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The Prophet Jeremiah
VI. When the Heat Comes
Jeremiah 17:5-8

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“When the heat comes,” the Lord God says through His prophet Jeremiah – *“when the heat comes.”* Well, the heat has certainly arrived in the upstate! But, of course, the reference is symbolic, poetic – not literal. *“When the heat comes”* – meaning when bad things happen. Meaning when life gets rough and the going gets tough. Stretches of pain, periods of illness, seasons of sadness, times of loss. Personal, professional, relational upheavals – just those days when life seems like an uphill slog, if not a downward spiral. When the heat comes. I suspect we can all call to mind what those times have been like in our lives. Some of us may well be going through such a time right now.

“When the heat comes.” And notice the Lord God says “when,” not “if.” “When” the heat comes, meaning that it will come into all our lives at some point and in some way. That no matter our precautions and protections – the height of the walls we have built to guard us, the depth of the moats we have dug to defend us – still such times and seasons will come into our lives. Jesus said as much when He told us, in His Sermon on the Mount, that God allows the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust alike¹ – and despite the rain image being the very opposite of the heat and drought image in Jeremiah, we get the point. When the rain falls, when the heat comes – the point is that to be human is to have to weather the “weather” of life.

But more to the point – the point God is trying to get across to us this morning – more to the point, what God says through His prophet is that when the heat comes, only two things matter. One is into what soil we have sunk our roots; and two, how deeply our roots have grown. When the heat comes, God tells us, *“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.”* If what we are counting on to get us through the seasons of heat is something man-made – money, for example; or, more broadly, anything that is of this world and not of God – status, success, power, our life coach, our prescription medicines, our own inner resources – if that, or anything else like that, is what we are counting on to get us through, then we are in trouble. If we have sunk our roots into the wrong turf then we will find ourselves blasted by the heat – life become a veritable desert, and we unable to withstand the drought:

*Cursed is the man who trusts in man
and makes flesh his strength,
whose heart turns away from the Lord.
He is like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see any good come.*

*He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.*

When the heat comes, if it is anything other than the Lord God that we are trusting in to get us through, then we will end up as nothing more than tumblin' tumbleweeds in a desert land.

As a pastor, I've seen it. Back in the good old days when I first began my work as a pastor, it was common for people who had no real interest in religion still to want a pastor to do a funeral when a loved one died. So every funeral director had a list of pastors to call on when such requests came in. It doesn't happen as often these days, but I can remember many years ago a family that had lost their 22-year-old son in a motorcycle accident. They were loosely associated with the church I was serving at the time – something like a third cousin, twice removed on his mother's side had once come to a Christmas Eve service there. So I got the call from the funeral director, and agreed to conduct a graveside service for them.

And I remember it so well – it made a deep impression on me, because it was my first time experiencing exactly what Jeremiah is describing. I proclaimed to them the promises of Jesus in the face of death – but because they had never bothered to put their trust in those promises, they simply couldn't hear them, couldn't be consoled by them. Their grief was so hopeless and helpless and loud that, as I read those promises, I felt like I was a man flapping his lips in a hurricane. They simply couldn't hear those promises, couldn't receive them, couldn't rest in them. Their pain – so great, so raw, so overwhelming – simply went untouched by God's comfort. Tumblin' tumbleweeds of sorrow in a desert place without hope. When the heat comes, *"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord"* – because they have bet their lives, rooted their lives in the wrong things, in the wrong places, in the wrong soil.

But, says God through His prophet, when the heat comes, *"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord."*

*He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.*

If it is the Lord we are counting on, trusting in – then, when the heat comes, we will be able not just to stand up and take it, but to stay growing and green all through it, and even continue to bear fruit in the midst of those days. Deeply rooted, firmly embedded in the soil of God's love, God's Word, God's grace, God's power, God's peace – we not only survive the season of drought, but it becomes in us a season of growth. *"Like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes . . ."*

As a pastor, I've seen that too – and often – in the lives of those rooted deeply in their Maker, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This is not my story – but it could be, because I have seen it so

often in the lives of those it is my privilege to serve in this church, as in my previous churches. It is a story about a couple named Linda and John. Their pastor describes them as the sort of people who just seem to have a special radiance emanating from their hearts. He says their faces seem always to have that shiny glow that people get when they've fallen asleep too close to a fire in the fireplace. And their pastor says this is because John and Linda have spent a long time basking before the flame of God's love for them and for this world. And they live their lives with their arms flung wide open, both to welcome others into their hospitality and also to offer up whatever is needed to be of service to others. At a church event a while back, says the pastor, someone had videoed John without his knowing it. The look on John's face was almost childlike – that radiance, that openness, that deep inner joy and peace. He's wearing a laughing smile, eyes twinkling – a look of utter contentment, pure wonder, wanting nothing and grateful for everything.

What no one would ever guess, looking at him, is that John was once a very angry man – his anger wild and uncontrolled like a terrible storm. Until the day he met the Lord who stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee – and who stilled John's raging heart with peace. And what no one would ever guess looking at John and Linda together is that Linda has cancer, and is beginning to show also the early signs of MS. The congregation prays for them continually, says the pastor – so much are they loved. And God answers their prayers every time – only not in the way expected. Because it is the congregation that seems to be receiving all the healing – because every time they sit with John and Linda they come away with an even deeper assurance that God is good, that God is filled with mercy and grace, and that life is a precious gift to be received with joy and thanksgiving.² And that when the heat comes, God will get them safely through:

*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.*

But it isn't just rooting our lives in the right place when the heat comes – "*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.*" It is about rooting our lives in that right place long before the heat comes. It is also a matter of how deeply, how diligently, how intentionally, and how persistently we do so before the heat comes: a tree "planted" by water, deeply dug into that soil – a tree that "sends out its roots" by the stream, deeply embedded in that good soil. If our trust in the Lord is, truthfully, rather shallow or sporadic – more a passing mood than a mode of daily living – well, it may not hold up when the heat comes, any better than the one who has placed his trust in something other than the Lord. I saw a sign in a plant nursery one time – it read, "*The best time to plant a tree was twenty-five years ago.*" The same applies to our faith in God, when the heat comes.

Presbyterian pastor Craig Barnes tells of a couple named Paul and Jean. Paul's first wife had died of Lou Gehrig's disease. The congregation had witnessed his faithful love and tender devotion to her during all the long months of her decline. When at last she died, the congregation

surrounded Paul in his grief. Jean had also lost her dearly loved first spouse. She and her husband were active and faithful members of the church. Then, one day, Jean's husband and her only child were both killed in a horrible plane crash. The congregation also surrounded Jean in her grieving.

Time passed, and eventually Jean and Paul found one another, grew in love, and decided to marry. Barnes writes:

I was so excited when the day finally came to marry Paul and Jean. But I wasn't prepared for what would happen during the ceremony. I got about halfway through the service before a question developed in the back of my mind: "How can these two find the courage to go through this again?" I tried to push it out of my thoughts and continue leading the ceremony, but it became unavoidable the moment they faced each other to say their vows. Paul started to cry when he got to the part "... in sickness and in health" I could feel the tears welling up in my own eyes. Then Jean cried her way through saying, "... till death do us part." At this point I could no longer speak. I looked out at the congregation who were all crying so hard they could no longer listen. So we just stopped the service and cried for a while.

Now the question was demanding a response. If any couple knows what marriage can cost it is these two. Clearly they are aware that one of them will have to go through all of the grief again someday. How could they find the courage to risk loving again? The answer to my question came when Paul and Jean then faced the congregation as we sang the hymn they had selected – "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." It was because they had found the faithfulness of God in the darkest days of their grief that they were now able to receive a new blessing. They know they will have to give it back someday. But they also know God will be there when that day comes.³

Deeply planted in the soil of God's love, sending out anchoring roots into the turf of God's goodness and graciousness. A long obedience in the same direction – that's what one pastor/theologian called the life of faith, the life of true discipleship.⁴ A long obedience in the same direction:

*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.*

When the heat comes, life can break us – or, if we are trusting in the Lord, God can make us resilient, grace-filled, fruitful, and deeply faithful.

Oh, and that sign in the plant nursery, the one that read, “*The best time to plant a tree was twenty-five years ago*” – actually there was a second line on that sign. A second line that also speaks to the planting of our roots deeply in the soil of faith. The full sign read: “*The best time to plant a tree was twenty-five years ago. But the second best time to plant a tree is today.*” So that we’ll be ready, in Christ, for when the heat comes.

¹ Matthew 5:45.

² Mark Buchanan, The Holy Wild (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), pp. 65-69.

³ M. Craig Barnes, Hustling God (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), pp. 194-195.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980). See Chapter One especially.