Invitation to the Table

Thomas and Alexander Campbell were the primary movers behind the Restoration Movement of the early 19th century that eventually lead to the formation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Last Friday was Alexander's Birthday. I invite you to find a hymnal and turn to #400 and join me in the responsive call to Communion, written by Alexander Campbell.

Pastoral Prayer

Last Thursday, two things happened that compel us to reflect on our lives as citizens and as Christians.

On that day, 9/11, our nation remembered the four coordinated terrorist suicide attacks against the United States, and we remembered the bravery and the sacrifice of those who saved lives as firefighters and rescue crews at the Twin Towers, and of the people aboard United 93 bound for the Pentagon. Our world changed that day, 24 years ago. We've seen how easily buildings can fall and how quickly lives can end, and we're reminded that humanity does not yet hold the keys to security.

On that same day, the assassination of Charlie Kirk exposed the depth of division in our nation, as it became evident that neither the left nor the right, neither Democrat nor Republican is above politicizing and weaponizing tragedy and exploiting grief to demonize one another. As Governor Spencer Cox of Utah put it, "It seems like rage is the only choice."

It seems evident that "thoughts and prayers" have been useless in addressing the evil behind these *repeated* tragedies; nevertheless, I remembered Abraham Lincoln's comment: "'I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." In that Spirit, let us pray:

Heavenly Father, 24 years ago we came to You on 9/11, and we still come to You. We're still under attack. Maybe not the towers in New York City, but good men and women on university campuses, children on school campuses, and worshipers in churches. Your children are unable—and some seem unwilling—to find solutions to these atrocities. We beg You for mercy.

Our hearts are heavy today for children and adolescents and young adults who are framing the way they see the world. I beg You, Lord, don't let them be embittered by this and don't let them respond in kind. Grant them grace to trust a good and living God who is *"merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"* (EXODUS 34:6). Grant them, now in their youth, your vision of peace and justice and reconciliation, and give them gifts of leadership to lead your people in your way.

We beg Your mercy and comfort for the Kirk family and extended family, and we continue to pray for every campus and every church.[1]

Come, Holy Spirit. Come as fire and burn within us. Burn with an unquenchable zeal to bring about your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come as the wind beneath our wings and lift us from division and hatred into your realm of unity and love.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come as a dove, and bring us peace.

Amen.

[1] These first paragraphs are a summary and paraphrase of portions of Max Lucado's prayer on Max Lucado Offers Powerful Prayer for Charlie Kirk's Family, Shares 'Ultimate Cure' After Assassination | CBN News

When the Smoke Clears

JEREMIAH 4:11-12, 22-28 (NRVSUE) *At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse,* [12] *a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them. …*

[22] *"For my people are foolish;*
they do not know me;
they are stupid children;
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil
but do not know how to do good."

[23] *I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos,*
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
[24] *I looked on the mountains, and they were quaking,*
and all the hills moved to and fro.
[25] *I looked, and there was no one at all,*
and all the birds of the air had fled.
[26] *I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert,*
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

[27] *For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not make a full end.*

[28] *Because of this the earth shall mourn*
and the heavens above grow black,
for I have spoken; I have purposed;
I have not relented, nor will I turn back.

* * *

The Word of God for the people of God!

Here we go again! There are sixteen Old Testament books named after prophets. Throw in Elijah in I Kings and Nathan in II Samuel and I Chronicles and all of them carry messages of judgment and impending doom.

Jeremiah speaks of a day of destruction resulting from Israel's foolishness, but he does not claim that the complete chaos, the darkened heavens, the quaking mountains, the desolate land are the work of God; in fact, God is the observer, not the instigator, of the destruction: "***I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos…"***

While there always have been natural disasters, reading Jeremiah may remind us of our own situation. The earth is in upheaval: increasingly severe weather patterns, towns without clean water, glaciers and the polar ice cap melting, wildfires increasing in number and severity…

The scientific community is almost unanimous in connecting climate change to human activity, but their conclusions are met with denial fueled by a preference for profits over evidence. And so, the seas are rising, the unusual is becoming normal, our children's children are in peril,[2] and elements of the religious community are shrugging their shoulders dismissively: "God's in control."

Friends, God delegated control to humanity in GENESIS 1:28: ***"Go forth and multiply and manage—be stewards of the whole Earth!"***

While the issues are complicated, we humans too often prefer comfort and short-term gain over stewardship of our planet. There is a cost, and Jeremiah describes the human future any time those preferences take priority over stewardship!

[2] The previous two paragraphs are my paraphrase and interpretation of Finding A Way Home – Lectionary Commentary For September 14 | Bruce Epperly

But I'm troubled by the wording that dominates the faith of so many Christians today, the wording that implies natural disasters and human warfare are originated by God as punishment for human misconduct.

There is historic context for that perspective; but history moves on, and so does the biblical witness.

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a deity. The earliest humans who had a "God consciousness" perceived him as male and loaded with testosterone, which gave him human qualities of anger and violent retribution when he didn't get his way. Humans were terrified of him and tried to appease him with bribes—offerings and sacrifices, including human sacrifice.

Some of that image of God is in the Bible, because in the earliest writings, that was where human spirituality was. And that image hung around and, horrible as it is, people still cling to it.

But God's self-disclosure is constant, and bit-by-bit, moving from generation to generation, another image began to emerge through a process we call divine inspiration. God's self-disclosure is constant and complete; but human comprehension is not. Moses asked to see God, and God said, "I'll let you see a part of me, but you can't handle all of me at once."

But God's people kept notes and passed them on, generation after generation, and piece-by-piece, like a jigsaw puzzle, when it begins to come together, that other image replaces the old image of a terrifying God and we discover that behind the curtain, that "other image" was always there; God's self-disclosure is always complete. And, from the very beginning, the biblical witness challenges that male testosterone-loaded image of God: "In the beginning God created…"

Creation is the opposite of destruction, and hear this: in the 2nd verse, *"…the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters,"* the verb translated "hover" has a feminine ending; it describes a hen sitting and covering her eggs. No testosterone there.

In the creation narratives, God relates intimately with creation, walking through the garden in the cool of the evening, calling to the newly created man and woman.

But the residue of that other image reappears in the 3rd chapter when, like healthy two-year-olds, the newly created man and woman give in to their curiosity and reach for autonomy, seeking to know the difference between good and evil. They want to take responsibility for their own lives. The text seems to project that angry, retributive image of God driving them out of the garden and telling them to "get a job."

But there's nothing in the text to prevent a different understanding that is established from the very beginning. Rather than punishing, God guides the man and the woman in their quest for autonomy which, after all, is one quality of the image of God created within them. The apples don't fall far from the tree. After all, God delegated

management of the planet to them. So, God counsels, "Just be aware: there will be challenges ('thorns and thistles' vs. 18) and there will be work involved ('by the sweat of your face…' vs. 19). You think God didn't break a sweat creating the Rocky Mountains?" (if we want to extend those metaphors)

Nothing in the text demands an image of a retributive God, and if we read the whole story from Eden to Jesus, a totally reasonable image portrays a nurturing, guiding God who responds to brokenness with repair, not punishment, who responds to alienation with reconciliation, not retaliation, and who doesn't need to draw blood in the process.

And that image is reinforced and given definition in God's Covenant with Abraham, ***"I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. …and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*** **(GENESIS 12:2-3)**

And from the eighth century through the sixth century BCE, the Hebrew prophets held forth, manifesting a transition from the vindictive violence of the accepted image of God to the image that has been waiting behind the curtain since creation. And Jeremiah is a major voice in the middle of that transitionary period.

Conclusion: Jeremiah prophesied in Judea's final years as a sovereign state (indeed, chapter 39 is thought to be an eyewitness account of the fall of Jerusalem). We can summarize today's reading in two words: "total despair." But when the smoke clears, there is what James Newsome calls a "soft note of grace," almost indistinguishable, in verse 27: ***For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not make a full end***. Even though Jeremiah was a prophet of doom, his prevailing theme (indeed, the theme in all four Lectionary readings today) is that God's redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted.

The reading from Psalm 14 confronts the same sort of foolishness and perversity as Jeremiah: ***"…there is no one who does good"*** **(vs. 1, 3)**. Yet the Psalm builds as a testimony to God's ability to gather from among sinful humanity a community of people who will find their refuge in God. God's redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted.

In the reading from I Timothy, Paul uses his own life as an example of God's ability to reclaim persons. God's redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted.

The reading in Luke 15 testifies to just how far God is willing to go to reclaim the lost. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, God is portrayed as proactively in pursuit of wayward persons. God doesn't just wait for people to return; indeed, God goes after them! God's redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted; and when the smoke clears, not even by death on a cross will thwart God's redemptive purposes.[3]

Pray with me.

[3] The conclusion summarizes and paraphrases parts of the introductory comments to Proper 19 in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), page 507.