THE TEXTS

Psalm: **Psalm 84** | OT: **Jeremiah 14:1-10,19-22** | Gospel: **Luke 18:9-14** | NT: **2 Timothy 4:6-18**

SERMON

French poet Jacques Prevert wrote a poem; goes like this:

Our Father who art in heaven

Stay there

And we'll stay here on earth

Which is sometimes so pretty

With its mysteries of New York

And its mysteries of Paris

At least as good as that of the Trinity

...

Its candy canes

With its Pacific Ocean

...good children and bad people

With all the wonders of the world

...

Simply on the earth

Offered to everyone

Strewn about

...

With the world's outrageous misfortunes

...with...priests...traitors and...troops

...

With the pretty girls and with the old bastards

With the straw of misery rotting in the steel of cannons.

NO, Jacques.

I contend otherwise. Even if you want it, God would not stay there; no you’re too late. OUR Father...created all these wonders of the universe IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT come down to us; and he answered all of your seemingly random characters and events with perfect harmony...nothing was strewn about haphazardly...good, bad; wonders, misfortunes; priests and troops.

OUR Father…He walked with us in the cool of the day in the Garden; our Father there delivered us from the tyranny of the serpent; our Father delivered us from great wickedness in the Flood; from our own pride at Babel; from disgusting vileness at Sodom and Gomorrah; our Father rained down plagues upon those who enslaved us and tried to keep us from him; our Father raised up the valley of dry bones; our Father fathered the fatherless; married the widow; loved the prostitute -- OUR Father will orchestrate ANYTHING to dwell with us!

Our Father...sacrificed his only Son; his only beloved Son; to win our hearts and our minds and our souls and our bodies that He might dwell with US!!

[That's it..sermon over..nuff said..mic drop.]

But there's more, sooo much more in the riches of God's Word...and What I’m going to discuss with you today is:

1. God sovereignly orchestrates events that he might dwell with us, and
2. We see evidence of this in the spiritual and physical blessings and curses in our lives and the world in which we live.

See Jacques juxtaposes seemingly opposite or antithetical things -- a candy cane vs the Pacific Ocean; good children, bad people; priests, traitors, troops -- and I believe the Scriptures given us in our lectionary today show that we understand these seemingly opposing things and forces in light of God’s purposes toward dwelling with us (and I contend it is the ONLY way we can understand dichotomies in our existence, but we will not have time to challenge or prove that exhaustively).

I hope to show, at least in part, how these are understood in light of all four of our Scripture passages today.

We are going to go chronologically through the texts, starting with the Psalm of praise, moving to the despair in Jeremiah, to the juxtaposition of pride and humility in the parable, and to some of Paul’s last words in Second Timothy -- keeping in mind throughout our two points of God sovereignly orchestrates events that he might dwell with us, and evidence of this in blessings and cursings, good times and bad times.

In order to help us grasp the profundity of this, let’s touch on a prerequisite, if you will:

Who is God?

He “[w]ho has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand” (Isaiah 40) -- The vast Pacific Ocean, less than a drop in the tiniest wrinkle of his cupped palm.

He has “calculated the dust of the earth”

He has “[m]easured heaven with a span.” Isaiah 40.

He established the world by His wisdom...stretched out the heavens at His discretion; When He utters his voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens: And he...makes lightning for the rain...brings the wind out of his treasuries. Jeremiah 10:12ff

He has numbered the stars and calls them all by name! Psalm 147:4

He has numbered the hairs on our head. Matthew 12:7

In the verse just preceding: “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God.”

And here’s our first text, Psalm 84 (please turn to it):

Even the sparrow has found a home,

And the swallow a nest for herself,

Where she may lay her young

What a beautiful reminder from the Psalmist that as he pines for the temple even the sparrow is important.

Let’s note that the Psalmist is essentially happy simply to be as privileged as the sparrow. He would be content for just one day at the doorway of the temple...like the sparrow, an onlooker into the splendor of the dwelling place of the Creator and redeemer.

Even the sparrow has found a home,

And the swallow a nest for herself,

Where she may lay her young—

...

For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God

Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

Not only does the Creator remember the sparrow, but the sparrow exists as part of his grand scheme to share with us his perfect greatness.

But what about mankind is different from the sparrow and the swallow in this image the Psalmist is painting?

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,

The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,

What is man that You are mindful of him,

And the son of man that You visit him?

For You have made him a little lower than the angels,

And You have crowned him with glory and honor. Psalm 8

He cares even for the little sparrow, but he created us below the angels yet crowned with glory and honor. From whence comes this glory and honor -- not just in the form of our bodies, or even just the capacity of our souls, but chiefly in the Creator’s intent for intimate union as manifested in the price of our redemption toward that purpose of intimacy.

We see this in what is happening at the door of the tabernacle -- where we might envision the sparrow and swallow look on, and that spot where the Psalmist wants to be.. What is happening at the door of the tabernacle?

Your Bible likely has a note at the beginning of this Psalm that this is a Psalm of the Sons of Korah. Who were the sons of Korah?

I think we first learn about Korah back in the wilderness…Numbers 16

Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; 2 and they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. 3 They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?”

Moses replies:

Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to serve them; and that He has brought you near to Himself, you and all your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you?

They were the doorkeepers to the tabernacle. They did not go in it. They became jealous and they were nearly wiped out by God, but we know they were not because we hear about them again in 1 Chronicles 9 (~1003 BC), which is taking place ~400 years after this rebellion against Moses and God (~1426 BC), if my source is correct, so they held their office at least to the days of David (who we know longed to build a temple).

The Psalmist -- who is either a son of Korah, or is David writing to the sons of Korah -- would rather be a doorkeeper, as were the sons of Korah, and I think THE reason why, is because from this position, at the doorway to the most holy place where was kept the tabernacle, the Psalmist could witness this:

Leviticus 1

‘When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of the livestock...he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord. Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.

He shall kill the bull before the Lord; and the priests, Aaron’s sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of meeting.

The Psalmist, longs from the very depths of his being to be in that place where he can so closely witness this act of atonement being performed on his behalf in order that his Creator may dwell with him! This is the form of atonement prescribed by God -- under the Mosaic covenant, is a progressive maturing of the Adamic covenant (that had sacrifice, but did not have a temple), to the Noahic covenant (again, sacrifice, no temple), to the Abrahamic covenant (no temple) -- and the Psalmist is reveling in redemption! He is already redeemed!

Would we long, faint even, just to stand at the door of the tabernacle and witness the killing of an animal and its blood being sprinkled on the door? Would we speak of this and of the keeping of the moral law and ceremonial law without any trace of negative compulsion as the Psalmist does?

It is hard to imagine being so exuberant for this stage of redemptive history.

We talked about this some in Dr. Philip Grace’s catechism class. We had multiple sessions on the Ten Commandments...where we marveled at how the Psalmist loved the law of God...judgments and all. And I think the imagery in Psalm 84 is a marvel...God dwells with us; his judgments are pure and purifying! We should love them!

What we so often struggle to grasp is just how broken our relationship with the Creator became as a result of the sin of the fall;

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We are desensitized to just how broken our bodies and spirits are from their pre-fall state and how even this dim foreshadowing of redemption, even this feeble atonement is a taste of sweet healing for our sin and a foretaste of the wholeness we experience in the presence of the one who Created us to enjoy beauty and fullness!

Have you ever seen, heard, smelled, touched or even thought something that repulsed you? Just disgusted you to the point of nausea, or mental revulsion. Too often we think that we’re pretty decent and so the idea that God would dwell with us does not seem so repulsive. But let’s consider that person, or event, or experience in your life that repulses you to the point that you cannot bear to be in his or her or its presence...something that really hits home, hurts you or angers you deeply. There are places, there are sins, I would not want to be around; I would leave.

Then why do we expect God to dwell with us, because that is exactly what we have done; repulsed him with our sin. And this leads right into the state of things in our Jeremiah text (please turn to Jeremiah 14)…

Judah mourns,

And her gates languish...the cry of Jerusalem has gone up.

...They were ashamed and confounded...Jeremiah 14

We’ve gone from the Psalm “heart and flesh crying out for the living God...blessed is the man...whose heart is set on a pilgrimage” where? To the presence of God in Jerusalem (annual festivals -- Pesac (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles)) now to mourning and languishing over the land in the prophet Jeremiah’s writings. And the reasons?

For our backslidings are many,

We have sinned against You

...[We]have loved to wander;

[We] have not restrained [our] feet

Where have we wandered, I wonder? What atrocities have we committed... sought after, wished for?

Earlier in Jeremiah the Lord says:

Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, So have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,” says the Lord. Jeremiah 3:20

We have forgotten not only that the Creator wants to dwell with us, not just a generic presence like the sparrow experiences, but intimately so! Like a husband and a wife. Some ~100 years before the time of our Jeremiah text (and ~250 years after Psalm 84 was written), our Creator spoke to us through Isaiah:

For your Maker is your husband,...

He is called the God of the whole earth.

6

For the Lord has called you

Like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit,

Like a youthful wife when you were refused,”...

“For a mere moment I have forsaken you,

But with great mercies I will gather you.

8

With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment;

But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,”

...

9

“For this is like the waters of Noah to Me;

For as I have sworn

That the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth,

...

My kindness shall not depart from you,

Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,”

We lost sight of this. We, like some of the sons of Korah, despised the tabernacle, and disdained the mode of atonement God had provided for us. And in opposition to the Psalmist’s physical longing FOR the temple, God descended physical pain on us, in the form of a great drought, seen here in Jeremiah.

The Israelites should have known exactly why they were experiencing suffering, because God tells them why in Jeremiah, and even hundreds of years beforehand in Isaiah -- “With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment” -- and many other places they would know about the wrath of God against their sin -- from Cain to the Flood, to Babel, to the plagues, to the wilderness, to worship of Baal at the foot of Sinai, to wicked kings...on and on

God corrects us, uses nature and non-elect to bring about his purposes with us--the elect--that he may dwell with us.

Note how God uses nature to get our attention. We should understand this text even to the point that it reveals how our sin has impacted nature around us.

Nature suffers

Yes, the deer also gave birth in the field,

But left because there was no grass.

The picture is of a pregnant deer, that has surely wandered searching for food; who is so famished that it knows it cannot provide for its fawn, so it births it and abandons it in the field.

Yes, our sinfulness, as stewards of the earth, does so greatly hurt all the creatures of the earth! Does not the earth groan over our sin.

God also uses non-elect to get our attention, and this is also included in what the prophet Jeremiah is foretelling. Jeremiah is speaking in the present tense of events that have yet to take place...even the parts of the text where the Israelites are asking for mercy. God is on the cusp of permitting the enemies of his people to conquer and enslave...to bring them back to him.

And to the wrongdoers in Israel’s midst:

And the Lord said to me, “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, [c]divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart. 15 Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in My name, whom I did not send, and who say, ‘Sword and famine shall not be in this land’—‘By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed!

Not only does famine speak audibly to the Israelites of their sin, but sword also punishes the wickedness of God’s people, to cut it off, to circumcise it, that the holy one may dwell with us.

What the Israelites, what the prophets they’re listening to are doing and thinking is exactly like what the Pharisee is praying in our parable in Luke 18

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’

Instead of being content with the laws prescribed by the one who did so to communicate his forgiveness to us that he might dwell with us, some people decided to go above and beyond. Being discontent with the ceremonial and moral law, and self-righteous, this man fasts more than what is prescribed in the law of Moses and in doing so misses the point! Misses out on the indwelling of the Creator.

But what beauty, what comfort, what astonishing wonder that the greedy, extorting one is truly repentant and thus will be exalted.

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be [d]humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Here, in a coupling of the prophetic word in Jeremiah and the parable in the gospel, is an example of how we understand that God will take bad and use it for good -- this is in a way no other worldview or philosophy can adequately understand in light of the infinite cosmos and that which exists beyond our ever-expanding universe.

What a comfort...no matter how bad you have been, or how bad are things happening to you, the Lord wants to dwell with you, and he will pay the price for it!

The Pharisee utterly misunderstood the purpose of the law for self-righteousness, but the tax collector, who may or may not have even understood the letter of law could only throw himself on the merits of mercy. While materially wealthy, he recognized he was spiritually bankrupt and God not only comes down to be with him, but promises he will bring that tax collector UP, into a wholeness and richness unfathomable -- they will dwell together!

We are not exempt from the kind of suffering God brought upon Israel as a result of our sin, and we would do well to live our lives in light of the wisdom and experiences we see in the Old Testament and how it flows into our lives today. The Apostle urges Timothy to “convince, rebuke, exhort” and teach us

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 2 Timothy 4:3-4

Sounds like exactly what was happening to Israel in the time of Jeremiah...listening to false prophets. Are we heading the exhortations of our pastors? Are we living up to our calling or are we still children, in our ignorance repeating mistakes from thousands of years ago; or do we, like the Pharisee, think we’re exceeding our calling?..replacing God’s narrative of redemption with our own, and shunning his indwelling? Galatians 4:1-3

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, 2 but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. 3 Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

This stage of redemptive (indwelling) history that we enjoy affords us such a depth of knowledge about where we came from and where the Creator is taking us; we ought not to be like children; we ought not to wrongfully rest of the work of the Son in a manner wherein we disdain or ignore or even diminish the beauty of the law and our responsibility toward it, but rather delight in the law and persevere in it

We are still called to work, to cleanse ourselves, to live as though we are standing before the door of the tabernacle as the life blood of the atoning animal is sprinkled at our feet; yea at the foot of the cross where the blood of he who created us flows from his hands and feet and side...to stand before this table and these elements.

And so because of this perspective we see an imperturbable peace, unshakeable confidence, and selflessness, at the end of the Apostle Paul’s life at a time when he is abandoned by everyone (turn to Second Timothy 4):

Demas has forsaken me..Crescens [left] for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia....Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm...At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me

At this time when only Luke is with him, after he has suffered so much because he has proclaimed Christ, what imagery does the Apostle call upon?!

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. 2 Timothy 4:6

The Old Testament sacrificial system! Remember, Jacob, when he was named Israel erects “a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it.” Genesis 35:14

And again Numbers 15

then he who presents his offering to the Lord shall bring...one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering you shall prepare with the burnt offering or the sacrifice...a sweet aroma to the Lord.

Even under this new covenant the Apostle likens his life to that of a sacrifice in the old covenant!

Are we living, such that when we come to our time of dying, will we be able to liken our lives to a sacrifice to the Lord? Do we understand our blessings and our sufferings as sacrifices to our Creator who sought us out by the sacrifice of his very life to dwell with us?

This brings us to a final point I would like to make, within this understanding of the beautiful orchestration of events toward the Creator dwelling with us -- that suffering is not only for our corrective purposes to spur us to right living, but is also A RESULT OF our right living.

Excerpts from 2 Timothy:

share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began...

Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, 9 for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained.

And if we are spared the corrective discipline of our Creator because we are keeping his law in our hearts, we may suffer for the very good work we are doing as we strive to mimic our Christ, the suffering servant, and as we strive to love and live the law in which he and our forefathers took so much delight.

But if we look back at our history -- the story of God dwelling with his people, no matter what -- we will not despair; quite the opposite, we will like the Psalmist says “go from strength to strength” such that we, like the Apostle Paul in our text today, can say:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 Timothy 4:7

Fr Chris has been bringing us this message of encouragement to stay the course, persevere with confidence as did the Apostle Paul; and I hope this message builds on the good word the Lord has been delivering us through him --

We know that the Creator, like a sovereign conductor, is orchestrating these events to redeem us that he might dwell with us.

Wrap it up summarily.

God created this infinite universe. He particularly placed us on this little speck of dust at a particular time; but when we, like some of the angels, had sinned, he withheld his wrath (unlike what he did toward the angels), and has orchestrated an incredible narrative of mercy, through his own sacrifice on our behalf. He had to satisfy his justice; it cannot be compromised. And in doing so, he revealed a depth of his character we and the angels otherwise would never have known -- patience, mercy, forgiveness, grace…...LOVE (beyond all measure). And so our understanding of blessings and cursings, of this perfectly orchestrated artwork of our very existence is transformed by this knowledge.

So now we can go and do likewise -- find the downtrodden, the broken, the orphan, the widow, the extortioner, the self-righteous -- and change their narrative...LOVE THEM!