

An Uneasy Faith
Sunday September 12, 2010

Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-10

Kathleen Kline Chesson

First Christian Church, Falls Church VA

Very often in the gospels, when there is conflict, Jesus' teaching, his story telling, his actions are directed at helping people see things differently, to model or lead them to another way. For that example I am glad as I needed his wise counsel to help me interpret both the scriptures and the world events that surrounded us this week.

To begin with, the week's scriptures, right from the lectionary, are really quite challenging. They cry out for interpretation, for God is presented in such varying images and through such differing lenses ~ one might wonder if God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

At the same time, this was not a week for living in a bubble. Few of us could escape the impact of world events. So much has happened this week that screams for understanding. Where to begin?

Last Monday was Labor Day—and what a challenge it is to support and glorify the American worker when almost 10% of us are unemployed, with many more people discouraged and no longer looking.

Hurricane Earl dropped a lot of water on the east coast, but didn't do the damage most feared. But then tropical storm Hermine caused massive flooding and tornadoes in Texas while Tropical Storm Igor out in the Atlantic seems likely to reach hurricane force in the next few days. There's another storm behind Igor, and a tropical storm may be evolving in the Caribbean—that would be named Julia.

So much for the weather. How about the horrible forest fire out near Boulder Colorado, which has already claimed 170 houses and is not yet under control? I called my brother, Logan, who used to live on the edge of four mile canyon where the fires started, and where I lived with his family for two years. He says the air everywhere is thick with smoke – but that his current home is on the safe edge of the fires wrath. Or the natural gas explosion in San Bruno CA adjacent to the San Francisco Airport that claimed at least four lives and more than 40 houses last Thursday night? It could sound like the apocalypse is upon us.

Yesterday was 9/11. Everyone here who is at least a teen-ager remembers where he or she was on that horrible day nine years ago when America was attacked. We are still struggling with the aftermath of that. It sent us into war and caused us to change the way we do things—from getting on airplanes to crossing America's borders. Yesterday, there were moving memorial tributes to those lost in New York, the Pentagon, and the farmlands of Pennsylvania.

The aftermath of 9/11 has also had the tragic effect of causing some Americans to express an extraordinary intolerance towards Muslims. American citizens who may have lost loved ones on 9/11, and who chose to follow the peaceful teachings of Islam, are finding themselves under attack. It's gone beyond the question of whether to locate a new mosque near Ground Zero in New York—I say "new" because there's already another mosque in that neighborhood which has never generated any controversy. This past week, the question was whether a pastor of a small church in Florida with about 40 or so members would go ahead with an announced plan to burn some Korans, the holy book of the Islamic faith. What was he thinking? Could he be a Christian and do this? And, what were America's news organizations thinking when they put this—pardon my opinion here—ignorant and intolerant pastor on television. What were they thinking when they gave him a podium to peddle his unique brand of hate, and claiming it was God who put it to him. Finally, our Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called him to explain how his actions might put American servicemen at risk. Surely Secretary Gates has more important things to do...and yet he also has a duty to protect our military. Pastor Jones, who television helped create, was posing a risk that could not be ignored.

At least this misguided pastor has held off for now, but his example has inspired a bunch of copycats. Men who claim to be Christian ministers in Kansas, Tennessee, and elsewhere now say that they will burn Korans. Christian extremists, like the Muslim extremists they love to hate. It was heartening to see every serious politician and most religious leaders I'm aware of condemn this kind of action... Imam Johari Abduli-Malik down the street at Dar Al-Hijrah said he felt gratified that it wasn't just Muslims who stood up to condemn the hate speech of Pastor Jones.

How ironic, then, that this craziness would occur at the end of the holy season of Ramadan, the month-long period when all Muslims go through a period of spiritual and physical purification, fasting from food and water from sun up to sun down daily for a month.

How ironic that this craziness would occur when the heads of Israel and Palestine are talking face to face **for the first time** about the possibilities of peace in the Middle East.

How ironic that this craziness would occur at the time of the Jewish New Year, those ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Jews worldwide atone for their sins and start fresh for the year ahead.

So, with all that going on around us, it is timely and fitting to reflect on today's difficult scriptures. They are as complicated and confusing and challenging and even counter-intuitive as our world today.

Upon a first listen they sound pretty simple and straightforward. In Jeremiah we hear that God is grieved by what is happened in the world, a world conceived, created and envisioned by Love; a world gone astray and suffering with misunderstand about who God is. This passage is a lament, a harsh call to repentance, a plea to the people to return. Daunting images, hardly comforting, but right now, these words seem eerily relevant. As a people we *have* gone astray. We *are* confused as to who God is. Some of us believe that God calls us to burn sacred books. Nowhere in the scriptures can I find that directive.

What might God's anger make us to do that we are not doing? For me, it rather drives me to my knees. While I may not personally feel complicit in the Christian intolerance towards Muslims that has erupted of late, I am part of the world in which this intolerance thrives. Jeremiah presents us with an opportunity for repentance, for remembering and for changing ourselves.

But it gets better. The author of First Timothy presents a far more merciful and forgiving deity; a God that will save us, despite our bad behavior. The writer glows with gratitude as he recounts how God saved this former "blasphemer, persecutor, and man of violence" (1 Timothy 1: 13) so that he could become an example to others and lead them to faith. I, for one, understand that as I fall on my knees, and then stand to serve, I will receive mercy. Not only is God merciful, we are told, but patient with our slowness to understand and change.

Luke's God, in the image of the Good Shepherd, is not only merciful, patient, and forgiving, but goes a step further. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them (or should I say us) and ultimately dances with joy over "over the one sinner who repents." (Luke 15: 10). The Good Shepherd is the image most of us would prefer to identify with – at least in theory. We desire a God who will come to us when

we are absolutely unable to find Him ourselves. I, for one, prefer a dancing God over an angry God... don't you?

The problem is... which God do we take home with us today? In the midst of a swirling and complicated world, do we prefer wrath, judgment, mercy, or grace?

Ultimately, of course, it is not about what God we would prefer to follow, or even choose. The truth is that there are so many times we, *as a people*, behave badly, stupidly, that Jeremiah's harsh insight is the only thing that will turn us and save us. He forces us to look where we don't want to look.

There are times when we, *as individuals*, do such stupid and foolish things, acting in ignorance and hurting God's people— that God's mercy and patience is the only thing that can turn us and save us.

And there are times when we are so lost and feel so forgotten that we simply do not have the strength to turn at all. Like a lost sheep that does not know how to even begin to find its way home...so it lays down and cannot even try. That's what they do. Jesus said that when we are *that* lost, our God will search us out and we must keep the faith.

Can our world heed these calls of God? The answers are laid out in a perfect progression for us through the scriptures. And we need all of them.

But then, perhaps the message is much simpler than it appears. Sometimes, there is no answer other than to place ourselves in the hands of God; endeavor to serve our neighbors with grace and honesty; and to seek eternal guidance in how best to follow in the footsteps of the One called Jesus. If we do so, we are indeed saved through *whatever* means God can get to us. And there is rejoicing and dancing among the angels of heaven...making each one of us an example to those who would come to believe.

The world indeed is crazy. Thank God our Lord is not. Amen.