

*Unmaking the Upside Down*  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 15, 2019  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 \(CEB\)](#)  
[I Timothy 1:12-17 \(CEB\)](#)

That passage, from Jeremiah, is incredibly challenging for us to hear. Listen again, and use Jeremiah's vivid imagery to picture what he's talking about:

*A blistering wind from the bare heights rages in the desert toward my people... I looked at the earth, and it was without shape or form... I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking... I looked and there was no one left... I looked and the fertile land was a desert, all its towns were in ruins.<sup>1</sup>*

It's a terrible and terrifying situation. And Jeremiah is not writing this in the midst of a sunny time, either – no, for he has seen the destruction of the northern people of Israel by deportation to Assyria, and while his kingdom of Judah still remains, he knows that if the empires of the north or south turn their attention toward Judah, it cannot stand against their might. The people of Judah know at their core that things are bad – but they are not preparing. Instead, they are keeping their heads down and trying to ignore the impending danger. Jeremiah is still a very young prophet, and no matter how he tries to show people the danger of ignoring the reality around them. Just a few verses before, Jeremiah is told to “announce in Judah, ‘Gather together! Let's flee to the fortified towns! Take cover, don't just stand there!’”<sup>2</sup> But once the people are gathered in the walled cities, what next? Jeremiah tells them: “Cleanse your heart of evil, Jerusalem, that you may be saved. How long will you entertain your destructive ideas?... Your own conduct, your own deeds have done this to you. This is your payment and how bitter it is, piercing into the depths of your heart.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 4:11, 23-26

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 4:5-6, selected

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 4:14, 18

The 20<sup>th</sup> century professor and rabbi, Abraham Heschel, recognized that Jeremiah was in tune with something beyond most of humanity. He wrote:

*The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is neither a 'singing saint' nor 'a moralizing poet,' but an assaulter of the mind. Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends.*<sup>4</sup>

It seems that the vivid descriptions of the dark world that Jeremiah paints for us are a vision of what human evil does. It's an inversion of God's good creation – God's spirit hovered above the cool waters in Genesis, while the hot, scorching wind blows through the desert for Jeremiah. "In the beginning, the world was formless and empty" says Genesis. Jeremiah "looked at the earth, and it was without shape or form" – it has been corrupted by evil, returned to its state before God's good creation. It is... well, it is upside down. Jeremiah even says, dripping with sarcasm, "My people are skilled – skilled at doing all the wrong things, while being hopeless at doing what is right."

This image, of an upside-down world, is powerful today as it was then. Even as we understand more and more of the mechanisms by which the world works, we are also able to cause greater damage to each other and to the very earth on which we live. Post-Apocalyptic dystopian fiction is so popular today because it would be so easy to end up in a dystopian future, if we keep being skilled at doing evil, instead of learning how to do good.

One of those dystopian fictions is the show *Stranger Things*, that revolves around a place literally called "the Upside Down." In the show, this is a dimension that is like ours, but dark, covered in vines and fungal spores. In fact, it even includes duplicates of our world – cars, and buildings, and the like – but is toxic to our earth's animal and human life. It makes a great analogue, a great visual image, of what Jeremiah is describing! Now, there is one key difference – in Jeremiah, he is not describing holding up our world as good, and describing an evil alternative – it's the other way around. He looks at our world, and sees it as corrupted by evil – it's

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, part I. Harper & Row, New York (1962, 10)

like we are living in the Upside Down and not even aware of the good creation of God that awaits us if we just turn our lives around.



*1 Screenshot from [The Arcade](#), an Augmented Reality mobile game of Stranger Things*

That’s also something of a misnomer, though – since we can’t turn our own lives around. Like trying to lift yourself off the ground by pulling on your shoelaces, or by trying to quench your thirst by drinking seawater – it’s impossible for us to turn our own lives around on our own. But fortunately, we don’t have to turn our own lives around. God is there, hand outstretched, waiting to pull us through the thin places of our Upside Down world into God’s good creation. The amazing grace of God is overwhelming – it’s enough to forgive and return us to right relationship with each other and with God. And all we have to do is stop resisting God’s pull for long enough to have our whole worldview altered.

And that’s where we get to the apostle Paul, our first-hand account of someone whose life was turned from the upside down to God’s good creation. “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord,” Paul writes, “who appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith.” We know that Paul’s story is one where he was persecuting Christians, though both he and they would have been called Jews by the Roman Pagans. This is someone who attacked and killed people who were almost but not quite the same as himself. Yet, he was called

to change as “Our Lord’s favor poured all over [him] along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus.” That change wasn’t Paul’s doing – it was God’s. But Paul listened to God, and was saved from sin – saved from the Upside Down world and able to help others find God’s good grace.

There’s a term in the world of art, where an image or object is almost-but-not-quite like reality. It’s said that whatever it is, it falls into the “uncanny valley” – a vaguely unsettling area. For instance, here’s a picture of our sanctuary – even in 2d, we see it’s as realistic as digital photography can make it. But, if we cut to a 3d model of the sanctuary, we enter that “uncanny valley” – it’s close, but not exactly right.



*2 Photograph taken Sept 10, 2019 at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Bixby, Oklahoma*

So much of the Upside Down of our world today feels more like this uncanny valley and less like the Stranger Things and Jeremiah place of darkness and uncreation. We’re more like the Romans, looking on at Paul and the Christians and sensing that there might have been some difference, but it wasn’t immediately clear. In the meanwhile, Paul saw clear differences, before and after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Likewise, Jeremiah was so sensitive to the evil of the world that he saw it not as being uncannily similar – but as different as the Upside Down.



*3 3D Render of the sanctuary created from photogrammetry software [Meshroom](#), using photographs taken Sept 12, 2019*

There is more than judgment in this passage, too. As Louisville Seminary professor Tyler Mayfield points out, “After all the talk of judgment and the undoing of creation, God notes plainly that the end of the world is not yet. This will not be the destruction of Israel and creation, even if it feels that way. This small promise amid judgment holds out hope for the exilic community. Those who come after this time of judgment will feel the effect of the desolation, but there will be survivors.”<sup>5</sup> What can we do, then, to both survive and unmake this Upside Down world? Is there anything we can do to help re-orient, to reclaim the rightside up? Yes! We can lift each other up, holding to the hopeful promises of God. Even as bad as things can get, by having faith in God, and following in the Way of Christ, we can help restore creation. We are called to speak out against injustice, to lift up goodness and mercy, to bear each others’ burdens that we might, together, see the world through God’s eyes, and love the world through God’s heart.

Or, to put it as another prophet once did, “What does the LORD require of you,

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<sup>5</sup> Tyler Mayfield, “Commentary on Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28,” *Working Preacher* [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4169](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4169)

but to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

We unmake the upside down by living right-side-up lives, filled with justice, mercy, and humility. May you know, always, that you are held closely by God, filled with the love of the Holy Spirit, and led in the Way of Christ. Amen.