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The Judahites go down to Egypt. Paul's foolish boasting.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah 43. When Jeremiah finished speaking to all the people all these words of the Lord their God, with which the Lord their God had sent him to them, Azariah the son of Hoshiah, and Johanan the son of Koriah, and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you to say, Do not go to Egypt to live there.

But Beruk the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon. So Johanan the son of Koriah, and all the commanders of the forces, and all the people, did not obey the voice of the Lord to remain in the land of Judah. But Johanan the son of Koriah, and all the commanders of the forces, took all the remnant of Judah who had returned to live in the land of Judah from all the nations to which they had been driven, the men, the women, the children, the princesses, and every person whom Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the

guard had left with Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, also Jeremiah the prophet, and Beruk the son of Neriah.

And they came into the land of Egypt, for they did not obey the voice of the Lord. And they arrived at Tapanes. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in Tapanes, Take in your hands large stones, and hide them in the mortar in the pavement that is at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace in Tapanes, in the sight of the men of Judah.

And say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword. I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive.

And he shall clean the land of Egypt, as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace. He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt, and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire. In Jeremiah chapter 42, after the killing of Gedaliah by Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, with the support of Baalist the king of the Ammonites, Johanan and the remaining Judahite community planned to go into Egypt to escape the reprisals of the king of Babylon.

They had come to Jeremiah seeking an oracle from the Lord. They presumably were hoping for a favorable word of the Lord that encouraged their journey into Egypt, assuring them that the Lord would bless them in this. However, Jeremiah's word was not encouraging.

He told them to remain in the land and submit themselves to the king of Babylon, even though they feared what he would do in response to the killing of Gedaliah. They should remain in the land and they would be blessed if they did so. The Lord himself would protect them from harm.

However, by the end of chapter 42 it became clear that they were not going to heed the word of Jeremiah, and in chapter 43 they come out directly and call him a liar. The question behind all of this is who is the bearer of Israel's destiny? Walter Brueggemann discusses the way that the relationship between the Babylonian exile community and the Egyptian exile community can be seen behind much of this text. Israel is living in an ongoing story and acting in terms of different understandings of the shape and the direction that it is taking.

The prophecy of Jeremiah is a politically polarizing word. It weighs in on some of the most divisive questions of the time, how people see the story playing out, how they understand its shape. Earlier on it was about foreign policy, it was about the way that

Jerusalem and the Temple played into the story.

For the early Jeremiah he was attacking a particular ideology that suggested that on account of the Lord's commitment to his Temple and the house of David, there would be no ultimate threat to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not vulnerable to complete destruction, nor the people to deportation like the Northern Kingdom. Later on he is polarizing in regard to the war effort, as he tells the people to submit to the King of Babylon rather than fighting against him, and now his polarizing word is about the direction that the fugitive community must take.

Theology, the reading of history, the understanding of the future, and a determination of the direction that a community must take in its politics are all bound up in the story of the prophet. One cannot address one element without implicating the others. There can be a cynical reading of Jeremiah's word, merely presenting it as masking vested interests in a pretense of divine authority, and this is clearly the way that the refugee communities speak of it.

They believe that Beirut is behind the word of Jeremiah. They had been hoping for a favorable word upon their venture, and when they received a negative one, they think that maybe there must be some vested interest, leading the prophet to speak expedient falsehoods for his particular cause. We should always keep in mind how much the authoritative scripture speaks into and arises out of contested contexts, out of conflicts concerning the direction that the people of God must take, out of theological divergences that have to do with the reading of Israel's history, its destiny, and the way that God and the people play into that.

So much of the New Testament needs to be read in a similar way. The New Testament presents us with a particular understanding of how God has acted in history that has, beyond its obvious theological ramifications, deep political and sociological implications for its understanding of who the people of God really are and what direction they must take. The political import of such a word will always lend itself to cynical readings, to the suspicion that people are ventriloquizing their political agenda into the mouth of God.

However, the Lord had demonstrated the truth of the word of the prophet Jeremiah on so many occasions to this point, the fact that they would reject it now is a sign not of an appropriate wariness, but of outright unbelief. As verse 4 puts it, they did not obey the voice of the Lord. And Johanan and the leaders take Jeremiah, Beirut, and all the other people who were left in the charge of Gedolah and go down towards Egypt.

Jeremiah and Beirut, presumably both being taken down unwillingly, are now suffering further on account of the people's unbelief. The group arrive at the city of Tapanes, which is a border town about twelve miles west of what is now the Suez Canal. It is not the capital of Egypt, but is an important location, and Jeremiah is given the instruction by the Lord to perform a symbolic action once again.

We should recall the symbolic actions that he has performed to this point. In chapter 19 verses 1-13, he was instructed to do a symbolic action with a broken pot, in chapter 27 verse 2 to perform a symbolic action with a yoke, and perhaps most notably in chapter 13 verses 1-7 to hide a loin cloth. That symbolic action is the most similar to this one, where Jeremiah is instructed to hide some large stones in the brick pavement that is at the entrance to the palace or the government building of Pharaoh in Tapanes.

As in the case of other symbolic actions, he must do this in the sight of witnesses, here in the sight of the men of the refugee community of Judah. With this he is given a word to them. The stones that Jeremiah is laying are hidden stones that provide the foundation for a later laying out of the royal splendour of the King of Babylon when he arrives to enact the Lord's vengeance upon the land of Egypt.

The disaster that the refugees had sought to escape is going to pursue them and is going to catch them up. The familiar triad of judgement is heard once more. He will give over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword.

The great symbols of Egypt's power and authority will be brought down. The gods will have their temples burned and their idols will be carried away from the land. The King of Babylon will shake out the land of Egypt like a shepherd delousing his garment.

The obelisks of Heliopolis will also be broken down. Egypt will be humiliated. This does not seem to involve a full invasion, but it will be a great humiliation of Egypt, with many of the effects that a full invasion would have.

A further symbolic action will be performed at the end of the book in chapter 51 verses 61 to 64. And Jeremiah said to Sariah, When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, O LORD, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate for ever. When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted.

The book of Ezekiel also speaks of the coming judgment upon Egypt. Ezekiel chapter 29 verses 2 to 3. Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak and say, Thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, My Nile is my own, I made it for myself. This speaks of the sense of security that Egypt had. It was invulnerable to invasion.

However, the Lord would bring his servant the king of Babylon upon it, and he would judge the Judahite community there. Once again in chapter 29 verses 19 to 20.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it, and it shall be the wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he laboured, because they worked for me, declares the Lord God. Babylonian text fragments suggest that in 568 Nebuchadnezzar came up against Egypt.

While he did not take over the land, he did despoil it. The community that had rejected the word of the Lord, that had thought to continue the story in this way that the Lord had forbidden, ended up writing itself out. In chapter 28 verse 68 of the book of Deuteronomy, this was the final of the curses of the covenant, And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again, and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

A question to consider, reflecting upon the details of the symbolic action performed by Jeremiah, how might we discern some of its deeper significance? Second Corinthians chapter 11. I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me, for I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.

Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge. Indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.

And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I have refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.

And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do. And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claims of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence I say not as the Lord would, but as a fool.

Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves. For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

To my shame I must say, we were too weak for that. But whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I am speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one, I am talking like a madman, with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.

Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure, and, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak? And I am not weak.

Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

At Damascus the governor under King Aratus was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 Paul presents himself as if the jealous father of a young betrothed woman, concerned that she not be seduced away from her espoused partner. The Corinthian church is betrothed to Christ the Bridegroom.

The theme of Christ as the Bridegroom of the church is one found at many points in the New Testament. It is something we see especially in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 22-32. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their

husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. We also see Christ as the bridegroom in the book of John and the book of Revelation. The image of the wedding feast found in the Gospels is also important here too.

Paul begins with an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Eve by the serpent. There Adam was charged with guarding the garden and he should have protected his wife, but he failed to do so. And the guile of the serpent is particularly focused upon here.

The serpent deceived Eve with his cunning. Their thoughts ought to be devoted to Christ, but they might easily be misled by Satan's schemes. The task of Paul as an apostle is to act as a guardian for the bride.

There is a vision of Christian ministry here as well. The Christian minister is a servant of the bridegroom to the bride. He represents the bridegroom to her, protecting her from assault or any satanic wiles that might estrange her affections from the one to whom she is betrothed.

Unfortunately, the Corinthians seem far too ready to turn from their bridegroom to another. You can imagine Paul's distress at this. He is the one who is their father in the faith and he has directed their love to Christ and bound them to him in the covenant bonds of betrothal.

They have been washed as a bride in the waters of baptism and he has declared the wonders of their bridegroom to them. But now it seems as if they can be led astray from Christ with great ease and little protest on their part. Presented with a counterfeit form of Jesus, a counterfeit form of the Spirit, and a counterfeit form of the Gospel, they seem to be unable to discern the difference.

He started off by telling them to bear with him in a little foolishness. They bear with a counterfeit Jesus, Spirit and Gospel readily enough, so he is hardly making any great demand of them. Paul characterises his opponents as super apostles.

They believe that they are superior to him. These super apostles were almost certainly

not members of the Twelve. Sometimes the term apostle is used for the wider company of those who saw the risen Christ.

Paul also sometimes uses it for persons sent on a mission. Paul grants that he may not be the most skilled orator. Paul has already spoken of the plainness of his speech with which he proclaimed the Gospel to the Corinthians back in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verses 1-5.

And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling. And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

While Paul was not the most compelling speaker – Acts 20 tells the story of a young man named Eutychus who sank into a deep sleep when Paul spoke a considerable length, fell out of a window and died – Paul was nonetheless not without wisdom in the truth of Christ. That much should have been made very apparent to the Corinthians by this point. And even more so as the wisdom shone ever more brightly in contrast to the roughness of the speech in which it was couched.

The question of the source of Paul's support while he taught the Corinthians is raised here again, as it was back in 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Why had Paul acted seemingly inequitably in this manner? Why had he accepted money from the Macedonians but not from the Corinthians? Was it because he didn't love the Corinthians and didn't want to accept their support? Was their money not good enough for him? Quite the opposite. If anything, Paul robbed the Macedonians so that he could give a special treatment to the Corinthians. The other churches in the region would be able to back him up in this matter too, as would God himself.

Paul is going to continue to act in the same way. His consistency undermines the accusations of his opponents and their exalted claims that their own work operates in the same way as Paul's does. Paul previously mockingly called them super-apostles, and then he spoke about the way that they present a counterfeit Jesus, counterfeit gospel and counterfeit spirit.

Now he declares that they are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. Indeed, beneath the mask, they are actually servants of Satan, who, like their true master, are able to disguise themselves as their opposites. They preach a counterfeit gospel, spirit and counterfeit Jesus as those who are skilled in the deceptions of their father, who first deceived Eve in the garden.

However, as is the case with such persons, they will ultimately be revealed by their fruits

as their works yield a bitter harvest. Paul adopts a fool's persona for the sake of argument. He is speaking not in the proper way that he should as a Christian and an apostle of Christ, but with a persona for rhetorical purposes.

He is playing the game of the super-apostles for the sake of argument for a period of time, while steadily subverting it as he proceeds. His mode of speech is ironic and at the outset he wants them to be very clear of that fact. Once again he plays on the fact that, since they gladly bear with fools and their counterfeit gospels, they should bear with him when he devotes a few sentences to playing the part of the fool.

He develops the theme of the Corinthians bearing with the spiritual mistreatment that they have received. In bearing with a counterfeit Jesus, spirit and gospel, they have borne the worst sort of mistreatment. Paul uses hyperbole to drive the point home.

They will bear with being made slaves, being devoured, taken advantage of, with people taking airs with them, or being struck in the face. If Paul is being accused of weakness, in his foolish boasting he declares his shame that he and his apostles simply weren't strong enough to abuse the Corinthians in the way that the super-apostles had. The super-apostles' strength really showed up Paul's weakness on that point.

Paul has condemned the way of those who constantly compare themselves with each other earlier in the letter, but now he does so himself, yet in a way designed to nullify such competitive comparisons, not to play the same game. His ironic detachment in his foolish speech is really important here. The super-apostles may be capitalising upon their Jewish identity.

Paul could readily do that too, should he want to. Elsewhere in Philippians 3-11 he contrasts putting confidence in the flesh and the way that, although he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, he has jettisoned such confidence for knowing Christ. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may

share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

If the super-apostles want to play that Jewish status game, Paul can easily beat them at it. But he has abandoned that in order to gain Christ. Yet nullifying the super-apostles requires temporarily adopting an in-the-flesh persona to close them down.

If they claim to be servants of Christ, Paul is that much better. At this juncture he has to make especially clear that he is speaking in the persona of a fool, as a self-exalting boast in his apostolic service is precisely the sort of thing that the Gospel rules out. He boasts of his far greater toil or labours for Christ.

His list of hardships, one of a number in this letter, is a list of ways in which Paul has accounted his life and comfort of little value relative to the message that he bears and the master that he serves. Of course, part of what he has accounted to be of little value is his status, which means that this list has an increasingly paradoxical character. His endurance through so many trials is proof of his faithfulness to his commission.

It is a list of hardships, not of great demonstrations of power or prominence, but of dogged demonstration of faithfulness. The irony of the list will become clearer as we read through it. The sort of things Paul included would be considered shameful by many.

Who boasts of being imprisoned often, of being stoned, or of being beaten at the hands of the Jews? They might boast of being Jews. Being beaten at the hands of the Jews? Not so much. This is definitely not the list of someone who wants to make a good showing in the flesh.

However, someone who wishes to be found in Christ, to know the fellowship of his sufferings, might well see that fellowship most in the hardships he endured for Christ, and perhaps especially in those hardships that reveal the world's rejection of him, as it rejected his master before him. The point of all this is to foreground Paul's weakness. Who is weak? And I am not weak.

This is where Paul chiefly finds his boast, in his weakness. This focus of Paul's identity also leads to his especial concern for the weak who are caused to fall, a point that Jesus emphasised in his own teaching on a few occasions. The strong wish to set themselves apart from the weak as much as possible.

However, Paul, in foregrounding his weakness, can take a special concern for the weakest and most vulnerable of Christ's sheep. Paul concludes the chapter with one final boast, of being let down through a window in the wall of Damascus to deliver him from the king who sought to capture him. That story is not even a story of some great endurance on Paul's part, but of his rejection by the world and the Lord's gracious deliverance of him.

Paul's powerlessness in that situation was the occasion for the Lord's salvation. The subversion of the status-seeking games of the super-apostles then is well underway, but Paul will deliver the finishing blows to it in the next chapter. A question to consider, how might Paul's teaching, through his ironic boasting in this chapter, challenge the way that we regard ourselves and our status?