

SEPTEMBER 14, 2019

**SCRIPTURE LESSON JEREMIAH 4:22-28, 2019, 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17, LUKE 15:1-10**

In this week's text Jeremiah begins to set up for the pivot he will make in his message to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The bulk of the message is definitely gloom and destruction as punishment for the evil done by the people. While the specifics of what they did that was evil aren't spelled out the punishment they will experience is clearly spelled out as is the destruction they will experience. God will basically destroy the nation and people of historic Israel. But there is one small line of hope in the middle of the announcement of destruction. God says that while "The whole land shall be a desolation;" God opens the door to hope by saying, "Yet I will not make a full end." And in the end this is exactly what happened. The nation, the temple, the city were all destroyed but enough was left to allow it to be rebuilt at a later date and soon Jeremiah will begin to proclaim this message of forgiveness, restoration and hope IF the people repent and change their way. This message is the start of the Good News, fulfilled in Christ, for all of us to cling to.

The letters of Timothy are among the most controversial texts in the Bible. What makes them controversial is most modern scholars, along with many historic biblical scholars do not believe they were written by Paul. The most common belief is that they were written by a follower who either wrote under the name "Paul" or was one of the followers of Paul who kept writing after his death under his name. In reality this was a common practice in that day, because the author believed their writing would have a greater impact if it had a more important name attached to it. The point of the letter is a clear proclamation of the Gospel message of God's forgiveness for even the most terrible of sinners. It is a common theme of Paul's that he was among the worst of sinners because of his persecution of the early Christians. Yet this was always done because of his devotion to God and because he was a devout Jew. He argues that he was forgiven or "shown mercy" because he came to believe in Jesus Christ and repented from his past life, dedicating himself to serving God through Christ.

In the Gospel lesson again it is forgiveness and repentance that is at center stage. While the parable of the lost sheep may not make a great deal of practical sense, it is a clear picture of the message of hope and forgiveness found in both Jeremiah and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy. NO matter how sinful a person is God is reaching out to us in love and forgiveness. It is never God that turns away from us, but we turn away from God or get lost. God is always out there searching for us and rejoicing when we are found, and brought back into the flock. The trouble is for some with this idea is they believe that there is a limit to God's forgiveness. There are sins and sinners God will refuse to forgive. Will God forgive one of the "Mass murders" of recent times? Some argue today that God will forgive in the end everyone and the end will bring universal salvation for all people. They base that often on things like how Paul describes his own being forgiven.

In this context Jeremiah warns us that we can endure great suffering because of our failing to follow God's way but there is at the same time the possibility of forgiveness and restoration of our intended relationship with God. In Timothy we read how God does offer to us all the possibility of forgiveness, even if we, like Paul, is described as "The worst of all sinners." In the Gospel we read God's intent to come and search for us when we stray from doing God's way and will not only carry us back to our proper place in our relationship with God. God will with all of heaven rejoice at our return and offer praise and Thanksgiving for our safe return. These are the promises God makes to all of us, as we seek to serve God and live a Christian life.

Personally I believe it is the job of the church to proclaim the love and forgiveness of God, not as often seems to happen single out groups or behaviors that God will not forgive. Often when we do this we focus on behaviors of certain groups and leave out behaviors that are more common that are considered "Normal behavior today" and that we ourselves are guilty of. Perhaps we should focus our attention on pronouncing the message of forgiveness and leave the judging and who needs to be forgiven and for what to God. It's a novel idea but it is also Gospel.