

“When the Heavens Are Appalled”

JEREMIAH 2:4-13

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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I love the church of Jesus Christ. I love it when we gather to sing, to pray, to worship. I love serving with the church people. I love learning in the church. I love the church of Jesus Christ.

But not all of us do.

Anne Rice, the writer of vampire stories, was in the news some years ago because she publicly gave up Christianity. Christ was still at the center of her life, she said, but she quit the church.

"It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous group. . . ."

She's not the only one. Take your next door neighbor, for example. Or that new family down the street. Your grandson. Your cousin. They may pray. They may "believe in God" or in "Jesus." They might help out with charitable causes. One of their favorite songs might be Amazing Grace.

But they don't go to Church. They won't go to church. Like Anne Rice, they believe that "following Christ does not mean following His followers." They are done with church.

Gandhi supposedly said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Nietzsche said, "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

It's easy to be frustrated with the institutional church. It's easy to be disappointed or mad. Church people have a history of doing and saying horrible things. Christians sponsored the crusades. Too many Christians went along with Hitler. Too many Christians stood adamantly on the wrong side of Civil Rights in this country. Too many still do.

Jesus himself shared disappointment in organized religion. How many times did he call the Pharisees or Scribes on the carpet? How many times did he challenge religion's status quo?^[1]

God sees how the church has gone astray, fallen sort, turned away, and God is not pleased.

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We read about the prophet Jeremiah's call story last week. He said God shouldn't call him because he was too young. God told him he wasn't too young and that he (God) would give him the words to say.

Today we find Jeremiah's first words. We can see from this speech why Jeremiah didn't want the job:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? . . . I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. . . . Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. . . . my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate.

As we look at the shortcomings of the church, the sins of commission and the sins of omission, maybe the godly response is to feel “appalled.” Jeremiah thinks it odd—to say the least—that the ancient Hebrews have turned away from God, have lost interest, have grown lukewarm.

Participation in local houses of worship might suggest that we moderns have turned away from God. To borrow from the rant of Jeremiah, perhaps we should be appalled.

This passage begs us to look critically at our lives and shortcomings, at our churches and the institutions we support.

We can look at our apathy, and be appalled. We can be appalled at the ways denominations fight and feud. We can be appalled when bad things happen in a church and the church sweeps it under a rug. We can be appalled by the way the church has actually convinced itself that we are consumers of religion (What can church do for me?) instead of disciples of Jesus Christ (How can I serve in Christ's name?).

Is it any wonder our neighbors and coworkers and, even, our own family have left the church? Perhaps they have left the church because, along with the very heavens, they are appalled by what they have seen.

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Jeremiah's words invite us to be appalled by some of what we see in houses of worship. But he doesn't suggest we leave our houses of worship.

Yes, the church is flawed. The church is filled with sinners like me. The church is sometimes quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous. We should be appalled and *constructively* critical.

But (and this is important) the God we worship is not flawed, and God's son is the Lord of the Church, and because of the Power of God's Spirit, the church will always be a place for sinners like us to worship, and to serve, and to bear Christ's healing touch to others.

I dare say the world needs Christ's church. The world needs Christ's church, and the world needs us to be disciples in it.

And I wouldn't miss being a part of that for anything.

AMEN.

FIRST READING JEREMIAH 2:4-13

4Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 5Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? 6They did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" 7I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. 8The priests did not say, "Where is the LORD?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. 9Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. 10Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. 11Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. 12Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, 13for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

^[1] In the book of Revelation, Jesus critiques the church in Laodice'a (3:15ff):

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."