

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

NRSV

The people of Israel have strayed from God's ways. In the late 600s BC, King Josiah guided the people back to godliness by removing all traces of foreign worship and by making Jerusalem the one place of worship. Jeremiah played a key role in Josiah's reforms.

"The word of the LORD" is a characteristic expression in this book: the message Jeremiah proclaims is God's word. The Hebrew word *yashar*, translated "formed" (v. 5), is a technical term for *created*; a potter *forms* clay into pottery. Recall Genesis 2:7-8, where God *forms* man. The idea that God himself forms a child in its mother's "womb" (v. 5) was accepted. God has known Jeremiah since his first moment of existence – both intellectually and in his capacity for action. Even before that, God dedicated him, separated him for his purposes ("consecrated"), to serve him. Jeremiah is but a youth ("boy", v. 6 – probably in his early twenties), without experience and authority, but God will give him all necessary leadership abilities and support. (Moses' reaction to God's command to lead the people of Israel was similar.) God commissions Jeremiah through the symbolic action of touching his mouth (v. 9). In vv. 5 and 10, the "nations" and "kingdoms" are most likely Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and Judah: the history of Israel is intertwined with that of the whole Near East. Jeremiah's mission is to do away with corruption and ungodliness, and to promote ethical conduct and godliness. God's instructions to the prophet continue in v. 17. Jeremiah is to be ready for action ("gird up your loins"); he is to respond promptly to God's commands. Mighty as the ungodly are, he is not to flinch, but to "stand up" to them; if he fails to do so, God will "break" him. Even though the deviants will fight against him and persecute him, he will prevail, "for I am with you ... to deliver you" (v. 19).

Psalms 71:1-6

NRSV

The psalmist finds sanctuary in his trust in God; even so, he asks God to be his reference point ("rock", v. 3) and strength in life, to rescue him from "cruel" (v. 4) and ungodly people. He has trusted in God *since his youth* (v. 5) and, as v. 18 shows, he is now in "old age" and has "gray hairs". God has supported him throughout his life ("from my birth", v. 6). Note the belief that God caused him to be born. From vv. 7-10, we learn that his enemies consider him so evil that they avoid him *like the plague*: a "portent" (v. 7) was always evil. The psalmist especially seeks God's help now that he no longer has the strength to defend himself; his foes believe that God has forsaken him: may they be disgraced and scorned (v. 13). He will always proclaim how God acts with integrity and tell of the many times God has rescued him. God has taught him throughout his life (v. 17). A musician, he will praise God on the "harp" (v. 22) and the "lyre", and by singing

God's praises. He is confident that God will help him.

Hebrews 12:18-29

NRSV

The author contrasts the assembly of the Israelites when the old covenant ("something that can be touched") was given with those who have entered the new covenant (vv. 22-24) brought from God ("mediator", v. 24) by Jesus. On Mount Sinai, the Israelites were filled with awe and terror. Death by stoning was the Jewish form of capital punishment. In the story of the Golden Calf, Moses trembles with fear (v. 21). The old covenant was made on earth, but the new is in heaven ("Mount Zion ...", v. 22). The community celebrating ("festal") it includes all the Christian faithful, who "have [already] come ... to the city", ("the firstborn", v. 23) and the exemplars of the Old Testament ("spirits of the righteous") who trusted in God despite not having the promises brought by Jesus.

The author has written: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's ... he died, but through faith he still speaks" (11:4). The "sprinkled blood" (v. 24) of Jesus, his death and resurrection that established the new covenant, speaks much more definitively of forgiveness than Abel's example. Then v. 25: greater punishment is in store for those who reject Jesus' warning from heaven than for those who rejected his warning at Sinai ("on earth").

In vv. 26-29, the author interprets God's words spoken through the prophet Haggai as a reference to the Last Judgement. The kingdom that Christ has brought is unshakable, permanent, but those who "reject" (v. 25) him and his message will perish, *be consumed with fire* (v. 29), at the Last Day: God will "will shake not only the earth but also the heaven" (v. 26).

Luke 13:10-17

NRSV

In the story of the healing of the crippled woman, Jesus shows what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom – through his actions. That he heals a woman and refers to her as a "daughter of Abraham" (v. 16), a full member of Jewish society, is remarkable: the kingdom is equally open to women and the sick. In Jesus' day, physical and mental ailments were seen as the work of evil forces ("Satan"); the very being of someone with a serious ailment was thought to be hostile to God. The woman does not ask to be cured; no one asks on her behalf; Jesus notices her ("Jesus saw her", v. 12). Her response to his saving action is to praise God (v. 13). Anyone could speak in the synagogue: the "leader" (v. 14) speaks to the "crowd", but his words are directed at Jesus. He is blind to God's kingdom.

Jesus' rebuttal is clever, for while untying an ox or a donkey on the sabbath was forbidden in one part of the Mishnah (a Jewish book of laws), it was permitted in another. Jesus has "set free" (v. 12), *untied*, the woman who was *tied* to Satan. If you untie animals on the sabbath, why not humans? Honour and "shame" (v. 17) were, and are, important in Near Eastern cultures. Realizing that Jesus is right, the "leader" (v. 14) and other "opponents" (v. 17) are shamed before the crowd, who rejoice in this wonder-worker. The kingdom is open to all when they turn to God.