

“The Sky is Falling! (And Other Bad News)”

*Jeremiah 17:5–10*

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else;  
it is perverse—  
who can understand it?

I the LORD test the mind  
and search the heart,  
to give to all according to their ways,  
according to the fruit of their doings.

“The Sky is Falling!!!”

--*Chicken Little*

Remember Chicken Little’s famous four-word warning? “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Everyone seems to be sounding the alarm these days. It’s hard to keep up with and, after a while, it is hard to stay tuned in. One side keeps sounding the alarm because of socialism—the sky is falling! Then the other sounds the same alarm because of fascism—the sky is falling! One side declares a national emergency to build a wall; the other says the one who declared the emergency *is the national emergency!* It is confusing to know how to distill what is true from what is false. I know. Well, Jeremiah knows too. It is the quandary he finds himself in. He tries to help God’s people distill what is true from what is false. He hears the boots of Babylon’s legions creeping closer and he sounds the alarm: “The sky is falling!” Poor Jeremiah. I don’t envy him. He is given the most impossible calling: to speak bad news that’s true to people who only want to hear good news, even if it’s false.

Well, if we're being honest, we understand. Who wants to hear bad news? After all, isn't there enough bad news out there in the world to go around? The last thing we'd want to do is come to church and listen to Jeremiah's doom and gloom talk. Reminds me of a journalist who just came out with a book about the direction he sees America heading. The book is called, *America: The Farewell Tour*.<sup>1</sup> Recently, he was giving a speech in a bookstore when he began talking about how our country shows all the classic signs of a failing empire: the opioid crises, the increases in gambling, the spread of magical thinking, the resurgence of hate groups, the mass shootings, mass incarceration, mass debt, climate change—which is a case where the sky *is* literally falling. He even predicts that America as we know it will collapse within the next decade or two. Upon hearing all of this, someone from the audience asks the question, “Sir, are you in such despair yourself? I mean...have you given up so much hope!?” He answers by saying “The fact is we can't use the word hope if we don't resist [the bleak reality as it truly is].”<sup>2</sup> I mean, he may be right, but seriously, who wants to hear about the downfall of our nation? It's depressing. I feel for Jeremiah. He must preach the downfall of his nation to people who only want to hear that the state of their union is going to be okay.

Well, the dire news is part of life sometimes, isn't it? So the prophet asks where we are placing our trust when it comes. In God or in ourselves? Jeremiah says the problem is that the human heart is deceptive. The Hebrew word for “deceptive” here is *'aqobh*, which shares the same root word with the name Jacob. Remember him? The trickster. The manipulator. You see, the human heart has a way of tricking itself—of manipulating the truth—into believing that our own human strength can get us the results that we want. Especially when we are afraid. So perhaps we buy into the belief that we will remain a strong country by beefing up the military. Or by pouring our tax dollars into advancing nuclear weapons, which two weeks ago moved the official doomsday clock in Washington, D.C. to two minutes before midnight—the closest it has ever been.<sup>3</sup> The sky is falling! And while it might seem to be true on the surface, the prophet says such actions are as futile as a shrub withering away in the desert. Or maybe we think we can get what we want if we put our faith in our economic system. After all, we are told that capitalism creates jobs and, with a good work ethic, we can have whatever we want. But when bad news is on the horizon, it is a deception that protects the interests of the few. It is how CEOs of companies like Amazon and Netflix “work the law” so they don't pay one penny in taxes,<sup>4</sup> while someone who works three jobs can't pay their car payment. And while it might seem like the system is working, it is based in the principle of scarcity and is as parched as a salt land. Speaking of economics, take a guess as to what percentage of America's population owned slaves after the 1830's. Answer: 1%.<sup>5</sup> Our country was fractured, and we lost 620,000 lives based on the economic ideologies of the one percent! Scary how the human heart can manipulate what is good and true just to get what it wants. Our hearts are *'Aqobh*.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Hedges, *America: the farewell tour*, (New York, Simon & Schuster), 2018.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtBg3jdsrec>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/01/25/580670125/doomsday-clock-moves-closer-to-midnight-were-2-minutes-from-world-annihilation>

<sup>4</sup> According to <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/amazon-taxes-zero-180337770.html> Amazon will pay \$0 on \$11 billion dollars in revenue, while Netflix posted its largest-ever profit in the U.S. for 2018 of \$845 million for which it paid no federal or state income taxes.

<sup>5</sup> Jill Lepore, *These truths: a history of the United States*, (New York, W.W. Norton and Company), 2018, 287.

Yet still, the prophet's vocation is not only to name the dire reality as she sees it, but to remind us that we are still in covenant with God. She cries out that there is another Source to draw our strength from. There exists another way than reacting out of fear. So there comes a second image to consider: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. They shall be like a tree whose roots are planted by water...they shall not fear when the heat comes."

Have you ever heard of the Lodgepole Pine tree? They are mainly clustered in the western states. Lodgepole Pines are huge—150 feet tall. They are ancient—they can live up to 400 years. They are a miraculous tree who has what are called "serotinous cones." "Serotinous" is a scientific term for a seed that requires an environmental trigger in order to be released. The cones of a Lodgepole Pine wait patiently for decades...until their environmental trigger occurs. Their trigger? Fire. During a forest fire when the temperature grows hot enough, as the world around it is turning to ashes, the cones open and the seeds drop into the soil. Maybe that's what Jeremiah is inviting God's people to do: To open up when the heat comes, spreading seeds of compassion and justice, resistance and love. Yes, but that's only part of it.

You see, the point of the image is not the tree's trunk or its branches; it's not about the leaves or the seeds. What sustains the tree in moments when it seems like the sky is falling are *the tree's roots*.

Perhaps during Black History Month, you have heard of Clara Belle Williams. She was the first African American to graduate from New Mexico State University. Except nobody wanted her there. Despite being valedictorian of her high school, she would have to take notes from the hallway. Why? Because her professors wouldn't allow her into the classroom. When she eventually graduated, she wasn't allowed to walk with the other students to receive her diploma. Now for most of us, the experience would dry us up. But Clara Belle Williams roots were deeply planted by the water. So she took her degree and spent her life teaching black students by day; and then at night she would teach their parents who were former slaves home economics. In 2005 New Mexico State University renamed its English Department Clara Belle Williams Hall after her.

The question the prophet is asking is, "How deep are our roots?" Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, they are like a tree whose roots are planted by the water and they do not fear when the heat comes...

...when the terminal diagnosis comes...

...when the next oppressive law comes...

...when the next mass shooting comes...

...when the next hate crime comes...

...when the next political crisis comes...

...when it seems like the world is collapsing around us or the sky itself is falling.

We are like a tree rooted by the water of God's baptismal promises. Grounded in a hope that sees the bleakness of our reality for what it truly is. And then, by the grace of God, keeps standing firm to do something about it.

