

Written by guest writer, Nelson Cowan, Ph.D. Liturgical Studies: Boston
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Week 1 | SEASON OF CREATION WORSHIP SERIES

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All Month Season of Creation Worship Series

September 2 Labor Day (USA)-- <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-service-of-holy-communion-for-labor-day>

September 14 Holy Cross Day (<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=336>)

September 15-

October 15 [Hispanic Heritage Month \(USA\)](#)

September 29 Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

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All Month October Worship Series: “Dry Places” (in development)

October 6 [World Communion Sunday](#)

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

Week 1: [Jeremiah 2:4-13](#)

For the month of September, this worship series will focus thematically on the Lectionary readings from Jeremiah. In the life of the local church, September can be a hectic month: many parishioners are squeezing in their last vacation around Labor Day; while at the same time, many church choirs are resuming their standard schedule, and Christian Education usually has some

kind of kick-off (i.e. “Rally Day”). This collection of readings from the book of Jeremiah will be certain to challenge us as we to re-assimilate to the rhythm of a more robust church activity life.

The overarching narrative we see in the Jeremiah readings is a movement from humanity’s waywardness (Weeks 1 through 3), to repentance (Week 4), to renewal (Week 5). If confession is not a regular practice in your congregation, consider incorporating it each week throughout the series. To showcase the diversity of practices that relate to confession, consider varying the approaches, styles, and themes of confession each week.

As an example for Week 1 (this could be a joint activity for children and adults), purchase or make something that resembles a small, broken cistern or container. As a corporate act of confession, invite folks forward to pour water into the broken cistern. (You might want to situate the “cistern” in a larger bowl so that water does not go everywhere.) By pouring water into the broken cistern, we are confessing that we often forsake God’s living water, instead choosing to dig out cisterns for ourselves that cannot hold water (cf. Jeremiah 4:13). While we may be confessing personal sins, the ritual act of coming forward demonstrates that this, too, is a communal effort. Place this movement near the beginning of the service, following it with an assurance of pardon and the passing of the peace.

Additional Resources for this Service

- <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/worship-resources-for-promotion-sunday-and-rally-day>
- <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-confession-of-sin-based-on-jeremiah-2>

Author: **Victoria Rebeck**

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Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost (Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time), September 1, 2019

Caring for Creation

[Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

Key phrases: Plentiful, food, fountain of living water, dry cisterns

You may have home gardeners in your congregation. Often, their harvests produce a bounty greater than they can use themselves, so they offer their friends and anyone they encounter delicious and fresh tomatoes, zucchini, beans, and lettuce. They share with us what we need to nourish our bodies.

God is a gardener, too. Genesis 1 tells us that when God created the world, the world was like a garden that produced everything needed for life. God says, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” (vv. 29–30). Reinforcing this image, Psalm 81:16 speaks for God in saying, “I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.” Even in the wilderness, God made daily bread available to all – manna that could not be hoarded and could only be shared.

Abuse of nature, which is often committed in pursuit of short-term personal profit rather than the common good, treats what God has called good as if it were worthless. Our worship of the almighty dollar and self-importance exploits the poor and vulnerable and results in damage to God’s good and irreplaceable creation. When we pursue those things and actions that hurt others, we have turned from the Creator to false gods. Is there healing for the damage we’ve done?

The texts this month address the church as a group and as individuals.

Scholars generally date the oracles of Jeremiah to the end of the 600s B.C. to the first years of the Babylonian Captivity. King Josiah of Judea was, in the later years of the seventh century B.C., promoting a reform movement to eradicate the Assyrian cultural and religious practices that had crept into and corrupted Judaism. Today’s passage (Jer. 2:4-13) suggests to us that to care for creation is also to care for the community of God’s people (as well as those outside the community). Jeremiah draws the people’s attention back to their exodus from slavery in Egypt to salvation, a defining event to which the Scriptures frequently refer. In those days, God’s daily provision of manna sustained the people as they journeyed to the Promised Land, “a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.” Years after arriving, “you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination” (v. 2:7). “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit,” God says through Jeremiah. Though the tradition recalled God’s love and care for God’s people, the people were now attracted to the practices introduced by the Assyrian overlords. God’s people devalued the gift of God’s liberation and protection when they “went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves” (2:5). “What wrong did your ancestors find in me?” God asks through the prophet. When we turn from God, we snub the Creator and the blessing.

Earlier in the book, the prophet describes how the people turned 180 degrees from God’s way. They “take over the goods of others” (v. 5:26); “they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy” (v. 5:28). What humans tend to value—status, power, money—is worthless in the realm of God. Perhaps the people wanted to fit in with the invading culture and its pagan religion, or had their heads turned by something new, or allowed themselves to be tempted by selfishness and greed; we can only speculate. Yahweh had demonstrated to the people and their ancestors the divine care for the good of the whole nation, but any promises of the Assyrian gods were worthless. They added nothing to God’s garden of abundance for all. Rather than enjoy God’s “fountain of living water” (v. 13), the people dug their own cisterns for themselves, which eventually cracked and ran dry. We might say that the pursuit of the false just does not “hold water.”

We can observe the same factors at work today in terms of our turning our backs on God’s good creation in favor of acquisitiveness and short-term gain. Deforestation is creating an environmental calamity. “[T]he mass destruction of trees—deforestation—continues, sacrificing the long-term benefits of standing trees for short-term gain” for such purposes as expansion of grazing land or construction of new housing developments, reports Christina Nunez in *National Geographic* (“Climate 101: Deforestation,” Feb. 9, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/deforestation/>). In addition to contributing to global warming and its attendant problems, the reduction in the number of trees causes

drought. “Trees actually do two processes. They drill water into the ground. They funnel water into underground aquifers where it is stored to supply rivers during drought,” Nick Nuttal, spokesman for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), told *The New Humanitarian* (“Deforestation Exacerbates Droughts, Floods,” Nov. 10, 2016, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2006/11/10>). “They also hold soil. Where there are no trees, the soil is washed away into rivers causing siltation into the oceans, choking coral reefs. . . . The link between deforestation and drought is very significant,” he adds. It is the poor who are most harmed by environmental abuse. Even today, when we exploit God’s good creation, we find that our cisterns are drying up and cracking.

Throughout the Scriptures, we are taught that the way of God is to care for the outcast, the foreigner, the powerless, the poor, and the neglected. To stray from these priorities is to follow false gods. In the Luke passage (vv. 14:1, 7-14), Jesus tells a parable that illustrates the folly of turning from God to false gods. As a dinner guest at the home of a Pharisee, Jesus uses as an object lesson the behavior that he observes among the guests. They were jockeying for prime positions at the dining table to advertise their high status. In other words, they were pursuing the false god of superiority. When we favor guests who are powerful, self-important, and self-absorbed, we pay obeisance to the god of status, hoping that it can save us from our personal insecurity. In so doing, we turn down the reliable lovingkindness and salvation of the true God.

The host in Jesus’ parable is like God, inviting all to the table to enjoy together the abundant fruits of God’s creation. God as host invites the poor and marginalized as honored guests. The powerful have an opportunity to assume the seats usually left for those of lower status and thereby show respect to them. This is quite a different ethic than gorging oneself for immediate pleasure, wasting the goodness of God’s garden, and leaving little for those who don’t have the status to sit nearest the host.

Remaining with God and caring for the good of the community gives us access to a well-watered garden that sustains our souls and bodies. When we chase after other gods, disaster results. This week’s texts are both instructive and foreboding.

Questions for reflection:

In what ways have you observed poor “table manners” (treatment of others) practiced by the church and its people?

In what situations have your church’s people found “living water”—and how do they share it?

What are some “false gods” that tempt your church to stray from commitment to the Way of the gospel?

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Week 2 | SEASON OF CREATION WORSHIP SERIES

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

[Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

This is the second week of the series; the principal image from the Jeremiah passage is God, the potter. In terms of visuals, this is an excellent time to highlight the work of potters who may be in your congregation. If there are no potters in your congregation, consider purchasing pottery from local artisans to support your community.

Jeremiah's chief concern here is the power and agency of God. Like a potter, God may decide that the clay is not cooperating with the plan and/or design, and the potter may choose to start over again. The scripture thus functions as a prophetic warning to all who might forsake the potter.

How often do we forget our connection to God, the potter? Sometimes we need a reminder that we are intimately linked to God's creative work in the world. Psalm 139:14 offers a powerful declaration of our indebtedness to the potter: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Consider highlighting this affirmation as a response to the Word.

Invite the members of your congregation into an intentional moment of affirming one another's existence as the potter's workmanship. This ritual act will work best if you have a substance that resembles clay (could be actual red clay or dirt mixed with oil). Similar to how churches impose ashes for Ash Wednesday, your church could have an imposition of "clay." Depending on the size of your congregation, you may choose to have people come forward to receive the clay, or they could go to various stations and offer the clay to one another. Using the clay, one person would make the sign of the cross on the other's hand, while saying "You are fearfully and wonderfully made." Folks could then return to their seats to sit, sing, reflect, pray.

Songs such as "Change My Heart, O God" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2152) or "Spirit of the Living God" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 393), would be thematically suitable to sing during or immediately following this ritual moment.

Author: **Victoria Rebeck**

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Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time), September 8, 2019

Life and Death in Creation

[Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33](#)

Key words and phrases: potter, clay, count the cost

This is going to be one of those challenging weeks for preaching. Both the Jeremiah and the Luke passages have "hard sayings"—teachings that seem violent, vengeful, overly demanding, and out of character for a loving God.

Instead of using this week as an opportunity to take a lectionary break, we encourage you to wrestle with these texts. God's people frequently need to be called back to God's path. Our task is to show our people

how we've been tempted down other paths and how we can get back on the Way (Acts 9:2 et al.). We also can remind them that following God was never going to be a leisure-time activity that we take up at our convenience.

In last Sunday's Jeremiah passage, God put the people on notice. They had been wooed away by Assyrian gods. They had abandoned the law, which requires concern for the vulnerable. They had forgotten how God had carried them from slavery through the desert and ultimately to their own land—all the while making sure they were fed and safe.

This week, Jeremiah resorts to an overt warning. He tells the people about God's leading him to visit a potter. The vessel the potter was attempting to create got spoiled, so the potter reworked it into another vessel, "as it seemed good to him" (v. 18:4).

A potter uses her hands carefully and sensitively. It's a delicate matter to shape a clay pot on a wheel. This is truly the work of an artist. A slight change in pressure—or a change of mind—can result in the pot becoming ruined. Nonetheless, the potter can still turn the clay into something else.

"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" God tells Jeremiah. "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it" (vv. 6-8). The image of the potter is apt, for God is also a creator. Like potters in particular, creators (and the Creator) can destroy what they have made and turn the material into something better.

This sounds like one of those "smiting" passages that lead many Christians to adopt the heresy of Marcionism, saying that they "don't believe in the violent God of the Old Testament." Yes, God is pretty severe in this book. Do we not, however, get angry when we learn of children being abused, the elderly being neglected, or the vile rhetoric of emboldened racist groups? I hope that we the faithful are angry about the damage being done to God's good creation. Earlier in Jeremiah, we learn that God is angry about similar evils: the greed of religious leaders; false claims about peace in the land; oppression of strangers in the land, orphans, and widows; murder; lies; and the abandonment of the God who saved them in order to follow false gods who offer them nothing of real value. We know these evils still exist today, and I cannot imagine that God is any more accepting of them than we are.

Even when we acknowledge God's distressing rage and threats of violence in this book, the threats are always accompanied by the offer of a second chance. Twice in this short passage (in vv. 8 and 11), God says the people still have a chance to avoid punishment if they turn from their evil ways toward God's ways of compassion and justice. This God may be angry, but this God also repeatedly offers the people chances to repent and return.

"What we do matters to God, and God's challenge of our particular sins can seem destructive, but God's ultimate goal is creation and healing, not destruction and devastation," says Bruce Epperly. He continues,

Our consumerism and anthropocentrism have led to forest fires and floods, symptoms of global climate change. Our greed has led to economic inequality. Our racism has led to 'two Americas' and 'dog whistle' politics that polarize rather than unite and render any forward movement an impossibility in the halls of Congress. . . . God wants us to see the error of our ways, and while the celestial surgeon's antidote may appear harsh, as we are forced to be downwardly mobile, it is aimed at the healing of creation and the transformation of the human heart from greed and alienation to generosity and compassion ("The Adventurous Lectionary,"

Aug. 26, 2016, *patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2016/08/the-adventurous-lectionary-september-4-2016-pentecost-16/>).

Jeremiah was telling the people to recommit to their covenant with Yahweh and abandon their attempts at a Yahweh-Baal hybrid religion. In today's Luke passage, Jesus is no less demanding and no less harsh. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," Jesus says in Luke 14:26-27, and "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (v. 33). Yikes. This is one of those passages that challenge the idea of literal translation.

Even if this is to be considered hyperbole, as suggested by the *New Oxford Annotated Bible—New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press, 2010, 1859), it is still in the canon, and we still have to grapple with it. Of course, we should still practice the commandment to honor our parents. At the same time, we need the reminder that there is no Sunday-and-Wednesday only about following Jesus. Even serving on a church committee is not enough, for most members, to demonstrate their discipleship. It requires a life commitment.

Of course, this does not necessitate everyone's becoming a clergyperson. The world needs more laypeople who are committed to continual growth and service than it needs clergy. Laypeople can be in more workplaces, community organizations, and neighborhood sites than many clergy. These are the places to find people in need of compassion and a relationship with the divine, and who seek ways to be a force for peace and justice. The practices of kindness and concern for the marginalized, as well as the honest, personal stories of faith, are far more influential than those of the "professional Christians."

Counting the cost also entails sacrifice. What must we give up to commit more to God? What are those false gods we pursue that are taking time and resources (and personal opportunities for spiritual growth) from our life in the God of resurrection and new life?

"Discipleship is not just one more hobby or extra-curricular activity," David Schasa Jacobsen says. "Would-be followers should count the cost, but realize that the cost is not the same as for the 5K-charity run or expanding the Sunday school wing. The cost must be counted, but is not of the same order. Discipleship has to do with the ultimate and not just the penultimate" (Commentary on Luke 14:25-33, *Preach This Week*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2958).

This week's readings do not provide warm fuzzies. However, they do urge us to make hard choices in order to grow as disciples, experience new life, and participate in building the realm of God.

Questions for reflection:

What needs to be reworked or even discontinued in your church so that something new and necessary can be created in its place?

In what ways could your church limit its internal support committees to the essential ones and establish more ways to support people in practicing faith in the community?

Who would you identify as the people most likely to adopt spiritual disciplines and ministries to the community—in the context of supportive, intentional groups? How might you invite them into deeper spiritual exploration and leadership in ministry with the neighbors?

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28](#)

As mentioned in the first week of planning notes, Weeks 1 through 3 of this series are focused on the aspects of humanity’s unfaithfulness that’s being “called out” by the prophet Jeremiah. This is the final week of that first movement, and it will lead to next week’s focus on repentance and the final week’s focus on God’s renewal. It is important to mention that even though there is a more *negative* and/or

dreary focus to the first few weeks of the series (at least in terms of the focus Scriptures), the entire tone of the service does not need to reflect that. Be sure to balance your services with praise and thanksgiving for God's faithfulness (even in the midst of our waywardness), especially as you highlight the introspective components.

If last week's focus was about a "warning," then this week's passage is a colorful example of how that warning could play out. Through Jeremiah as God's mouthpiece, God communicates images of devastation and desolation, which have ecological implications. If you have a "creation care team," "green team," or any other type of sustainability-oriented teams or members in the congregation, this would be a great time to feature them in aspects of worship leadership.

When we look at this Scripture passage ecologically, it is clear that our human waywardness/sinfulness has negative implications for the future of the natural world. Encourage the congregation to examine their practices (and growth areas) related to the stewardship of the earth's resources this week. Have them work toward incremental change.

Additional Resources

<https://www.umccreationcare.org/>

<http://www.webofcreation.org/Manuals/index.htm>

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Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time), September 15, 2019

Creating from Chaos

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10](#)

Key words and phrases: loss, chaos, creativity, hope

If you have lived in the United States for at least a dozen years, you've likely been affected—then and now—by the 2008 financial crisis. A complex web of factors brought it about, but many observers agree that a significant cause was the practice of many banks creating and selling trillions of dollars in mortgage-related securities. Some of these contained uncollectable debt. Timothy Geithner, who served as the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury from 2009-2013, commented, "Most financial crises are caused by a mix of stupidity and greed and recklessness and risk-taking and hope" ("Financial Crises Caused by 'Stupidity and Greed': Geithner," *Reuters*, April 25, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-economy-geithner/financial-crises-caused-by-stupidity-and-greed-geithner-idUSBRE83P01P20120426>).

Greed, recklessness, and selfishness drew the Judeans in Jeremiah's time to leave God and God's ways and pursue false gods instead. Abandoning the covenant to love God and care for neighbors, the people engaged in practices that broke down rather than built up the whole community.

Some chaos followed the bank failures of 2008, which affected many people. Defaults on mortgages increased, and the price of housing sank, leaving many people owing more on their property that they could recover if they sold it. Unemployment and underemployment rose. The recession prompted employment cutbacks at many companies. "Even if you didn't lose your job, there's a possibility that your hours were cut, or that you lost some benefits. Underemployment is, perhaps, a lesser problem than unemployment, but it's still a problem," said Ryan Guina on his website "Cash Money Life" ("The Great Recession—Causes and Effects of the 2008-2009 Financial Crisis," April 4, 2019, <https://cashmoneylife.com/economic-financial-crisis-2008-causes/>). Clearly, those who already lived on the edges of solvency were most affected.

Further, if you are United Methodist, you know that our denomination is in a time of uncertainty, which some have described as chaos. Many are searching for ways to return order to our church.

This month's journey through Jeremiah has crept gradually toward chaos, and this week, we've arrived. God, through the prophet, says: "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger" (vv. 4:23-26). Humans have been treating the natural world as if it were disposable rather than something good that only God can make. Without much trouble, we can discover how the earth is starting to look like the picture described here.

On September 1, we recalled how out of chaos came the creation of a fruitful garden. Now, as foretold, chaos returns. The land will become a desert; living water was given up for dry cisterns.

The life of the world, the church, and even individuals seems to move in a cycle of chaos to order to chaos to order. As we learned from the story of the potter last week, that can be a cycle of creation. What do we gain from chaos? What do we lose? What might it give us to help establish a new and more fruitful order?

Writer and teacher Parker Palmer offers wisdom on the personal experience of chaos that can apply to the communal experience. "The insight we receive on the inner journey is that chaos is the precondition to creativity: as every creation myth has it, life itself emerged from the void. Even what has been created needs to be returned to chaos from time to time so that it can be regenerated in more vital form" (*Let Your Life Speak*, Jossey-Bass, 2000, 89).

After the harsh rhetoric from Jesus that confronted us in last week's Luke passage, we hear more hopeful assurances this week. Here, Jesus tells a number of parables, including one about a lost coin. The woman in the story has 10 silver coins, but she loses one. She does not shrug it off, but searches the house thoroughly until she finds it. Jesus explains the parable: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10).

We must admit, we often neglect our baptismal promises to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin; to accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, and to confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord, in union with the Church that Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.

It can be frightening and feel humiliating to confess that we've broken our vows to God and God's people. Yet the ensuing chaos need not be the end of the world, so to speak. Despite loss, fear, and chaos that results from our selfishness, greed, and breaking of covenant, God is still looking for us. God still longs for our return.

Questions for reflection:

What forms of upheaval are your church, its neighborhood, or its worshipers facing?

In what ways have you observed your church, and yourself, reacting to turmoil?

Where have you seen creativity emerge from the ashes of chaos?

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Week 4 | SEASON OF CREATION WORSHIP SERIES

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All Month Season of Creation Worship Series

September 2 Labor Day (USA)-- <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-service-of-holy-communion-for-labor-day>

September 14 Holy Cross Day (<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=336>)

September 15-

October 15 [Hispanic Heritage Month \(USA\)](#)

September 29 Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

October

All Month October Worship Series: “Dry Places” (in development)

October 6 [World Communion Sunday](#)

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#)

When we hear the word “lament,” we often think of the Psalms. Yet this passage from Jeremiah is a clear-cut example of this genre. The preaching notes from this week will emphasize the repentant aspect of this passage, wherein the people of Israel are recognizing their sin and that God has seemingly abandoned

them. This notion of recognition that God is more distant than “usual” will be a helpful framing for the response to the Word.

Consider incorporating a writing exercise in your congregation. Provide small sheets of paper (such as an 8.5 x 11-inch piece of copy paper cut in half horizontally) and writing instruments. Following the sermon, allow some space for people to write their own laments. What is making people sad or upset? Where do people feel forsaken by God? Where could people use the healing balm of Gilead? Accompany this time with silence, or highlight some musicians who can play “There is a Balm in Gilead” as instrumental worship.

It will be important to set up this response as pastorally as possible. Many people do not feel “allowed” to lament to God, so it is best to explicitly name that this is a shared Jewish-Christian practice. Conclude the time of lament and reflection by emphasizing that God hears our laments, and by singing “There is a Balm in Gilead” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 375).

Additional Resources

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/black-history-month-there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>

Author: **Victoria Rebeck**

Rev. Victoria Rebeck is a deacon and member of the Minnesota Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. She has combined her theology and journalism background in appointments to The Christian Century magazine, United Methodist Publishing House, Minnesota Annual Conference, and the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Her ministry has focused on pointing the church to the world's needs for compassion and justice. She is a board member of Tennessee Justice for Our Neighbors, which provides quality legal assistance to immigrants, particularly those receiving lower incomes.

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time), September 22, 2019

Creation at Risk

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#)

Key words: mourn, hurt, fountain of tears, balm

I have relatives in a rural part of Ontario. When I was growing up, my family would visit them almost every year. For some reason, the tap water in the small town where my cousins lived looked murky and smelled terrible. As I child, I could not tolerate it, so I drank a lot of soda pop instead of water while we were there.

During one of these visits, my family took a short side trip to the little town of Komoka. At that time (probably the early 1970s), the town was known for its natural springs. We filled bottles with water that came right up out of rocks. With some trepidation, I took a small sip. Then I could not drink enough. It was clear, clean-tasting, and refreshing. I immediately felt better, probably due to proper hydration.

Water has healing and soothing properties. I have visited Hot Springs, Arkansas, and the Roman baths in the aptly named town of Bath, England. While Bath is now a World Heritage Site, and the Roman baths are essentially a museum (well worth visiting), the Arkansas city still has many bathing sites that use the water from the springs. While the health benefits of these baths are debated, the experience can be quite soothing. And soothing goes a long way toward healing.

There is a lot of suffering in the Jeremiah passage today. The people have realized that God was serious; if they made a choice to walk away from God, they would see what life was like without God. “Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: ‘Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?’” (v. 8:19).

Surely all of us have endured grief. We may have lost a loved one to death or a serious disagreement; undergone divorce or a painful breakup; or perhaps we received a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. We may have pursued our own self-interest and in the process hurt others. At times like this, we can wonder if we will ever feel happy again. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” (Gilead was known for medicinal herbs, so the people would have understood the reference.) Today, we might ask, Will I ever be healed of this heartache? Will our church ever recover from its conflict? Will God forgive us?

The United Methodist Book of Worship includes in its order of weekly worship a congregational prayer of confession. Some churches skip this, not wanting to impose more guilt on people who may already have been influenced to feel an excess of unnecessary guilt. It might be helpful to keep in mind that this is a corporate prayer that confesses where we as a church have fallen short. It also gives us a chance to remember our baptismal vows, acknowledge where we have failed to keep them, and then return to them and accept God’s forgiveness, which is always waiting for us if we are willing to return to the God who cares for us and blesses us to be a blessing.

A prayer of confession frequently used in United Methodist worship includes the acknowledgments that “we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.” It’s easy to see the connection to our baptismal vows, as well as echoes of the faithlessness of the Judeans to whom Jeremiah prophesied.

Some commentators suggest that the sorrow that Jeremiah expresses is felt by God as well. It is quite forlorn: “My joy is gone, my heart is sick” (v. 18); “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me” (v. 21). Even God can feel profound anguish. As dismaying as it has been to read about God’s anger and the destruction of creation, we learn here that God is tenderhearted as well.

As Terence Fretheim says: “God is not an executioner who can walk away from the judgment exacted, thinking: ‘I only did my duty.’ Nor is there any satisfaction, let alone celebration, that justice has now been done. . . . For God to mourn with those who mourn is to enter their situation; and where God is at work, mourning is not the end” (*The Suffering of God*, Fortress, 1984; 136).

Admitting when we are wrong, whether to God, family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors, can be difficult. And we sometimes think “repent” means to punish ourselves with self-loathing. What it requires is a willingness to be honest and acknowledge the truth. This is a part of reclaiming our integrity. The repentance that God seeks is that we “turn around”—turn from our selfish, hurtful ways, toward God, who loves and nourishes us like a mother.

Now the water of life that was mentioned in Jeremiah 2 has become bitter tears. “O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my

poor people!” (v. 9:1). There is something soothing about the water of these tears. Knowing God cries for us and with us reminds us that we are not alone; we may dare to hope for healing.

While every problem may not be solved or fixed, we are not abandoned. What the future may look like for us, we do not know. But we know that if we turn to God, God will embrace us. What we have with God is a relationship, not a transaction.

Questions for reflection:

When has your church experienced sorrow or regret?

How have your church people expressed sorrow? Are there practices that could help them express sorrow, anger, or joy in healthy ways?

Steps eight and nine of Alcoholics Anonymous entail making a list of all people we have harmed and make amends to them all, wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. How might “making amends” be part of conflict resolution among your church people?

Written by guest writer, Nelson Cowan, Ph.D. Liturgical Studies: Boston University School of Theology

Week 5 | SEASON OF CREATION WORSHIP SERIES

NRSV texts, artwork and [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers](#) for this service are available at the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library \(https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=281\)](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=281).
Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).
Lectioinaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#)

This is the fifth and final week of the worship series. This week focuses on the renewal of things to come. Jeremiah 32:15 declares, “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” The

waywardness that led to the lament and repentance of the Israelites is now leading to the hope of a new future in God.

As a response to the Word, encourage the congregation to seek renewal for themselves, for their communities, for their church, and/or for their world. For materials, you will need a bowl of water (or . . . if you have a fully-functioning duplicate of your “cracked cistern” from Week 1—meaning, it holds water—then use that). You will also need dissolvable strips of paper. Communicate that the water symbolizes the “living water” (again, reinforcing Week 1) we are craving. Encourage folks to write down something, or multiple things, that are in need of renewal. Invite them to come forward and to place their hopes for renewal (the paper strips) into the water as a sign that they are putting their hope for renewal in God, the Living Water. This ritual moment can be accompanied with music, or it may be done in silence.

If your congregation offers a children’s moment earlier in the service, you can easily modify this activity for the children.

Additional Resources

<https://www.cokesbury.com/121000303899-Walk-with-Jesus-Water-Dissolving-Paper--25-Pack->

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Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time), September 29, 2019

Creation Renewed

[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; Luke 16:19-31](#)

Key words: hope, vineyards, houses, land, redemption, salvation

After a rocky month with Jeremiah, we have finally come to a hopeful moment. God tells Jeremiah to buy some property from a relative. The prophet does it all legally, with witnesses and a sealed deed put in a jar for safekeeping. He buys it through “right of redemption”: the owner sells it to a relative, so it stays in the family.

Two weeks ago, Jeremiah brought us to the middle of a disaster: the earth was devoid of plants and animals; the sky was dark; quakes shook the earth; cities lay in ruins; and once-fruitful land had become a desert. Now God is saying that “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” Renewal of earth and community is coming, as God also promises in the immediately preceding chapter. The people left God and ignored God’s warnings and disregarded reminders that they could still return. Once they experienced the desolation of life outside the covenant, they finally repented. Though the people took a long time to do so, God in eternal love accepts them back and pledges the renewal of their lives and the reestablishment of the covenant between them.

In the church, we are in the midst of Ordinary Time. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost have prepared us to live as disciples in the workaday world. What tempted the people of Judah tempts us too. We get bored, distracted, and more interested in our own comfort than the demanding work of loving God and neighbor. (This sounds simple, but we know it is not!)

Now we are getting ourselves back to the garden, “a plentiful land” where we can “eat its fruits and its good things” (v. 2:7). We are broken and scarred for our experience, yet also remade by the potter-God who broke down the clay in order to refashion it into a pot “as it seemed good to him” (v. 18:4). Being led back to the land God promised, we are going home.

In addition to welcoming the faithful, God is also renewing the whole earth. This balm of God is greater than what one would find in Gilead. This balm heals the community of the faithful as well as the rest of creation.

The psalm for the day reinforces this reason for hope. Speaking for God, the psalmist says, “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation” (vv. 91:14-16).

A new start requires a response. Just as God recommits to the covenantal promise to care for the people, the people can recommit to keeping the law, which requires caring for others, particularly the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. We adopt the posture of humbleness, know we have the same worth, no more or less, than anyone else; that we are woven into the same fabric as the community and the rest of creation.

Bruce Epperly suggests that Desmond Tutu’s ubuntu theology describes well this interconnectedness.

Ubuntu reflects the grace of interdependence in which we recognize that our lives are completely dependent on others: institutional structures, the accidents of birth, family of origin, national origin, the hard work of others, including forgotten and impoverished people, the love of parents, grandparents, and teachers, and the gentle—yet persistent—providence of God (Bruce Epperly, “The Adventurous Lectionary,” *patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2016/09/the-adventurous-lectionary-nineteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-september-25-2016/>).

Experiences of recklessness, darkness, and rebirth still happen in our day, to our churches, towns, and individuals. My friend Richard was driving home late one night after a raucous party where he had too much to drink. He accidentally drove into a pedestrian, who died of her injuries. It was a horrible time. I went to court when his sentence was read. The mother of the victim had a time to speak, and she said, “I forgive him.” I was floored. Richard was imprisoned for a time, and the experience was terrifying. He knew, however, that he still had a second chance and vowed to change his ways. A church prison ministry provided him spiritual support, and when he was released, he was baptized. His life changed forever. He had turned from responsible living and ended up in a dry and hostile place, but through the help of a caring church, his life was renewed and he committed to a life of spiritual growth, self-care, and responsibility toward others. This is a dramatic story. Have you seen this pattern in your neighborhood, church, or parishioners—perhaps in less dramatic ways, but still significant?

The Luke passage for the day also ties back to the one we read on September 1. We find ourselves back at a dining table, and a rich man and a poor man are also featured. Once again, we must ask, who is at the table? Who is kept away?

Jesus tells of a rich man who feasted sumptuously every day. Just outside his home, at the gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus, who was covered with sores. He hoped for some scraps from the rich man's overly bountiful table, but apparently none was offered.

Eventually the two men die. Lazarus is carried away by angels to Abraham's side, a place of honor. The unnamed rich man, however, is buried and ends up in Hades, which was imagined to be a place underground where all the dead go. In Jesus' story, he is being "tormented" in a hot place of flames, presumably for his failure to be compassionate when he walked the earth. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool the rich man's tongue. In this place of destruction and heat, he longed for something like the living water mentioned in September 1's readings.

Abraham tells the rich man that this is impossible. The man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, to warn them about what the future held if they did not change their ways. (Apparently, he still had not changed his perspective much; he still considered Lazarus to be a lowly servant.) Abraham tells the rich man that Moses and the prophets have already delivered this warning. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead," Abraham said (a statement seeming to foreshadow Jesus' resurrection).

This makes me think of Charles Dickens's story *A Christmas Carol*. However, in this case, no spirit returns from the dead to warn the rich man who has no compassion. The man and his brothers had plenty of warning already.

I would be careful not to use this story to suggest that God does not allow repentance; this would contradict the Jeremiah story. It has the same message as the parable of the dinner guests who pushed their way to the favored seats. Jesus leads us to rethink who is "important" and whom we should honor (and they will not likely be those whom the world honors).

In this ordinary time, we do well to take stock. Are we fulfilling our side of the baptismal covenant? Are we secure enough in God's love that we readily give preferential treatment to the overlooked and underappreciated? How can we as individuals and as a church "show we are Christians by our love"—not just for one another but for our neighbors as well? If you are preaching to a congregation you have served for a while, you can point out opportunities the church has to serve the community, particularly those who get the least amount of attention. Further, your people probably have some good ideas about that from their workplaces, recreational activities, schools, and other locations in which they interact with others.

Questions for reflection:

When has your congregation experienced some kind of renewal, even if in a small way?

Whom do your church members treat with deference, and why?

Does someone in your congregation participate in a social-service activity that other members can support in some way?