

Does the Church Speak for God Anymore? Part IV
Jeremiah 2: 11-12, 22-28
September 16, 2007

This little branch is from one of my pathetic, little hibiscus in my backyard. Instead of beautiful pink and orange truffles mine produce almost no blooms. Actually things have been worse in this barren corner of my yard. Many years ago I tried mightily to grow roses. I was a desperate failure. It seemed like I was out there constantly spraying insecticide and fertilizing my pathetic roses. They got one disease after another. Finally I tore them all out and settled for hibiscus instead. The problem is that my yard is too shady and my soil is too alkaline. On both sides of our house builders have built huge new houses, blocking out the little sun I used to get. Two hours of direct sun for these little beauties is not enough. I almost lost all of them a couple of years ago. We got this late, hard freeze and they all looked dead and lifeless as they winter faded and spring began. So I got out my blade and I cut them back ruthlessly, pruning them back almost to the ground. I watched closely to see if new growth would come. It took a while, but they did. Still no bloom. Stiff-necked little boogers.

Morris isn't stiff-necked. Actually he is a no-neck, little curmudgeon in a Hawaiian shirt. Morris is not his real name, but to honor the tradition of anonymity of Alcoholics Anonymous I will refer to him that way. I think of Morris as a prophet. Morris this past week celebrated 2745 continuous days of sobriety. Morris speaks of a transformation that he went through after years of failed attempts to remain sober. He told the story of the king who went into the prison one day to hear the stories of those incarcerated. Story after story he heard things like this: I didn't do it. They got the wrong guy. I was falsely convicted. Finally he met a man who said, "Yea I did it." The

king immediately said, “Guard, throw this pathetic criminal out of here.” The man was immediately released. Morris said that he was like that: trapped in a person who was totally committed to avoid responsibility and to see that his problems were not of his own making. God did for him what he could not do for himself. He had to be released from the prison of self. He had to be radically pruned so that he could be transformed into the person that God could use. Reconciliation with God works that way. It is when we honestly confront our sin and confess it that we are made free for the first time.

Jeremiah brings an awful word of destruction to the people of Israel. The enemy was on its way to destroy. The time for repentance was up. God’s wrath would be released with fury upon a stiff-necked people. There was no turning back. His language describes the reversal of creation on a cosmic scale. Order turns to chaos. The birds are all gone. Not a single righteous man can be found. But God stops short. God remembers that unconditional covenant made with Noah after the flood. After God did a “do-over” for those people whose every inclination was evil continuously, after wiping out the world, God made that promise that God would never utterly destroy humanity again. And God remembers that promise to Israel that God would not completely destroy creation. Instead God would cut Israel back to a bare stump, would radically prune the people of God. Yes, the temple would be utterly destroyed, the land lost, and the people carried off to a foreign land. The people of the Temple would once again become a scattered people and would instead become people of the book of Torah. God would do a good thing and grow the people of Israel. Jeremiah spoke in the radical language of renewal.

When I think of this prophecy of doom and destruction I think of the 6th anniversary of 9/11 just passed this week. It was a week in which the people of our country lost their innocence, their sense of security and their sense of comfort. Have we also lost our sense of self as the people of the United Methodist Church? Has the last forty years of slow decline given us a sense that God no longer speaks through our little branch of the body of Christ? Are we in need of radical renewal?

My seminary preaching professor, Zan Holmes, always said to us, "Tell them the good news!" So what's the good news that emerges from this oracle of doom? It's really hard to answer that question authentically for a text such as this from Jeremiah. Radical pruning offers no short-term consolation. We have such a need for pruning as a church, don't we? But God has promised God will not destroy or leave us. Jesus said, "I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword." Jesus calls us to radical reorientation to be people of justice, reconciliation and truth. That involves struggle, conflict, self-sacrifice and even pain and suffering.

My hibiscuses are still not blooming. I have alkaline soil, not the acidic soil that they really want. I don't have enough sun, too much shade. I have grown lazy and not given them the proper fertilizer to ensure the next bloom. As a church we have not prepared the soil to harvest fully committed followers of Jesus Christ. We have hidden in the darkness of cultural assimilation, not stood firm in the light of the divine Christ. We have lost the taste of salt and wonder if the church can regain its salt. Are we ready to be cut to the root? Are the winds of change blowing in our midst so that God's reign can be experienced with power in new directions for the church of Jesus Christ?