

(Psalms 139 NRSV)

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³ You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ I try to count them--they are more than the sand; I come to the end--I am still with you.

(Jeremiah 18:1-11 NRSV)

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

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Fashioned in Clay

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Date: September 6, 1998

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Text: Jeremiah 18:1-11.

Jeremiah is sometimes called a prophet of doom. He lived on the cusp of the final disintegration of Israel. But when he began his prophecy, Israel was in a time of comfort and calm. Some at this time took Israel's relative peace as a sign for the good, a sign of God's favor. It actually resulted from the transition as the power in the Middle East passed from the empire of Assyria to the empire of Babylon. Jeremiah rightly saw the peace as simply the calm before the storm. It turns out he was right. The great body of his preaching and prophecy occur in that last half century as Israel hurtles, largely unaware of it, to its date with destiny in 587 B.C. By then Babylon has secured her strength and can attend to minor irritants. Startled and tiny Israel was torn asunder by Nebuchadnezzar's armies as easily as a person slaps a mosquito, and with about as much notice in the Babylonian press, had there been one.

Jeremiah saw it all coming. It's hard to know, though, if he was actually an astute observer of military strength. He may have been; however it wouldn't have taken an especially subtle military mind to know just how menacing Babylon was. But in either case Jeremiah's message was not a warning that a huge power is building on the eastern horizon. He doesn't preach the need for a stronger defense. Rather, Jeremiah looked around at the society in which he lived and deduced that it was too corrupt to stand. Jeremiah held a rather old fashioned, at least now it's old fashioned, Jeremiah held a rather old fashioned notion that people and nations got what they deserved. His was a simple calculus of cause and effect. To Jeremiah the world was clay on the potter's wheel, and if the nation were a flawed jar, then the potter would smash the clay into a lump.

There seemed to be some evidence for this view in previous Biblical literature. The potter had already thrown the first family out of the garden of Eden for its excesses. Not long later the potter poured down the rains of the flood as a result of the world's wicked ways. The potter toppled the tower of Babel and sacked the city of Sodom for similar reasons. Jeremiah didn't need to be a military mind to know that Israel's days were numbered; he only had to look at Israel's heart to see her future.

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In many ways and for many good reasons this cause and effect notion of God the potter has gone out of vogue in many circles. Even Moses thought the potter could be more merciful and tried to keep his people whole in the face of the potter's otherwise intentions. Job was perhaps the first to lodge a formal complaint against the potter and call him into court. His charge was that blaming the hapless for their condition of sorrow was unsavory, and he used his own mean estate as a case in point. Job's friends, nonetheless, insisted that he got what he deserved. In the end the potter makes a cameo appearance and acknowledges that Job is right; things are unfair. In recent times some observers have been willing to agree that bad things do happen to good people, and, just as disturbing, good things sometimes happen to bad people. Some look at the resulting confusion about getting what you deserve and say There's no reason to it all. Israel got ruined by Babylon simply because Babylon was bigger and a bully, they say.

Such observers want to chalk what we get out of life up to random. I'm willing to find some randomness in the universe, maybe even a lot of it. But I'm pretty sure it's not the whole story.

Some of you may know that one of the things I love to do best on vacation is to read. During the year my time for recreational reading is slim, so on summer vacation I try to satisfy the voracious appetite that has built up. Over the years I have noticed that my reading interests have often turned to themes. One year it was U.S. history. Another it was James Michener novels. Another I read about the sea. This year I got hooked on hiking and mountain climbing. Among other books related to this theme, I read the two best-selling accounts of the ill-fated 1996 Mt. Everest climbing season, *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer and *The Climb: Tragic Ambitions on Everest* by Anatoli Boukreev. Both men were participants in the May 10, 1996 ascent to the summit of Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

Tragically, nine climbers from the two commercial operations climbing to the summit that day lost their lives. The books seek to tell the story and find an explanation if not a meaning for the events which happened.

Alpine mountain climbing is a sport on the edge. The altitudes are as high as the cruising altitude for an airliner. It takes several trips up to camps set at various heights up the mountain and then back down over several days and weeks to acclimate to the altitude. Even then, at the highest altitudes of the mountain the brain functions poorly, severely impairing judgement, fatigue occurs quickly and life-threatening altitude sicknesses can suddenly arise. Even if everything goes well, there is a tiny window of time to achieve the summit and descend safely, before either darkness, the fifty degree below zero temperatures or the altitude kills you. And that's even without being caught in a sudden mountain blizzard.

Climbing Mt. Everest is dangerous business at best. And it relies an extraordinary amount of interdependence. All in the expedition depend on each

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other for their well-being and safety. From the base camp usually four other camps are strung up the mountain and supplied by hired Sherpas. These camps are the climber's lifeline. In the climbing itself, the climbers are linked by ropes so that they can save one another. When something goes wrong on the mountain, all that stands between you and death may be the talent, trustworthy actions and the good will of one of your fellow climbers. Especially in the commercial expeditions, in which more or less amateur climbers are being taken up the mountain by guides, the judgement of the expedition leaders, as altitude impaired as it may be even for them, must be good. It requires sending back climbers who cannot safely continue, and it requires setting a time by which everyone begins descent, whether the summit has been made or not.

On several of these counts the two May 10, 1996 expeditions seemed to fail. One expedition leader, Scott Fisher, was probably too sick and exhausted to have kept going, but he did anyway. The other, Rob Hall, seems to have been so intent on getting a climber to the summit who had not made it the year before that he exceeded his own latest turn around time by over two hours. In the end, darkness and a raging storm made them and several others on the mountain that day pay the highest price, their lives.

The writer José Ortega y Gasset has written, "Men play at tragedy because they do not believe in the reality of the tragedy which is actually being staged in the civilised world." I think he is right. And, of course, it not just men. The 1996 Everest attempts included many women climbers, one of whom, Yasuko Namba, also died on the May 10 climb.

If Ortega y Gasset is right, men and women play at the tragedy of climbing Everest because it seems so real. There on the mountain, there is no margin for error. If your judgement slips, if your feet slip, if your commitment to one another fails, it very likely means the end. The cause and effect on the mountain is very swift and obvious. It seems so much less random or confusing. And perhaps that is why even those, like me and the many thousands who made these books best sellers, who are not likely ever to climb Mt. Everest, find ourselves attracted to the story. Life and death seems so real, and the reasons for it so obvious. A lack of judgement here: death. A stroke of courage there: life. It's as simple and as causal as that. Some of it's random, like when the storm comes, but mostly it's cause and effect, cause and effect we sometimes see less readily in our normal lives.

And yet Ortega y Gasset implies that the reality of tragedy is being staged in life every day. He would agree with Jeremiah who looked at his nation and saw her shortcomings and was convinced that those faults would need be paid by a price. For Jeremiah the metaphor was the potter at the wheel smashing an unpleasing creation. For him there was no randomness at all. For Jeremiah, Babylon's armies were but God's instruments of judgement.

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Like Job many of us have quite understandably recoiled from such heartless explanations. In fact Jeremiah pulls his own punch a little. The first part of the passage tells us that the potter will take an unpleasing vessel and work into a good one. That's a pretty good description of God's grace, to take us even in our unpleasing visage and make us new and good. But mostly Jeremiah held to a strict economy of social cause and effect, one which has found far less favor of late.

But sometimes we go much too far in our efforts to be sure we aren't too harsh. To be sure, in both ways of meaning it people don't always get what they deserve. There aren't even always clear causes. On the other hand, it seems abundantly clear that our actions – the things we do, even the things we think – have consequences. Unfortunately they are often hidden in a complex world where it may be hard to sort them out. Or the consequences may be so delayed in coming that they are not weighed at the outset. Bill Clinton is reaping this form of the tragedy even now. But the fact that consequences are delayed or are complicated to sort out may explain why we fail to consider them, but is poor argument for lack of accountability, or for ignoring, in Ortega y Gasset's words, The reality of the tragedy actually being staged in the civilized world.

On Mt. Everest if you take medicaid coverage and healthcare from those who need it most, the results would be obvious quickly. On Mt. Everest if you fail to provide proper nutrition to the children, the tragic results would be quickly apparent. On Mt. Everest, if national, political or religious loyalty turns irresponsible and ugly, the tragedy is quick, stunning and reprehensible. Things become startlingly clear in the thin mountain air.

Jeremiah believes that the tragedy here at slightly above sea level is no less obvious and shameful than it is at 29,000 feet. For him, the potter who threatens to destroy a creation gone bad and who does it with the sword of another nation are the warnings and the metaphor he knows. I may not be willing to go so far or opt for quite so transparent a calculus. But I do know this: he is right at the core. The tragedies that unfold in life every day in many cases have human causes that we know better than to do. In many cases we ignore them or believe we can get away with them. But whatever metaphor you choose, accountability better be at its heart. For accountable we will be, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, but accountable, to be sure. Like vessels of clay, like Israel in Jeremiah's time, you can tell by looking whether we measure up. And just as sure as there was a reckoning on Everest on May 10, 1996, we all face a reckoning, an accounting of our lives. While I trust this accounting will be infused with grace and mercy, I suspect it will tolerate little of a cavalier deceit that thought we could get away with it all.

May we each find the internal strength and integrity to live as if our lives depended on how we do it. For more that we may believe, it does.

Thanks be to God. Amen.