

**Sermon: 2019/09/15 (14th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) -
*Jeremiah 4:11-12, 12-28; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; & Luke 15:1-10_BTR***

[Invite children to the front. Handful of rusty, old pennies.]

When Mrs Randall, Poppy and I arrived in McMinnville,
and moved into our house on Ben Lomond Drive,
we found *lots* of old pennies in the back-yard;
rusty small coins that someone - presumably the previous owner - must have
casually thrown out there.

Look, I have some of them in my pocket...

Can you see?

They're *sooo*(!) corroded and dirty you can hardly tell what type they were.

You can't see whose face is on them, or any of the text.

Now, why do you think that a person would throw these little pennies away?!

(I'm still finding them even now. Usually when I cut the grass.)

Why did the last person to live in my house not care about them?

[Wait for response.]

Yes!

They aren't of much value.

Not like a twenty-dollar bill or something!

So, *who cares*, right?

Who cares about what happens to these little pennies - going green, becoming
ugly and faded?

And that's how some of the people listening to Jesus' *parable* about the lost sheep
felt too!

Who *cares* about *one*, single lost sheep?!

After all, sheep were *everywhere* in Israel.

Hundreds and thousands of them.

On *every* hill-top and in *every* valley.

The idea that a shepherd would leave behind 'ninety-nine' to search for *one*, silly
sheep [see Lk. 15:4] - *that* didn't make much sense:

The lost sheep, you see, was like one of these rusty pennies from my back-yard.

Not very important to "sensible," *normal* people.

And there are so many human beings on the planet too!

Billions and billions of us.

And most are poor, uneducated...not cool or famous or on TV.
Who could love them *all*? [Pause.]

God.

Each individual is precious to God.

And He wants them *all* to belong to His very special family, "the Church" - where they can be cared for, nurtured, and find a relationship with Him, the Heavenly Father.

Let's pray: Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

My favourite multi-movie-epic is probably Peter Jackson's take on J. R. R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*.

And it isn't just that I love the story itself - which I do! - the excitement and danger of it, the bravery and honour exemplified by so many of the characters - qualities that seem so lacking today...

I also love the movies' audio:

both the orchestral music in the background, which was added after-the-fact, *and* the sound-effects.

But especially the use of trumpets, horns and drums by characters themselves during the battle-scenes.

These instruments transform what would be an otherwise very unpleasant, base, bestial business - hacking and slashing, and *elevate* it into something almost valorous; majestic.

And we've heard something of the drum-beat of war these last few weeks in the background of our various Old Testament readings from the prophets.

A steady "drum-beat" gradually building to an *awful* climax, which we know will be the final siege and collapse of the Kingdom of Jerusalem that, two centuries earlier, Saul and David established.

This "drum-beat" has consisted of repeated warnings about the calamity that greed and godlessness would entail for the Israelites.

From Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos.

In the coming weeks it will be reiterated and reinforced too by Joel, Habbakuk and Haggai, bringing us up-to - almost - Advent and the new Church year.

And those men - those special messengers of God - would have heard an *actual* drum-beat echoing across the vast, hollow deserts of Mesopotamia as the Babylonian armies approached from the east to deliver the aforementioned coup-de-grâce: [see Jer. 4:13-17].^[n.1]

Now, there was nowhere for the Jews to run away to, to escape those on-coming armies.

Not really.

Israel - or rather what was left of it, "Judah" - had, as it does now, the Mediterranean sea to its back;
the mountains of Lebanon to the north,
and arid wastelands to the south.

They were trapped.

Outnumbered.

And friendless.

And the prophets didn't "sugar-coat" the situation either:

"my people are foolish," God speaks through Jeremiah.

"[T]hey are stupid," He says: [\[v.22\]](#).

And if we think that that is an overly harsh thing to say - lacking in sympathy, consider, for a moment, the matter from *Heaven's* point of view: like a parent who has expressly and consistently warned a child not to do something dangerous - like stick fingers into a wall-socket or play with a soccer-ball near the road, God had given them - "the Jews" - *clear* instructions - via Moses and others, instructions that were written down even - in books like *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*; and they had flouted and disregarded them anyway, thinking they knew better.

And those hadn't been arbitrary rules and laws.

The covenant - the Torah - wasn't about "jumping through hoops" for the sake of it.

They had been mostly safeguards; *a recipe* - for living *good*, safe lives.

Lives that would not only please the Divine *but also* impress *and charm* their non-believing, belligerent neighbors - like in Babylon.

But that opportunity was flagrantly squandered.

And so God had *no* choice but to now "wipe the slate clean."

To start over.

Which is why the language in the middle of today's verses - of, I quote, 'waste and void' - is sooo(!) reminiscent of the beginning of *Genesis*; of the beginning of history: [\[v.23\]](#).

Because God *the Creator* was about to *create* again.

But instead of lifting continents from the waters of primal chaos, He was going to build a fresh start from 'cities...laid in ruins'. [\[v.26\]](#)

And this is *exactly* what happened.

The archaeology proves it:

the Babylonians came in, demolished, robbed, raped and burned.

And then a new society emerged - from among those who weren't enslaved in combination with some refugees who eventually returned; a "new society" which was the one that produced and nurtured Jesus. A "new society," which is that that we glimpse in the gospels. A "new society" which was the perfect time, place and context for the appearance of the Savior-of-the-world.

And you and I - our lives can feel like 'cities...laid in ruins'.
Our health or marriages or employment or education not as we wished when we were young.
Our ideals and ambitions - the 'fruitful land' of our youth - now a 'desert': [v.26].
Maybe your bones and muscles are 'quaking' with age as the land "quaked" from the marching of Babylon's massive armies. [v.24]
But, we see, this might, in fact, be the *very* most "fertile" situation into which we should invite the Lord to create something new.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. At least we can assume they did: the Egyptians, Hebrews and Greeks certainly used instruments in warfare, to both signal manoeuvres and/or for the purposes of terrorising the enemy. See: Farmer, Henry George (1912), *The Rise & Development of Military Music*, London: W. M. Reeves, 2-3.