

## The Dawning of a New Life

### Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

#### Jeremiah 14:1-9



*<sup>1</sup>The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:*

*<sup>2</sup>“Judah mourns, and her gates languish; her people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. <sup>3</sup>Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns; they find no water; they return with their vessels empty; they are ashamed and confounded and cover their heads.*

*<sup>4</sup>Because of the ground that is dismayed, since there is no rain on the land, the farmers are ashamed; they cover their heads. <sup>5</sup>Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn because there is no grass. <sup>6</sup>The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights; they pant for air like jackals; their eyes fail because there is no vegetation. <sup>7</sup>“Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name’s sake; for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against you. <sup>8</sup>O you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who turns aside to*

*tarry for a night? <sup>9</sup>Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save? Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not leave us.”*

When Baluchistan in Iran becomes dry, the color of the earth changes – from a rich, dark brown to a reddish brown. But Ahmad had noticed that the color of the earth had changed even more. It had long since ceased to be a reddish brown and instead had taken on a pale gray color, as if the earth had been drained of its last ounce of strength and thus of all life. The cracks in the earth were so deep that he could stick his whole hand into them. There hadn’t been a single drop of rain in three years. Ahmad thought of his daughter Salima – how, just a few years ago, she used to run through the wheat field to bring him food. Now, there is not a single plant to be seen. There is nothing to be seen but gray, dead earth. His daughter has moved to the city where she is trying to make ends meet. Life in the city is no picnic either. Ahmad had made a decision: He, too, would have to move to the city, selling the land of his ancestors. He wanted to know: “Why?” Smart people had explained that this was happening because the climate had changed. But one didn’t need a smart person’s explanation to see that. Ahmad could see for himself, from his own, bitter experience, that the climate had changed, and he wanted to know: “What’s the point of it all?”

In today’s sermon text, we see a situation like Ahmad’s from Baluchistan. A drought had affected the people of Israel so severely that humans, plants, and animals alike were impacted. The drought was so bad that it was no longer possible for life to go on. For the people of that time, even fleeing to the city was not a solution. They had no choice but to go home with their empty water vessels to die.

Something that really moves me about the situation in Israel at that time is that they didn’t blame anyone but themselves. They had sinned against God and therefore received the punishment they deserved. After all this had happened, they repented. They confessed their sins and sought God’s face. For years, Jeremiah had preached that disaster would come upon them if they did not do just that. For this, Jeremiah was thrown into prison and tortured. Now, everything had changed. Now, they repented and confessed their sins. But we are met with a tremendous shock: Even though the people repented,

God would not hear them. Just as they went home from their wells with empty water vessels, so now they must go home with empty hearts and no forgiveness. They could no longer even rely on God. However, the people did not give up. They continued to pray. They acknowledged that they were not worthy of forgiveness, but that God should be merciful nonetheless for the sake of His honor and the promise He had made to His people. Again, God refused. He would not be persuaded, even saying in the following chapter that He would not forgive them even if Moses and Samuel stood before Him: Because He was tired of forgiving.

These words from the book of Jeremiah strike us as strange. Perhaps we even feel angry and think to ourselves, “How can God be so merciless?” Or perhaps it is more likely that we do not even connect the suffering with God. Yet, this suffering is so universal that it demands an answer. Every person, every philosophy, and every religion in the world must ask this question: “How can there be so much beauty in the world and at the same time so much horror?” And even further: “When horrible things happen, why do they happen to one person over another?”

The question “why?” has occupied people of all generations and of all ages, yet there is no one answer for it. Job’s friends went out on a limb when they placed the blame on those who were suffering. We now know that they must never place the blame on those who are suffering. First, we cannot do this because we are all equally entangled in guilt. Second, because we are not God and cannot pass judgement for Him. It seems to me that the Israelites did not have the “why?” question because they had already answered it for themselves. They knew exactly why this was happening: “We are in misery because of our guilt!” Yet, I see in God’s answer to this very statement that the Israelites were not entirely honest in their confession of sin. Jesus once quoted from the book of Isaiah where God had said, “The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

In the book of Jeremiah, we see that the attitude of their hearts plays an important role. In chapter 14, it even says that the false prophets prophesied according to their hearts, but their hearts were far from God. Could it be that the people of Israel, too, repented with their mouths while their hearts were elsewhere entirely? If so, then there is a red warning sign for us as well. How often do we pray with statements that are theologically correct, but our own hearts are elsewhere entirely? We may even justify ourselves by saying, “The most important thing is that I prayed at all!” Could it be that our prayers, too, are only with our mouths and not with our hearts?

In our text from Jeremiah 14, God justifies His lack of response by saying that the people like to run to and fro. This means that the people worshiped a whole host of deities and changed who they prayed to based on their mood. The true God was only one among many. It was, in the truest sense, a “patchwork religion.” God does not want patchwork believers. He wants children. So, he does not go along with this behavior. The First Commandment says that we should have no other gods. Jesus Christ is the only way, not one way among many. The final reason why God did not answer the Israelites’ prayer is because they wanted salvation from their misery, but they did not want it for the sake of God Himself.

Honestly, I can understand anyone in deep distress who cries out to heaven solely about their distress. The distress is the focal point of the Israelites’ attention. God’s lack of response can also be an important lesson in faith, teaching us to worship God for His own sake, even if we are not initially heard.

When I apply to myself these reasons that God does not always answer prayer, I can see that each one does in fact apply: Praying without heart, running to and fro, and only turning to God when I am in a deep crisis. We realize that, like the people of Israel, we have no excuses. Like the Israelites, we too must

go home with our empty prayers. But, why did it happen to the Israelites and not to others? Or, to put it in a modern situation, “Why must the people of Iran endure so much suffering? Why are their prayers not answered?” Even more fundamentally, “Why does heaven seem closed to us, and why do our prayers go unheard?”

Over the millennia, we have realized that there is no satisfactory answer to the question of why some people suffer while others don’t. I wonder, if we ask a question and get no answer, could it be that we’re asking the wrong question?

When I take the Hebrew text from Jeremiah 14, I see that it uses the question particle “Lema.” In Hebrew, this question could mean both “why” or “what for.” The question “why” would therefore imply that we are looking for someone to blame. The question “what for,” however, looks forward and ask about the meaning and the purpose of it all. The Israelites’ question is focused on the future. They no longer have a “why” question because they have answer that for themselves: Because of their guilt. They had a “what for” question that asks about meaning. In other words, “How will God’s story with us continue if we are no longer here?” God wrote with His red pen here too and refused them. It seemed that the future, too, was blocked. Now the question arises as to why God refuses. Why does He keep heaven closed so that we can no longer recognize Him and His path for our future? We can relate to this in our own lives: “Why is a young person torn from this life and his future suddenly erased?” Or even, “Why must a human life end with a pile of dirt? What’s the point of it all?”

The question of purpose is important because we see that God Himself asks that question in chapter 13 of Jeremiah. There God asks, “Can a man change his skin, or a leopard its spots?” And God Himself seems to answer this question when He says, “Can you who are evil do good?” These words seem to be a final surrender. The path from people to God is blocked and must remain so because of human wickedness. Yet, there is a way forward. This path can only be traveled when all wickedness has been removed, and only in Jesus Christ is this wickedness absent. Through Jesus Christ, it becomes clear that God has not left His people alone in their suffering and wickedness but has gone precisely where people are at their wits’ end, and where we are also at our wits’ end with our prayers.

In today’s Gospel, we heard about Jesus’ first miracle, where He turned water into wine. The water was intended for the ritual washings of the Jews. Jesus took this very water and turned it into heavenly wine. In the same way, He takes our prayers and fills them with His Holy Spirit so that it is no longer our prayers but His prayers that count. Jesus also takes the dry earth of our spiritual life and fills it with His own life. It is no longer our life, but His life that counts, so that the Holy Spirit flows out of us like a spring.

Returning to our opening story, Ahmad drove out of the city of his fathers in a cloud of dust to a big city. He wanted to leave the gray, dead land behind him. He looked ahead to where his daughter was waiting for him, where there was water, and where there was perhaps also a new beginning. The drought had taken his land, but not his hope. We cannot understand Ahmad’s suffering, much less explain it. We can only respond to his suffering with one person. That person is Jesus. Jesus not only has the deepest needs of people in His heart, but He also has the goal. His goal is to transform our parched souls into flowing springs, and perhaps also transform our lives here and now. Then, there will truly be a new dawn in Iran. Amen.