

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost - September 19, 2004**  
**Anne G. Cohen**

**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1**

**For Our Reflection:**

Do you have the stamina, now, to grieve  
As intensely as you need to grieve?  
Do you have the stamina to react with rage  
As intensely as you need to react with rage?  
Do you have the stamina to retreat into silence  
Asking nothing of anyone, for a while?  
Do you have the stamina to bask in the love  
Of people who would tenderly nurture you?  
Do you have the stamina to return to the real work  
Of nurturing that which will someday blossom ...  
Maybe even, at last, into lasting peace?  
Do you have the stamina to believe in this world  
That has weathered many mass extinctions?  
Do you have the stamina to become an aspect  
Of the as-yet-unforeseen creative energies  
That will emerge from the craters of the bombs,  
Soon to fall, on people and buildings in [this war]?  
Do you have the stamina to keep growing the promise  
That indeed you're a seed of such an aspect?  
For that seed is a power that can never be attacked  
By anyone other than you.

- Kevin Farey 2003

**Who Was Left Behind?**  
**A Story**

Ezekiel was a priest and, even more, a visionary – literally speaking. If Jung were to do a psycho-analysis of his writings, he'd probably declare the man psychotic, subject to visual and auditory hallucinations – complete with alien abduction fantasies. But in the 6<sup>th</sup> century b.c.e. – he was declared a mystic and a prophet. Who's to say which declaration was correct?

Jeremiah was also a priest and a prophet – but he was the Prophet in the Parking Lot. His message of doom to the privileged classes was delivered from the gate and received with a boot to the curb.

So, when the Assyrians came and killed as many as they captured, they did a brain drain on Judah – as Empires were wont to do. They took the scholars and priests, the business executives and the inventors, the elite and the useful, the crème-de-la-crème. They rounded them up and took them to Babylon. As the troops swept the Temple for stray clerics, Ezekiel was taken up in an alien abduction – just as he'd predicted. And there, in Babylon, he lived as an embedded witness to the Exile – working with other priests to develop a theology to hold the Jewish Exiles to God in the absence of Jerusalem's Temple.

Jeremiah? He was left in the parking lot – grieving the outcome he'd predicted had come to pass. He was left behind as a freelancer in the aftermath – trying to make sense of what he was witnessing. Who was left behind? The Parking Lot Prophet and the Poor, the unskilled and uneducated, the homeless and the peasants, the sick and the broken and the useless.

And these people – left to cope with shock and awe and ash, left leaderless and penniless in a devastated city that the One God had supposedly promised to preserve forever so he could live there with them, the Chosen Ones – these people were understandably unhinged.

As with any one who's lost loved ones and had a near miss with mortality themselves, they reorganized their circumstances so that it could make sense to them. People who had previously relied on fertility Gods and Goddesses to regulate their land-dependent lives – people who had experienced the regularity and faithfulness of the seasons and a tangible return on their prayers – decided to go back to those Gods and Goddesses. The One God of All hadn't worked out. He had obviously gone back on his Word and had Left the Building. So why not return to the deities that had never abandoned them?

Out came the fertility Goddesses from their hiding places. And these so-called “idol worshippers” offered this form of hope to their Jewish spouses and friends who, in the face of obvious dereliction of duty on the part of YHVH, thought it was better than nothing. The purists had been hauled away – so purity was no guarantee of life. Better hedge bets and pray to Every God.

The ritual abominations and pollutions to the Faith that Jeremiah had been complaining about BEFORE the invasion were nothing compared to what was going on in the aftermath. If God was angry enough to destroy the Temple BEFORE, He was not going to be happy with the results of his rage experiment. Jeremiah was in despair.

What he could not see was that

- when a monotheistic religion makes claims on the Truth and makes promises that are so easily broken by the cycles of human history...
  - when monotheism declares war on the pantheon and slams a book of rules down where there used to be earthy explanations for the mysteries of life and death...
  - when push comes to shove and shove comes to massacre...
- the people are going to hold onto what is most real to them. They are going to find their own source of empowerment – the belief system that sustains them. They will land in the place where the heartbeat of the Universe beats closest to their own rhythm.

And, unless the Divine Power of the Universe is an Ogre, the process of finding meaning and sustenance after a tragedy is NATURAL, UNDERSTANDABLE and RIGHT. And no one, especially anyone who has not endured the same suffering, is in a position to JUDGE the rightness of another person's religious practice FOR THEM.

While Ezekiel and the priests in Babylon worked hard to write edit the Torah and Prophetic scrolls in much the form we have them today – giving the folks in exile a strong framework for practicing Judaism in a foreign land – and describing the One God who is still present – but Above rather than Among... Jeremiah was back home tearing his hair out over the cultic heresies being practiced in the ruins of God's former Earthly Dwelling.

And he was sending letters of lament over to Babylon – where the Exiles were not ghettoized but assimilating quite well into bourgeois society – even thriving and profiting in their new digs.

Jeremiah described the state of the homeland and the fate of Judaism in the bomb craters. He communicated that the only real Hope was the Return of the Exiles – and it was ONLY their return that could make things right again.

It was a set up. As well-intentioned as Jeremiah was, his writings – from a man of privilege to others of privilege – his writings were the basis for some serious elitist attitudes on the part of returning Exiles a generation later. Most of the Exiles DIDN'T come back. They were comfortable in Babylon and their children had married there and settled into new lives.

Those who DID return saw themselves through Jeremiah's eyes – the saviors, the hope of the nation. And, sure enough, with their resources and know-how – they rebuilt Jerusalem – Temple and all. But they built it on the foundations of a classist world view. They built it on the backs of those who had endured life in a decimated homeland.

And the people of Jerusalem – “idol worshippers” and “purists” alike - were never the same again.

And God, who had never left, lived among them with faithfulness and hope, all of their days.

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If you catch a news-byte some evening that mentions Afghanistan or some outlying town in Iraq – you may catch sight of some faces of those who got left behind.

If you hear a report on Darfur in Sudan where massacres continue daily – you will hear the voices of those who have been left behind.

If you visit a Narcotics Anonymous meeting or an AA or an Al-Anon meeting – you will meet some of the people who've been left behind.

If you hang out at the Samaritan Center with Will Peterson or serve dinner with Almeda and others on Tuesday nights to the homeless of Simi Valley who, according to the City Council, don't exist – you'll meet some of the people who have been left behind.

If you look over the counter at Baja Fresh or the Jack-in-the-box drive-through as you order your food – you will meet – face-to-face – some of those who have been left behind.

And if you stop to hear their stories – or to help in some way – don't expect a hero's welcome or gratitude for the hope or gift you offer.

They know that most of us have no clue what they've been through.

And they know that most of us have some attitude adjustments to make before we can get the story straight.

Cheryl Stewart and I will be asking members of N.A. to come to worship and introduce themselves to you, tell their stories, give us some clues. Our hope is that you will return the courtesy, visit them here on a Wednesday night – build relationships.

Virginia Christie, recently liberated from the Building Project, has some profound ideas about a literacy and ESL program that would connect Non-English speaking people in this area with church members who are open to stories and relationships.

Almeda Babcock has designed a kitchen that could feed the entire community – not just once a month but once a week or more. It depends on the commitment of members and friends of this church to developing lifelong relationships with people who do NOT need RESCUE but who DO need partners to assist with important life decisions.

The Youth Group, bless their hormonal hearts, feels alienated – for real and misinterpreted reasons. In the midst of a terrifying world they are formulating their sense of meaning and self-empowerment. Don't let them get left behind. We're the adults in the relationship. Let's help each other to move

beyond self-defense to listening. Let's get these kids out of their club closet on the hill (figuratively, not literally) and enfold them into unconditional love and acceptance.

While I'm here, let me help. While you're here, let's get started. Remember that God, our main Player, is waiting breathlessly in the wings for the New Story to begin.

## **SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

**September 19, 2004**

**10:00 a.m.**

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

**The New Century Hymnal** or "Hymnal" has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

**The Chapel Songbook** or "CSB" is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

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*When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.*

### **FOR OUR REFLECTION**

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### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

**Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering**

**Welcome and Perspective on the Day**

*Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.*

### **Musical Call to Worship**

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

**“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” Let us worship God, our Eternal Light.**

+ **Opening Hymn**

*Bring Many Names*

Hymnal # 11

+ **Opening Prayer** (unison)

**God, plunge me deep into a sense of sadness  
at the pain of my sisters and brothers  
inflicted by war, prejudice, injustice, indifference,  
that I may learn again to cry as a child  
until my tears baptize me into a person who touches with care  
those I now touch in prayer:  
victims of violence, of greed, of addictions;  
prisoners in ghettos, in old age, in sexism;  
people with broken bodies,  
with broken hearts, with broken lives,  
whom I remember now in silence before you  
because I have too often forgotten them  
in the shuffle of my fretful busy-ness.  
God, plunge me deep into mindfulness  
of the pain of my sisters and brothers  
so that I might remember and weep and heal.**

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

**Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.**

**Time for Silent Reflection** (you may be seated)

**One:** My soul waits in silence.

**All:** God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

**Silent Reflection**

**The Assurance of Good News** (unison)

**God is mindful of our pain and our joy. God never forgets us.**

**Sung Response** “Hallelujah... God be praised!” (CSB #5 Refrain)

## **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

**Just Peace Reflection**

**Conversation with Our Children**

