You Cannot Eat Money or God’s Decree
Jeremiah 2:4-13
Irondequoit United Church of Christ
September 1, 2019

Only when the last tree has died,
the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught,
will we realize that we cannot eat money.

-Cree Proverb

The scene is a courtroom. God is suing His people who are on the witness stand. Jeremiah is the prosecutor, but we are the jury and we have a conflict of interest because well, we are related to the people on the witness stand in thought, word, and deed.

God begins with a rhetorical question which comes out the depths of the pre-existing relationship. Abraham J. Heshel explains the relationship this way: “Israel’s distress was more than a human tragedy. With Israel’s distress came the affliction of God, His displacement, His homelessness in the land, in the world.” Hence God’s self-examining question in Jeremiah 2:5:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?
God wants to know what wrongs did the ancestors find that drove them away to chase after such “worthless things” as money and power, and thus, become worthless themselves in the pursuit; God wants to know why they polluted the garden given to them---to trash and defile it. The charges against the people are abandonment of God through commission and omission---by turning to other gods and defilement of God’s creation.

That a nation has traded in its gods
for gods that aren’t even close to gods?
But my people have traded my glory
for empty god-dreams and silly god-schemes. (Jeremiah 2:12)

The decree is a pronouncement meant to inspire repentance; it is a warning to Israel of the impending doom of Babylon sweeping down and carrying off the people to live in exile.

My people have committed a compound sin:
they’ve walked out on me, the fountain
of fresh flowing waters, and then dug cisterns----
cisterns that leak, cisterns that are no better than sieves.

Dear Ones, are we not also guilty of abandoning God and worshipping other gods? Have we not also made ourselves into idols to worship? Wasn’t it just a few days ago that our Commander in Chief declared himself the Chosen One while others declared he was the King of Israel or the Second Coming of God? Are there not Christians who actually believe this?

Have we not also asserted that our freedom and worth are dependent upon what we own or drive? What colleges our kids go to? What country we belong to? Are we all not just a wee bit guilty of these same crimes against our God, the one who takes care of us through thick and thin?

Equally important are we also not also defilers of God’s garden, God’s creation too? Let us just take a look at this week alone. The Amazon is on fire set by miners and ranchers making room for agribusinesses who want to grow soy to feed cattle so the meat can be sold to supply our stores, to feed our appetites. The burning and deforestation in Amazon has been going on for years but has increased 84% percent with the support of a political leader who does not hold indigenous peoples lives as equal to his own or their rights to their lands as sovereign territory, and who places profit above the lives of the entire planet who depend on the Amazon ‘s forest to supply oxygen for the whole planet.

But let us not point the finger at others when in the midst of these fires, 74,000 in the past few weeks, our own leader directed the Environmental Protection Agency to roll back methane regulations. In addition, he has asked that logging restrictions be lifted in the America’s largest National Forest in Alaska and when the first glacier was pronounced dead asked if he could buy Greenland. We who live in glass houses and who eat meat should not throw stones at Brazil.

The prophet Jeremiah was calling for repentance before it was too late, and the people would be forced into exile. We, the people trashing and defiling the garden are not living in exile but in apocalyptic times where we are facing extinction of millions of species including our own. By most estimates we have 11 years to transform our economies before climate change is a full-scale catastrophe world-wide.

We know the science, the facts on the ground and in the smoke-filled air. What is needed is the will to admit our sins and change before it too late because there is neither time nor a Plan B
for planet earth. Yes, sins. Theologian Sallie McFague says that sin is the refusal to accept our place in the scheme of creation where humans live together with other creatures and thus, are most dependent on the rest for survival. The other sin, closely related to our refusal to accept our place, is to think of ourselves as the only ones with agency and intelligence, as the ones who have dominion over others.

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet because he did not want to have to deliver such doomsday messages, because like God, he felt the pain of abandonment from the people and saw the future coming.

The late Catholic monk Thomas Merton once said that “Today wisdom begins with sorrow.” If this is so, can we acknowledge how genocide and ecocide are evil? Do we have the energy to combat the powers that are causing such evil? Do we have the will to change our own consumptive behavior?

Yes, says the Ethiopians who just planted 350 million trees in one day in late July to combat the effects of deforestation and climate change.

Yes, says Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish Climate activist from Sweden who just arrived in New York harbor this week aboard a sailboat. She staged a 2-week strike outside Swedish Parliament calling for the country to cut carbon emissions by 15% a year. Her prophetic voice has sparked a world-wide movement led by youth across the globe to work against the clock to get us to change from being cracked cisterns made of pride, greed, and arrogance; to come back to our source, the living fountains of fresh flowing waters.

She has asked the world to engage in a week of Climate Strikes beginning September 20 thru the 27th. Here in Rochester we are invited to join with other faith communities and activists in a march and tree planting action on Sunday September 22 in the afternoon beginning from the Islamic Center.

On this Labor Day which is also a World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, let us join with others in laboring to clean up and protect God’s creation. Let us plant trees by clean waters and commit to lowering our carbon footprints so that all may have life abundantly.