

February 13, 2022 – Jeremiah 17:5-8

A couple months ago, I was fortunate to attend a circuit pastor's meeting that included a presentation by Pastor Marty Haaz. And he taught us a psychological term that I had never heard before: adjustment disorder. An adjustment disorder is when your life circumstances change so quickly and so drastically that your brain has trouble coping with it. Your mind can't adjust to what's going on around it.

Adjustment disorders can happen for many reasons, but usually its because something stressful happens to you. The loss of a job. The death of a spouse. A sudden illness or disability. That sort of thing.

Adjustment disorders can also have many effects of you. Some people panic. They're filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Some people withdraw. They become secluded and depressed. Some people become angry. Their frustration just boils over into every area of their life.

Pastor Haaz was telling us this because mental health care professionals around the country have noticed that a huge percentage of the population is currently exhibiting the symptoms of an adjustment disorder. An adjustment disorder tracing back to the pandemic. Even after 2 full years, we still haven't figured out how to adjust. How to cope. How to understand and react to this situation.

A major reason for this is that we don't know who to trust. Normally, one of the more healthy ways of dealing with an adjustment disorder is to seek out someone you trust. A family member, a friend, an expert. Most of us have that person in our lives that we call when things go wrong. And they help us adjust to the situation. And that's a good thing.

But no one knows how to adjust to this situation. We're all the blind leading the blind. Do we trust our friends and family? Do we trust our government? Do we trust our doctors? Do we trust a journalist on TV? Do we trust a scientist on the other side of the planet? Do we trust a guy on the radio or a podcast? Who do we trust? How do we cope?

That question – Who do you trust? - is really at the center of our Old Testament lesson for today. Who do you trust and why do you trust them? What makes them trustworthy? And how do they help you cope with the challenges of life? Jeremiah seems to boil it down to just two choices, but it's actually a bit more complicated than that.

He says our first option is to “trust in man” and to “make flesh our strength”. And if you're trusting in man, if you're trusting in flesh, then you are definitely not trusting in spirit. You're not trusting in the Lord. You have turned away from him.

But the simplicity of this choice is deception. Because trusting in man, trusting in flesh, can mean a lot of things.

It can mean trusting in yourself. In your own flesh. In your own strength. It can mean pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. As Americans – particularly midwestern Americans, I think – we have a strong culture of rugged individualism. Of feeling like every problem is our own problem to solve. And we just need to be strong enough, smart enough, determined enough to solve it. And if we fail, that just means we need to try harder next time.

But trusting in man can also mean the exact opposite. It can mean trusting in other men. In the strength of their flesh. Trusting in governments and judges. Militaries and police forces. Political parties and corporations.

Trusting in people who have worldly power. Worldly wisdom. Worldly strength. And believing that if you just put the right leader in the right place at the right time and throw all your support behind him, he can fix everything.

Yet, according to Jeremiah, trusting in yourself, trusting in other men, trusting in any worldly thing, is a curse. Something that brings a curse upon you. And it's not just because it has turned you away from the Lord.

Jeremiah compares it to being a shrub in the desert. You might expect that a desert shrub is a hardy plant. I mean, it's living in the desert, after all. But desert shrubs actually weren't all that hardy.

No, the desert shrubs of Palestine tend to be quick growing, quick dying plants. They spring up in the rainy season, bloom quickly, scatter their seeds, and then die as soon as the rains stop. They grow so quickly, they don't even have time to put down roots. A strong gust of wind will rip them right out of the ground.

Trusting in man and in flesh makes you a desert shrub. Because worldly power is fleeting. Just as the lives of mortal men themselves are fleeting. To be perfectly blunt, human beings don't live long enough to do much good, even if we could.

And we can't. Because the place where we dwell is a parched wilderness. It's an uninhabited salt land. Have you ever seen a picture of the Dead Sea? The land around it is absolutely bare dirt and rock. It's so encrusted with salt that almost nothing will grow in it, just as almost nothing can live in the water of the Dead Sea itself.

This sinful earth is a parched wilderness. It is an uninhabited salt land. Devoid of spiritual life. Full of death and decay. You will never find life and goodness from your own strength or the strength of others or any worldly power. There's just too much sin and death encrusted over this world for anything good to grow.

Which is why trusting in the Lord is such a blessing. Because when you trust in the Lord – when your trust is the Lord – you're no longer trusting in yourself or in any worldly power. Which means you're planted somewhere completely new.

You're no longer a desert shrub that sprang up by chance in a parched, salt land. No, you're a tree. A tree that has been intentionally, lovingly planted by fresh water. In a great location, where your roots can dig deep into the soil. Stretch far out into the stream.

You are a tree planted by living water. By baptismal water. By the sacred flood that purifies you from all sin. That keeps you refreshed when heat comes, so that your leaves never dry up. That keeps you from becoming anxious in years of drought, so that you don't cease to bear fruit.

Which is a wonderful image that Jeremiah paints for us. But what exactly does that mean in concrete terms? What does it look like to be a tree planted by water?

Well, it looks like Jesus. You see, if we're trees planted by baptismal waters, then we are connected to Christ through baptism. And Jeremiah refers to Jesus as a tree as well. He is the righteous branch of David's tree. *“A king who will deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”*

And yet, is that what Jesus did during his life? Well, yes and no. In worldly terms, absolutely not. Nothing that Jesus did was kingly. He was the son of peasants. He lived as an itinerant preacher, living off the generosity of others. He was arrested, crucified, and buried in someone else's grave. There was nothing kingly about him, in worldly terms.

But that shouldn't surprise us. Because, as Jeremiah just pointed out, worldly power is a curse, not a blessing. There's nothing trustworthy about it. And there would be no reason to trust in Jesus if that's all that he offered to us.

No, what Jesus offers is something far greater. He offers us resurrection from the dead. He offers us eternal life. He offers us a kingdom that is not of this world.

Like so many of us, he was planted in the parched, salt land of this sinful world. But he didn't just spring up as a desert shrub and then die like the rest of us. No, he sprang up, died, and then lived again. *“Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*

And in rising again, he planted himself as a tree in the wilderness and brought water to the desert. So that we might be planted beside him and draw from that water. So that we might hope in something other than the wasteland of this world and find strength in the knowledge that there is no heat or drought, no illness or death, that can take away the life that he has given to us.

Who do you trust in the midst of a worldwide pandemic? I don't know. But I do know this: there is no reason for frustration. God has us in his hands. There is no reason for depression. The joy of the Lord is our strength. There is no reason for panic. Death has no victory for those who are in Christ Jesus. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord. For Jesus alone is trustworthy. Amen.