thought worlds of Hebrews and Revelation are vastly different from one another, they both reflect the apocalyptic idea of a heavenly Jerusalem. See Revelation 21:9-22:5.

Luke 13:10-17

It is clear that Rabbinic law allowed healing on the Sabbath. The principle is called *piquax nefesh* (“saving life”), and it applied equally to the saving of Jews and non-Jews. (See *t. b. Yoma* 84b). Certain sins such as idolatry, incest, and shedding blood were to be avoided even if one had to die to avoid them; but nothing less than such grave sins superseded *piquax nefesh* (*t. b. Ktuvot* 19a). It is not clear, however, that for the Rabbis the same kind of rule applied to livestock. Among the sectarian teachers responsible for the so-called Damascus Document, there were specific prohibitions against helping an animal give birth or pulling an animal from a well or a pit on the Sabbath (CD 11.13-14). Since the Rabbinic evidence is later by a century or more than that of the Damascus Document, we cannot be sure that the principle of *piquax nefesh* was as clearly spelled out for Jews in the early years of Christian existence as it came to be in the second century CE. Yet in our passage Jesus derives the principle of *piquax nefesh* on analogy with an unattested rule about saving animals. Following Bultmann, Fitzmyer, and others, we should regard Luke 13:10-17 as a controversy dialogue and not a miracle story. Its purpose was to teach and not to amaze.

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