

“How To Beat the Heat”
Jeremiah 7:5-8
Luke 6:17-26

“How to Beat the Heat” is an absurdly out-of-season sermon title for a February Sunday, especially with the bitter cold that has a lock on most of the nation. Am I trying to be funny? No, not really. Extreme heat, extreme cold – both have the same effect. They can suck the life out of you.

One of the things we learned during a trip to Alaska a few years ago was that the tundra, north of the Arctic Circle, is classified as a desert. I found this on the website of the National Geographic:¹

Earth is home to several "extreme" environments where mere survival is a constant struggle. Two such habitats are deserts and tundra, where extremes of temperature and rainfall are the norm.

Tundra temperatures can plunge to bone-chilling lows; deserts can go to either extreme – hot or cold. Many animals, such as the kit fox and the spotted skunk, have adapted to sizzling desert days by being active at night, when it's cooler. In summer, the Arctic fox may store food in tundra's permafrost, which freezes the food and keeps it available for winter when the ground is covered with snow.

Both deserts and tundra receive very little rainfall – usually as little as 10 inches a year. Desert plants may have to go without fresh water for years at a time, but their ability to adapt can boggle the mind.

Plants in the cold, northern desert-like tundra – ground-hugging grasses, sedges, shrubs, moss, and lichens – have adapted by remaining small, resistant to wind, and able to grow in poor soil.

Frigid or scorching temperatures and lack of water push wildlife to the very edge of survival in these lands of fire and ice. Yet they adapt.

The operative word is *adapt* - animals and plants adapt to their environment. But how do we humans adapt to our environment, especially extreme heat or cold? Of course, the sermon title comes from the prophet Jeremiah. Hear him again, this time via *The Message*:

"Cursed is the strong one who depends on mere humans, Who thinks he can make it on muscle alone and sets God aside as dead weight. He's like a tumbleweed on the prairie, out of touch with the good earth. He lives rootless and aimless in a land where nothing grows. "But blessed is the man who trusts me, God, the woman who sticks with God. They're like trees replanted in Eden, putting down roots near the rivers – Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, Serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season."

Extreme hot or extreme cold – chose your metaphor depending on the current landscape of your life. Has something happened to you that causes you to sweat with fear, or do you feel frozen out of

something, perhaps a relationship that has become cold and bitter. The question is: how do we adapt to such temperature extremes? The answer is – being rooted in God and being connected with God’s people.

“I don’t know how people who have no faith get through something like this.” I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard that said.

I’ve heard it after a funeral service when the family gathers for the refreshment of food and fellowship and memories. The widowed often say to me, “I don’t know how people who have no faith get through something like this.”

I’ve heard it when someone gets a pink slip without a moment’s notice and suddenly they don’t know where the next paycheck is coming from; “I don’t know how people who have no faith get through something like this.”

I’ve heard it from guests in the Hospitality Network who have to make a monthly move from congregation to congregation seeking shelter; “I don’t know how people who have no faith get through something like this.”

I’ve heard it when a marriage falls apart and the security that a husband and wife can give each other is yanked out from under them; “I don’t know how people who have no faith get through something like this.”

By faith, I certainly don’t mean the right theology or doctrines or belief systems. I’m talking about a basic trust in God – that God is not against us but utterly and unalterably for us. The survivors are those **“who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.”** Even in environments of death, dysfunction or despair, their faith keeps them grounded.

So, too, does being connected with God’s people. The great sequoia trees in the western part of the country have survived fierce storms, violent winds and even raging fires. That’s because their roots, though not particularly deep, interlock with the roots of other sequoias. When the winds blow and beat upon them, they are held firmly in their position both by their own roots and by the roots of other trees about them. That’s what Christian community is all about.

The Psalmist is obviously familiar with this passage from Jeremiah:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.²

By *prosper* the Psalmist didn’t mean that everything would always go well for you. Jeremiah knew that wasn’t true. He asked God one day: **“Why do the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”³** He took lot of heat for being a prophet. His word from the Lord was not one the people wanted to hear.

Prosper, in this context, means being true to God and true to one's self. In Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the main character works to come to terms with who he is. At mid-life, after going through a crisis, he says, "Now, finally, I really had lost all desire for change, every last twinge of the notion that I ought to get somewhere or make something of myself. I was what I was. 'I will stand like a tree,' I thought, 'and be in myself as I am.'"⁴

In reflecting on the story of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen writes that life's basic question is, "to whom do I belong? To the world or to God?"

Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down. Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves. All the time and energy I spend in keeping some kind of balance and preventing myself from being tipped over and drowning shows that my life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me.

As long as I keep running about asking: "Do you love me? Do you really love me?" I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with "ifs." The world says: "Yes, I love you if you are good-looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you if you have a good education, a good job, and good connections. I love you if you produce much, sell much, and buy much." These are endless "ifs" hidden in the world's love. These "ifs" enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world's love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain "hooked" to the world--trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.⁵

Bob Dylan strikes a similar theme in one of his songs:⁶

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls...

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

You might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage,
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage,
You may be a business man or some high degree thief,
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief...

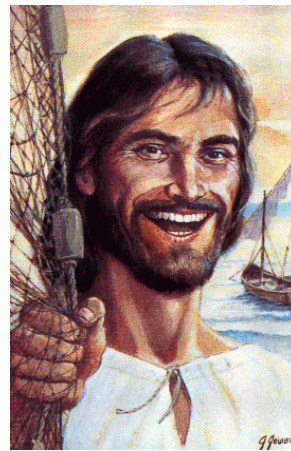
You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,

You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair,
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir...

And so on and so forth,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

I hesitate to bring this up because if you are like me, you are tired of hearing about Vicky Lynn Hogan, but I ask you, which smile seems to be the more genuine; which one models the kind of life you want to emulate; which one represents the kind of life that can withstand extreme heat or cold?



When she was in court laying claim to the inheritance she thought she deserved from her late billionaire husband, she told her attorney she wanted to be somebody. When pressed by as to what “somebody” she wanted to be, she replied, “Anna Nicole Smith.” Not Vicky Lynn Hogan, the name given to her at her birth, but Anna Nicole Smith, whoever she was.

How do you define *prosper*? *Goodness*? *Happiness*?

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests ... Your task is to be true, not popular.⁷

Some might say that Jesus really turned the world upside down when he spoke the *Beatitudes*.

Others would say he turned the world right side up. How do you see it? To whom do you belong?

Endnotes

1. www.nationalgeographic.com/geographyaction/habitats/deserts_tundra.html
2. Psalm 1:1-4
3. Jeremiah 12:1
4. Quoted by Kyle Childress in The Christian Century, January 23, 2007, p. 17
5. The Return of the Prodigal Son, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 42.
6. ©1979 Special Rider Music
7. Portions of Luke 6:17-26, *The Message*