

Living the Dream: Cooperate With God
Jeremiah 32:1-2, 6-15

We've been talking for a few weeks about living in a *contemplative stance*—a pattern that every day might put us in a posture that's ready and available to live as part of God's dream of life that flourishes—not only for us but for all of creation. We've said this stance could be like a rule of life, a practice that we use every day to train our senses to see and hear what God's dream is, and then to align our living with that dream. I love the idea. Like a lot of things, doing it is harder.

If you're a person inclined to jump into action quickly, like I am, you might have already been challenged by the first two steps we talked about. *Show up* and *Pay attention* aren't about action at all. They're the purely contemplative part of this contemplative stance. *Don't* act so fast, this stance says to us who tend to act impulsively or who are drawn intuitively to help. Slow down. Make sure you're fully present, and then, instead of diving in to fix a messy situation, watch and listen first. Because whether you can see it or not, you can be sure of this: God has gotten there before you. God has already planted the seeds of healing and restoration. That's who God is. That's what God does.

Today we're talking about Step 3, where we move into action. I've been waiting for this one. So often, I can see what's wrong. I know what needs to be done. I've got energy, hope, things to offer. I'm ready. Put me in, Coach!

And again this contemplative stance says to me: Not so fast. My go-to-action way of being in the world, that has really served me pretty well most of my life, gotten me ahead faster, let me accomplish more—that's nowhere in this recipe. *Cooperate with God*, this third step says. Let God lead the way.

But aren't I always cooperating with God? Don't I always act out of good intentions, common sense, my best judgment? Isn't that what 'cooperating with God' means?

Maybe. But not always.

Let's go back to that odd, wonderful story we just read about the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in a really bad time. He lived through the Exile, when the Babylonian army invaded his country, destroyed Jerusalem, marched the Israelites off into refugee camps. It was bad. Even worse maybe, Jeremiah saw it coming. For years before the Babylonians attacked, Jeremiah was like the voice of doom. He paid attention to signs that no one else seemed to be able to see—signs that said God's people had lost their way, and there were going to be consequences. 'The King is making bad decisions,' Jeremiah said. 'Something terrible is going to happen.' Think Bernie Sanders. I bet Jeremiah even looked like Bernie Sanders.

King Zedekiah had had just about enough of Jeremiah's whining about disobedience to God. Free speech wasn't really a thing yet, so Zedekiah shut Jeremiah up the best way he knew how: he threw him in jail. And that's where this story begins.

While Jeremiah is in prison, he has a vision. He hears God tell him to buy a piece of property, an empty field in the middle of Jerusalem. 'Are you kidding?' Jeremiah thinks. That's a terrible real

estate investment. An invading army is right outside the city gate. I've been telling everyone that we're going to lose this war, lose our land, lose our way of life. Now you're telling me to invest in an unredeemable city? Buy land? Here? Are you sure?

Yep, said God. I know things are just as bad as they seem. I know your investment advisor is telling you to sell short. But sell long. I've got a plan.

Despite his better judgment, Jeremiah calls the title officer to come and document a ridiculous real estate purchase. (Apparently the King had put Jeremiah in a minimum security prison where you could still do real estate transactions.) Jeremiah plunks down his hard-earned money for an empty field in a city that was about to be overrun by an invading army. Why? Because God told him to, and Jeremiah was listening. Because he was cooperating with a God he didn't understand, whose instruction, at least this time, was not the same thing as common sense. In fact, what Jeremiah heard God asking him to do seemed foolish. I wonder if God's instructions often sound foolish to us.

Even after the documents are signed, Jeremiah isn't sure he's done the right thing. He prays again. He tells God again all the reasons real estate in Jerusalem is not a good investment. God says, 'You're right; these are terrible people. Terrible things are going to happen to them. But afterward,' God says,

I will bring them back to this place to live securely. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one mind so that they may worship me all the days of their lives, for their own good and for the good of their children after them...I will rejoice in treating them graciously, and I will plant them in this land faithfully and with all my heart and being.
(Jeremiah 32:36-41)

Stay with me, God was saying to Jeremiah. 'I'm never giving up on my people. I'm asking you to buy that field to show them that I'm staying with them. That I will bring them back. *You* are my sign to them.'

But what if we don't get direct messages from God like Jeremiah did? How are we supposed to know what it means to 'cooperate with God'? I'm not unwilling; I just don't know how to do it. God doesn't always speak clearly enough for me to recognize the voice. Even when I think I'm paying attention, it's way too easy to convince myself that what I want, God wants too. How do I know when I've heard God's voice, and when to listen for something else?

We actually do have some places to go to find out how God thinks about things. The Bible, for one. The Bible is not an instruction manual. That's not what it's intended to be. And there are a lot of questions that come up for us that no one was thinking about 2,500 years ago, so the Bible always needs new interpretation. But what the Bible gives us is stories of other people who were also listening for what it means to cooperate with God. What they learned about who God is and how God acts. Sometimes they learned hard lessons we can learn from.

There's church, which, at its best, is a group of people who are looking and listening for the same things you are. We are pointing out to one another the signs that God has been here, where to look, the direction God is leading.

There's your own good mind, which is formed by whatever it is you're intentional about putting into it. Do you want to know more about how to act like someone seeking justice? Read about what justice looks like. Listen with empathy to the stories of people who don't look like you. Use your mind to find and understand the God you can believe in.

And then trust your experience. There's a lot of hearing God, knowing God, that happens in some deep place inside of you, that you'll never be able to explain. A voice you'll never quite identify for sure. You just know. Often, I think, God speaks to us without attribution. Our heads are not entirely sure, but somewhere inside, you just know.

Here's what I know. Cooperating with God always moves us toward imitating Jesus, acting more like him. That you can always be sure of.

Elias Chacour is a Palestinian Christian whose life has been about making peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In a book about his life's work¹, Chacour wrote that he'd gone back to Jesus' original language, Aramaic, to try to understand what Jesus was trying to say in the Beatitudes. You know the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the poor; blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who mourn...*

It didn't sound right to him, Chacour said, that those words are so passive. What good does it do to tell someone who lives in a Palestinian refugee camp that they're blessed? But Jesus' first language was Aramaic. And the Aramaic word that was translated into 'blessed', Chacour discovered, isn't passive at all. It means 'to turn and set yourself on the right way for the right goal.' When he understood that, Chacour translated the Beatitudes like this:

*Get up, go ahead, do something, move,
you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied.
Get up, go ahead, do something, move,
you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God.*

The way of God is not passive. The way of God sees and faces straight into despair. Holds it. But it knows that despair is never the end of the story.

Can you see the pain of a broken world, systems that don't work? Have you felt the sadness of loss, or your hope go dim? Then you are the one God is speaking to. 'Get up, do something, move,' God says to you. 'Do something that seems foolishly hopeful. Get your hands dirty. Let's build a place where human beings can live, where life can flourish.'

Come on, God says to you. Let's do this together.

¹ Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation*