

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Shelter From the Storm

Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature this year. I've long been a fan and I even enjoyed seeing him in concert once. Probably my favorite Dylan album is "Blood on the Tracks." This morning as I walked into church I was humming a bit of "Buckets of Rain." But last night, hearing the dire predictions of Cliff Mass, I was thinking about another title from that album: "Shelter from the Storm."

Of course, I don't think Dylan wasn't talking about rain and wind in either of these songs. Bob Dylan lives a pretty cushy life as far as I can tell. He gets to do what he loves, mostly on his own terms, and he continues to be well-remunerated for it. But he is a public figure and sometimes a controversial one. He has caught a lot of flack over his career and he is human. He is subject to disappointment and loss just like any of the rest of us. "Shelter from the Storm" sounds to me like a relationship that provided Dylan with a place of refuge, a place of acceptance, a place where he could *be* and know that he was accepted for who he is. Who among us doesn't long for that?

As we read our lesson in Jeremiah today, we find the prophet Jeremiah speaking to the people of God. These are the people whom God had formed, with whom God had made a covenant. God had established for these people a shelter, a safe place in the promised land. God's covenant was, for this people, a description of what it would look like to maintain that land as a safe place to pursue health, emotional wellbeing, everything that is good in life. God intended the promised land to be a shelter, where God's people could safely acknowledge their vulnerabilities, and thereby have opportunity to grow into the fullness of whom they were created to be. The Kingdom of God is, for them and for us, a safe space for us to be... and to become... ourselves.

By the time of Jeremiah, however, God's preferred outcome for God's people had been distorted. The community of the children of Israel was full of religious, social, political, and economic stratification. Their divisions often were based on such things as one's family tree or one's socio-economic heritage. There was a strong sense of who was in, who was out, who was good, and who was bad. Some people measured up and some people didn't. The common understanding was that if you didn't measure up, then you had no one to blame but yourself for the abuse you received at the hands of others. The society God had called into being was experiencing disintegration. It was no longer a safe place to be human, to be imperfect, to grow. This was a storm with no shelter in sight.

That sounds to me like a hard place to live. Generally speaking, it's only in those places where I feel safe that I can unclench enough to actually feel what's going inside. I find it's only in those places of shelter that I can reach out with my soul to touch God, or another human being. God works and we often experience "spontaneous spiritual formation" in times of chaos and hardship. But when the wind and rain are hitting my windows at 60mph, my body is in fight or flight mode. I may be praying, but it's not the contemplative model of prayer.

Jeremiah is known to us as a prophet. The role of a prophet is not to tell fortunes or predict the future. But a prophet might well warn us:

The first one now

Will later be last

For the times they are a-changin.

The role of a prophet is to perceive the idolatry of a culture and to address it in terms of the reality of the Kingdom of God. Prophets today might choose to speak to issues of racism, educational opportunity, or homelessness. A prophet will not necessarily fix those problems, but will help us to understand the idolatries, the powers and principalities, that are behind those problems. A prophet will call us to formulate our own responses to those problems based on our life together in the Kingdom of God.

Jeremiah was a particularly astute prophet. What Jeremiah did, in addition to naming the brokenness and corruption of Judean society, was also to name the eternal goodness of God. Jeremiah looked into the past at who God is, what God had done among God's people, and was able thereby to hold out hope for the future. God, who had witnessed this disintegration and destruction of God's beloved people, would plant anew and rebuild. God would make Israel once more a shelter: a safe place for God's people to live and grow. The eternal purpose of God's kingdom among this people would not be thwarted.

God's promise, as reported by Jeremiah, is to institute a new covenant, one not inscribed on stone, like the tablets Moses brought down from Sinai, but on human hearts. The children of God would come to understand their faith not as a set of legal requirements, but as a relationship. The covenant was a result not of human effort to live up to a particular standard, but of God's own work: *I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts, I will be their God, I will forgive their iniquity, I will remember their sin no more.*

In other words, said Jeremiah, God will create a space of safety for God's people to pursue relationship with God and with one another. God will create a shelter which allows us to let our guard down, to be vulnerable, and thereby to discover new strengths in ourselves and new connections to those around us.

This is the "New Covenant" or "New Testament" for which the newest section of your Bible is named. This is the covenant that was written in Christ's blood, the one we celebrate and remember as we gather around the Eucharistic table. The message of this new covenant is that the Kingdom of God is a safe space for us to be... and to become... ourselves.

This is the space where we can ask ourselves, as Doyt prompted us to a few weeks ago, "Who is *your* Lazarus?"

This is the space where, as Wellesley depicted for us last week, our young children can be the evangelists, enjoying a garden party in the kingdom of God and inviting us to join them.

This is the space where we can let go of black and white legalism, prejudices and assumptions about how the world is meant to be. In the Kingdom of God, we can let go of those things and simply love our neighbors.

This is the space where we can explore our own tender spots, to be honest and vulnerable with one another, and thereby have opportunity to *grow up* into the people that God created us to be.

The Kingdom of God is a safe space for us to be... and to become... ourselves.

The invitation of God could be paraphrased: Come in, she said, I'll give ya': shelter from the storm.

Certainly that is our purpose here at Epiphany: to be a safe haven and way-station for pilgrims on a spiritual journey.

What is going on in your life that brings you here in need of shelter?

What resources do you find at Epiphany that give you a safe space to be... and become... yourself?

Questions:

Where or with whom is a safe space in your life?

How does Epiphany make safe space for you?

How do you help make safe space for others?