**SERMON**

**INTRO Story**

My dad is a quiet man, one who is not inclined to talk about himself much, or at all. Some of my most poignant memories of him are from early in the morning, at 6 or 7 am. Coming downstairs, and passing the door of his office, to see him bent over a grubby, dog-eared copy of his King James Bible, at his desk. Hearing him quietly sound out the words under his breath, as his weather-worn fingers tracked the text on the page under the dim light of the small desk lamp. This was his daily routine before going out to feed the cattle, before my mother returned home from her night shift as a nurse, and before I got on the bus to school. My father was and is not an academic, not particular verbose or authoritative, but that simple yet consistent act instilled a kind of curiosity about the Bible that has never really left me.

Growing up, I was very aware, particularly as the first born, that my parents held high standards for my behavior. And as fairly conservative Christians, that standard was informed directly by a particularly reading of the Bible. Now, as a teenager, although I pushed a few boundaries and was always a little opinionated, I wasn’t ever particularly rebellious - which I still maintain my folks should be grateful for. However, I distinctly remember a time when as a 15–16-year-old playing field hockey for the adult city team, I felt the pressure to drink alongside my teammates at the pub that sponsored the club, after games on a Saturday night.

I was a thoughtful teen, but I still wanted to fit in with this older group of women. I wanted to belong, wanted to act grown up, and didn’t want to be seen as a child. This felt like a major threshold moment for me. I felt its significance fill my whole body, occupy my emotions. It intersected with my faith, my social standing, my prowess as a young athlete wanting to be taken seriously by older teammates. It was all very important. And in a car ride somewhere with my dad, I tried to slyly introduce a nuanced and hypothetical conversation about the merits of moderation for the young person of faith when it came to alcohol. Now bearing in mind that both my parents were and are staunch T-totalers, I fully expected the conversation to be very short. This was a ‘cut and dry’ issue. However, instead of launching into a full condemnation that his underaged daughter was even considering consuming even a drop of alcohol, my dad chose to reframe the issue in a question that I will never forget: (pause) “But why,” he said “would you even *want* to participate in something that contributes to the suffering of others? (repeat)

Well, that was the end of the conversation. I’m confident that I didn’t fully grasp all that my dad was saying in that question. And there is, of course, more to the story…but his words have come back to me more times than I can count! That question…those words, have become prophetic words to me! They reframed the entire decision-making process, in a moment that as a teenager felt quite high stakes. That question…those words were revealing, they cracked open more questions: about motives and impact, desires, consequences, and accountability, about what I valued and what I was willing to trade in order to feel like I belonged.

**LINK**

My dad’s question was, for me, a reality check/a perspective check! A question that, I would realize many years later, revealed how short-sighted my vision tends to get... His prophetic words placed me into a bigger story, with different considerations and more people than just myself to think about. AND It struck me this week again, while reading Jeremiah, that the prophets in scripture often did the same thing. They delivered reality checks. They held up a mirror to the community of people that God chose to be in relationship with, lamented over what they’d become, and sought to hold them accountable for their actions.

**TEXT**

**(2:1-3)** Our passage today opens with God speaking through Jeremiah, in a kind of nostalgic story-telling way. “I remember your first love,” God says, when you were devoted to me and followed me. Jeremiah uses two types of imagery to picture the wilderness relationship between God and the people of Israel. He first uses newlywed imagery, comparing the relationship of the people to God like that of a bride to a groom (verse 2). He next uses first fruits imagery, a farming metaphor to convey how Israel had been set apart for God, in the same way that the first fruits of a harvest were (Lev 23:9-14). Both images underscore the specialness of that early relationship between God and the people. Of the high worth that was bestowed on them from the God who liberated them from slavery.

**(2:4-6)** But, as the story progresses, things changed. In verse 4 and 5, God asks, why then did your ancestors go from being a faithful bride to being an unfaithful spouse? Why did our relationship break down? (pause) The implied answer is “nothing.” Given all that the Lord has done in bringing the Israelite’s ancestors through the wilderness and in establishing a committed relationship with them, the prophet says that it is shocking that they would go away from God. It is even more shocking that they pursued other gods, phony gods, gods that weren’t real.

The NRSV says that the ancestors “went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves” (verse 5b). The Hebrew word translated “worthless” is *hevel*, which basically means “vapor,” or “emptiness” (NASB) or “vanity” (see KJV). And in pursuing gods who are nothing, Jeremiah say that, the people became nothing themselves. They devalued themselves, their own humanity, and specialness. Their pursuit of insubstantial/shallow gods produced an insubstantial/shallow people. People who couldn’t let what was truly valuable and what wasn’t.

**(2:12-13)** We jump then to verse 12, where Jeremiah doubles down how shocking, the people’s “infidelity” to God was. This was not what the climax of the story was supposed to be. This turn of events sent shudders and tremors throughout the heavens (verse 12). Israel had exchanged commitment to the God who has blessed them (and would bless them again) to pursue non-gods who can do nothing for them. Worthless things that would ultimately make them more insecure, more vulnerable, and more unsatisfied. They could have “the fountain of living water,” but instead they settled for “cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (verse 13).

**LINK**

1. Folks, there’s a lot for us to learn and glean from this brief retelling of Israel’s history by the prophet. Jeremiah uses Israel’s own story, their own past, to try and wake them up to the reality in which they found themselves in the present, and the choices that they would have to make going forward.

And in doing so, Jeremiah reminds us, is that the stories we remember and tell (in worship, and just about everywhere else) matter. They have a prophetic quality, but only if we allow them to motivate our actions going forward, a inform and shape our faithfulness in the future.

2) Prophetic reality checks, in the form of stories and questions, also have the capacity open up new ways forward, ways that are hopeful and grace filled. And because these prophetic messages seek to locate us again in the larger story of God’s liberative work in the world, they are not just messages of warning, they can illumine hope too.

This is why I believe; we tell the story of our ONA process so often in St Andrew. That story of becoming open and affirming of LGBTQ+ people and their families at every level of ministry. It is St. Andrew’s story of when God’s spirit moved God’s people away from division and into wholeness through offering solidarity with queer folks. Like the Israelites were encouraged by the Prophet to return to the fulness of the love of God, St. Andrew embodies that same love through its commitment to the gay community, and through our proclamation again and again that LGBTQ+ people are holy, that our relationships are sacred, that we are a part of the family of God and welcome exactly as we are.

This liberation is collective - For a community that remembers its *own* story of grace is also liberated from the bondage of anxious self-focus and forgetfulness. Liberation stories are POWERFUL, and they are prophetic. They have the potential to reframe our current struggle, our current moment of contention into one of connection, to one another and to the arc of God’s justice that surely flows like a river, no matter how much we try to dam it up.

**CONCLUSION**

Dear friends, not only must we continue to tell our story, because we are as prone as ever to be distracted from God and the things in life that have real worth, but because those stories strengthen and give us confidence as we follow God into new arenas and seek to cross new thresholds and entertain new possibilities.

Our history and the questions we ask about our present can energize us for ongoing participation in the liberating work of God. Helping us to remember our core purpose and our beloved identity in God, propelling us forward rather than limiting us. I pray that as we continue to journey in the life of ministry together that we remain receptive to the prophetic voices among us. That we never tire of asking good questions of ourselves and our ministries. That in growing together we choose that which has lasting worth, that is faithful not just to God but is loving to our neighbors, and those who are the most vulnerable in society.

Amen