

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

# THE EMPTY SPACE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, October 25, 2009 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Book of Jeremiah 31: 7 – 9.

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*For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither.*  
— Jeremiah 31: 7 – 8

Of the prophets Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the one easiest to identify is Jeremiah. If you're thinking of going to Rome, let me tell you where this Jeremiah is. Were our ceiling at Saint Francis like that of the Sistine Chapel, the weeping prophet would be up here directly above the pulpit. It is a potent psychological portrait of weakness, weariness and despair. His sitting posture, his crossed legs, his downcast eyes, his right hand covering his mouth, Jeremiah is a picture of anguish and inner suffering. Michelangelo uses every angle to convey his pain. Everything in the scene points down; his head, the fingers of his left hand. His right hand covers his mouth as if he's weary of his own complaints, a prophet who has nothing more to say.

The book of Jeremiah is about the crisis of the last days of Judah, a crisis culminating with the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 587 BC. We read about it in the last chapter of Jeremiah (52: 12 – 14): "Now in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month — that was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon — Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard who served the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the LORD, and the king's house; and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down all the walls around Jerusalem."

Jeremiah was the son of a priest named Hilkiah. He was raised about three miles northeast of Jerusalem in Anata, a town halfway from Jerusalem to Jericho. He spent much of his life denouncing things which is why denunciations are called jeremiads. Recreational sex. The rich for exploiting the poor. The poor for having it coming to them. His own people for batting her eyelashes and winking at every new god who came riding in someone's saddlebags into

town. He stood at the gate of the Temple and told people as they walked in that if they believed God was touched by the highjinks that went on in there they should have their heads examined. When some took to indulging in a little human sacrifice on the side, Jeremiah showed up with a clay pot which he smashed to smithereens to show them what God was going to do to them when the time came.

At the beginning of the book we hear the voice of the Lord say to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." It sounds like a nice appointment but it isn't long before the work of being God's mouth, of trying to reform Judah, makes Jeremiah more pitiable and exasperated than any curate in the novels of Anthony Trollope, so that by the fifteenth chapter Jeremiah laments not just the work but the One who saddled him with it. Taking his complaint directly to God he asks him, "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" To this last question there isn't any doubt that Jeremiah thinks the answer is Yes. A little later he says, "Cursed be the day I was born. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, 'A son is born to you,' making him glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?"

To understand his anguish, you have to remember that in the Jerusalem of Jeremiah the heart of the city was the Temple, and the heart of the Temple was the *kapporeth* or mercy seat — the empty space above the Ark of the Covenant between the two golden cherubim. It was the most potent sign of Israel's repudiation of idols, the great speaking absence between the images.

What the people of Israel lost above all when Jerusalem fell was the empty space between the cherubim, the place that was the center of their life as the covenant people, the space behind the curtained holy place where God is, the place where all the mercy comes from, what the psalmist refers to as “help from the sanctuary” and the “answer from heaven”.

**T**he crisis that the burning of the Temple presented for Jeremiah was about the destruction of that empty space between the cherubim. If that seems strange to you just think of the crisis of having someone you cherish taken away. If you’ve lost someone you love you know a bit of what it is to live as Jeremiah had to, in exile. You have to live every day with what’s missing. When Jeremiah and the people of Israel lost the empty space between the cherubim, the place where all the mercy comes from, they lost everything. God himself was in the empty space, and the empty space was gone.

Today’s Gospel story takes place six miles up the road from Jeremiah’s hometown and six centuries after the destruction of the Temple. The silence between the cherubim, the silence from that empty space where God speaks becomes a God who has stepped into the world, becomes for a little while a physical hand outstretched as it were to Bartimaeus. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” he says. It’s the first time Jesus is called the Son of David in Mark’s gospel. Jesus stood still, and Bartimaeus came to him. “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus said, “Let me see again.” Jesus said, “Go; your faith has made you well.” He could see again but Bartimaeus didn’t go. Instead he followed Jesus.

The way Mark tells the story, here’s the next thing he writes: “Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village of Bethany and you will find a colt tied....” And riding that colt Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple.

I picture Bartimaeus watching Jesus ride into Jerusalem, watching him as he’s brought into Pilate’s kangaroo court and put on trial, following Jesus as he is led by the Praetorian guard outside the walls of Jerusalem to Golgotha, named for the skull of Goliath whom David defeated to win victory on behalf of all the people of God. It was at Golgotha that they crucified him. According to Mark, Jesus’ last words were, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” . . . And with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.”

**T**here is that silence again, the silence between the cherubim from which God spoke becomes the silence culminating in the death of the Beloved Son; the silence where God has nothing more to say.

You and I live between the Old Jerusalem and the New. Jesus is our altar and our sanctuary, our *kapporeth* or mercy seat. He’s the One I trust, the One you trust. He knows what it is to experience God’s absence, the empty space, the empty space being gone. And when he breathed his last the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Why? Because the God of Jeremiah, the God of the Temple, the God of that empty space between the golden cherubim, had come out from behind the curtain to hang between two thieves. Amen.

*For more information about Saint Francis Episcopal Church and its life of faith and mission just northwest of the Capital Beltway, please contact the church office at 10033 River Road, Potomac, Maryland 20854, call 301.365.2055, or see us on the web at [www.stfrancispotomac.org](http://www.stfrancispotomac.org)*