

September 9th, 2018

Scripture:

Jeremiah 18:1-23

Isaiah 64:8

“The hands of God.”

What starts off so beautiful here in Jeremiah 18 goes South in a hurry.

We have this beautiful image of God the potter holding His people in His hands and gently massaging them --- making something beautiful out of them --- as it seemed good to Him.

But all too quickly this peaceful image of unity changes --- as the people reject the hand of God guiding them and decide it is easier to simply throw the message and the messenger to the dogs --- they ignore God’s words --- and devise to dig a pit and throw the messenger into it.

The people want the hands of God guiding them but ---- only if the guiding hands and the message they provide are agreeable and positive --- uplifting - -- what they want to hear.

This beautiful image of God holding forging and fashioning His people --- goes awry ---- as verse 12 says --- on account of stubbornness and evil hearts.

Let’s explore the passage.

It begins with God directing Jeremiah to arise and then go down to the potter’s house.

The NIV doesn’t capture this subtle phrase --- this idea of --- “arise and go down.”

It’s a beautiful beginning to what Jeremiah is about to do --- rise up and go down at the same time as he speaks for God ---- when we speak for God --- when we live for God --- we have to at once rise up and sink down.

We have to at once be bold and also be humble --- we have to rise up and sink down at the very same time.

Len Sweet talks about how he bought the door frame from a Russian war ship with the idea of installing it as the entrance to his study --- so that it would remind him to be bold and humble in the same step ---- every time he goes into his study now he has to step up over the bottom water plate --- and slouch down under the top metal frame.

Rise up and sink down.

Jesus had to sink down into the cross in order to rise up into the glory of the resurrection.

Here Jeremiah begins with that very Christ like movement ----- “Arise and go down to the potter’s house...” ---- God says to him.

Be bold ---- and also be humble --- not easy --- but every Christian is called to be bold and also be humble.

Be bold ---- proclaim Christ in word and deed --- but also be humble because we all still have so much to learn.

“Arise and go down to the potter’s house...”

Of all the places to send a prophet why the potter’s house --- I can well imagine Jeremiah thinking to himself --- “Why is God sending me to a potter’s home?”

“Of all the places to send me to learn and grow ---- why a house of clay shaping --- why not the Temple or the Synagogue --- why not to a rabbi or a priest or something far more obvious and fruitful.”

Sometimes God sends us to places --- or sends us messages that don’t seem to make much sense at first.

An artist in clay --- what is Jeremiah going to learn form a pot --- and cup --- and bowl maker?

But Jeremiah --- being Jeremiah --- doesn’t question --- he just goes --- he follows God’s lead ----- he is obedient ---- and he arises and then also sinks down into what God asks of him.

Clearly God wanted Jeremiah to see something with his eyes and not just his ears --- clearly God wanted Jeremiah to see the hands moving --- the wheel spinning --- the clay taking shape --- being formed and then deformed --- and then formed again.

I can well imagine Jeremiah recalling Isaiah 64:8 --- we heard it read a moment ago --- our second reading -----

“Yet you, Lord, are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are the work of your hand.”

Jeremiah would likely have been familiar with this passage --- Isaiah prophesized before him ----- it's quite possible --- probable even ----- that he would have recalled this verse as he sat and watched the potter at the wheel that day.

And so as he's watching this --- just in case it wasn't obvious --- just in case Jeremiah didn't recall this verse from Isaiah --- God speaks ----- Jeremiah is literally watching the potter and the wheel spin and the clay taking shape when God says to him ----- picking it up at verse 5 -----

“Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as the potter does?”

“Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.”

This is what it is like God says.

Just what you see before you --- the hands shaping the clay --- so it is with me and with you.

I'm the potter --- and you Israel --- you Jeremiah ----- you _____ insert your name here ----- are the clay.

And as verse 4 says ----- if the clay becomes marred --- misshaped --- the potter can form it into something new --- another pot --- shaping it as it seems best to him.

Sometimes God has to take us --- and reshape us --- into something new ----- and beautiful ----- as it seems best to Him.

These are words of great comfort.

God's got us --- each and every one of us --- in His mighty and tender and saving hands ---- and he is fashioning us --- His people ----- one by one and also community by community.

And as Jeremiah said in one of his prayers --- from our call to worship chapter 32 ---- nothing is too hard for you Lord --- great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds.

These are great words of comfort --- if we take them seriously they are indeed words of great comfort.

We are clay --- and God is fashioning us as seems best to Him --- not just good but as seems best to him verse 4 from our reading says this morning --- - God doesn't just want what is good for us --- He wants what is best for us.

Often we want to settle with good --- "good enough" – we say --- but as verse 4 reminds us God wants what is best for us.

And yet the Israelites reject this.

At least they reject it on this day ---- they reject the particular kind of vessel that God is working them into on this day and at this time in their life cycle - ----- faith journey.

Put another way ---- they like the idea of God shaping them ---- of course they do ---- but just not the particular way God is shaping them at this time.

On this day --- at this time ---- hey reject the shaping hands of God working on them.

Verse 11 reads ---

“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’”

In other words God says to the people --- “Trust me --- if you keep doing what you are doing it doesn’t end well --- so ---- turn and go in a new direction --- change things up --- reform your ways and your actions.”

But no --- they want no part of this --- not a chance --- this isn’t going to happen and God knows it --- the next verse --- verse 12 --- God says ----
 “But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.’”

“But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.’”

Verse 12 makes it clear ---- God already knows that they will refuse to follow Him.

Knowing this God provides some words for Jeremiah to speak when the people reject the idea of changing.

Jeremiah speaks them --- see verses 13-17 --- God rebukes them.

And then there is verse 18 --- after Jeremiah speaks the words God gives to him --- this is how the people respond ---

Verse 18 ---

They said, “Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.”

Let’s make plans against him --- let’s attack him with our tongues --- and then let’s pay not attention to anything he says.

They don’t like the message so they stop listening.

They don’t like what they hear so they stop listening.

How will they ever grow if they only listen to what they like to hear? -----
 the answer ---- they won’t of course.

Imagine if you tuned out to everything you didn't like to hear ---- who would you be as a person if you had tuned out to everything you didn't like to hear in life?

We sometimes have to listen to correction --- we certainly do when it comes from God ----- the Bible says ---- 2 Timothy 16 and 17 ----- “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Verses 13-17 are just this --- God teaching --- rebuking --- and correcting.

And then the rest of the chapter is Jeremiah's plea to the Lord for help and for action on his behalf.

What starts out so beautifully --- this great and powerful ---- and peaceful image of the potter --- and the wheel --- and the clay --- and a beautiful vessel.

What starts out so beautifully --- God is the master potter we are clay in His hands and He will make something beautiful out of us just as the potter takes a blob of clay and makes something beautiful out of it.

What starts out looking so promising and beautiful --- ends in animosity.

They said, “Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah ----- let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.”

All because they didn't like the word that God spoke through him.

All because they didn't like what God was asking them to do.

All because as verse 12 says ---- they decide that --- “We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.”

There was a meme --- a poster slide --- going around Facebook recently that said --- “Don't ask God to speak to you if you are not willing to listen to what He has to say.”

This applies very well to our passage today ----

“Don’t ask God to speak to you if you are not willing to listen to what He has to say.”

God says to Jeremiah --- I’ve a got a word for the people.

I’ve got a word for the people so get up and go down to the potter’s house.

Jeremiah goes --- he arises and then at the same time goes down and he watches ----- and then comes the next word --- God says see what he’s doing --- well that is exactly what I’m doing too.

And see how when things go awry and the clay becomes misshaped --- it has to be re-worked --- well that is exactly what I am doing.

The people have gone awry and I’m going to work them over into something new.

So go and tell the people they need to give over ---- give way --- and let me fashion them because if not --- it’s going to be disastrous.

So tell them --- tell them to quite being so stubborn --- that’s the word used here --- in verse 12.

“It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.” --- verse 12 says.

God wants them to abandon their plans --- quit being stubborn and let Him work and re-work them over as seems best to Him.

But --- the people say --- “It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.”

That’s all of us.

That’s all of us here today --- from time to time.

We’re human beings --- we’re stubborn --- and we like to continue with our own plans.

Men in particular are good at being stubborn.

There was another great meme I saw recently ---

“This year thousands of men will die from stubbornness.”

The sign read.

“This year thousands of men will die from stubbornness.”

And spray painted just below these words were --- “No we won’t.”

“This year thousands of men will die from stubbornness.”

“No we won’t.”

Jeremiah 18 --- like the whole book of Amos --- and like so many other passages from scripture reminds us that we are stubborn.

And as the sign says --- men in particular are stubborn.

“This year thousands of men will die from stubbornness.”

“No we won’t.”

It’s just part of who we are as humans.

It is great and faithful and necessary as Christians --- as people of faith --- to have certain tenets --- beliefs --- things in our lives that are non-negotiable.

Jesus is the Son of God --- God’s only Son --- sent by God to reconcile --- redeem --- save us from sin and evil and eternal damnation --- and instead escort us into the presence of God eternally.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

“I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.
Praise be to you, Lord;
I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.”

“For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son into the world that whosoever believes in him shall not die but have life eternal.”

It is faithful --- and good and true ---- to have certain non-negotiables in life ----- things that we will never stray from --- things that we will be stubborn about.

The problem is we put all kinds of other foolish stuff into that category of non-negotiables such that it harms and hinders our faith journey ---- such that it harms and hinders our relationship with others and with God Himself --- and worse ----- very often we don't even realize what we are doing.

Sometimes we put our steak in the ground unnecessarily --- sometimes we take a stand foolishly --- for a point or a cause that isn't worthy of taking a stand for.

Sometimes we take a stand just because of how we feel --- and not the actual truth or heart of the matter.

The meme is helpful ----

“Don't ask God to speak to you if not willing to listen to what He has to say.”

It's not really that the Israelites didn't care to hear from God.

The most definitely wanted to hear from God.

They just didn't like what He had to say on this day and at this time.

They still wanted to hear from God ---- but not the teaching --- rebuking and correcting part.

They only want to hear from God when it agrees with what they think --- feel --- and are already doing.

As verse 12 says --- “We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.”

This story is in the Bible for a reason ---- why do you think this passage is in the Bible?

Why is this passage --- Jeremiah --- the potter's house --- the message God gives --- the people ignoring it --- and then plot to harm the messenger --- in the Bible?

To remind us that we're stubborn --- the people listen for God but when He says something that rebukes or challenges them ---- they ignore Him and get mad at the one who shared the message? --- maybe.

Is this passage there to remind us just how stubborn we can be? --- perhaps.

“This year thousands of men will die from stubbornness.”

“No we won't.”

Any other reasons why this passage is in the Bible?

To remind us that we are the clay in God's hands and He is forever fashioning and re-fashioning us.

To remind us that sometimes God will send us to places that seem a bit odd at first ---- why would God send Jeremiah to a potter instead of a priest or a rabbi ---- why a clay house instead of the Temple or the Synagogue?

To remind us that as Christians we have to step up boldly --- and at the same time hunch over humble --- Jeremiah was told to rise up and go down in the very same breath.

We can come up with many reasons why this passage is in scripture --- and all hold some truth for some people at some time in their journey.

The passage is there to teach us something about ourselves --- life ---- other people ---- human nature --- and most of all the passage teaches us something about God.

As scripture itself says --- 2 Timothy 16 and 17 ----

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...”

There's a reason --- or better put there are always reasons why passages are included in the Bible --- and the reason or reasons are ----- "All Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training..."

Jeremiah ---- the potter --- the clay --- the stubborn people with evil hearts -- --- and ---- last but not least --- in fact last and most important of all ---- God's guiding shaping --- loving saving hands.

Among other things this passage reminds us that God's loving saving hands -- - are forever fashioning and re-fashioning us according to His will.

And --- this passage reminds us that though we have stubborn and evil hearts --- see verse 12 --- God doesn't give up on us.

Though we are stubborn and foolish ---- more important than this ----- God is still working in --- on --- and through us.

Greater than our stubbornness is God's love ----
 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." ----- from Romans 5.

And though we are stubborn --- and foolish --- God sticks with us --- keeps working on us keeps His hands around and upon us --- seeing that the clay is worked into something useful as seems best to Him --- from Philippians 1 --- "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

That's why this passage is included in scripture.

Precisely because it reminds us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us --- to remind us that when we are stubborn and foolish --- God sticks with us and remakes us --- He isn't finished with us yet ---- and will see the work He has started on through to completion.

God sticks with us he is not fickle --- even when we try to ignore Him He keeps coming at us with more counsel because he knows what is best for us - ---- not just what is good -- but what is best for us.

Sometimes being held in the hands of God will be uncomfortable and perhaps even hurt --- but good will ultimately come of it --- be patient.

Faith takes time.

An acorn doesn't turn into a mighty oak overnight.

A lump of clay doesn't just turn into something beautiful and useful without also some elbow grease and effort --- working and re-working.

Faith takes time --- discipleship takes time ---- get on with it right now --- here today for sure --- but it also takes time.

And most of all --- remember --- celebrate --- give thanks and honour and praise and glory for the fact that we are clay in God's hands --- He's got us right where we need to be ---- He's got us right where he wants us to be --- in His beautiful ----- good ---- correcting --- teaching --- rebuking ---- and saving hands.

We are clay and sometimes clay is worked over hard --- sometimes clay is fired --- just before it's made into what it is going to be it fired --- it's put into the fire to get it to hold its final shape ----- clay is forever and always being worked and re-worked over --- and we are clay in God's hands.

What joy.

What blessing.

What good fortune.

What goodness --- beauty and truth --- what saving love --- it is that we are clay in the hands of God.

What more can we possibly ever ask for than to be clay in the very hands of God.

If this doesn't give us peace and hope --- and settle our souls into a deep sense of calm and trust what will?

“Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.