

Prophets Series #9
Jeremiah 18:1-12; 32:1-15

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Jeremiah

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

But they say, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will."

[In this second passage, as Jeremiah is about to go into exile in Babylon, he does something illogical: he purchases a field in his hometown of Anathoth, three miles north of Jerusalem.]

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. Zedekiah had said, "Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the LORD; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?"

Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

When we talk about the Old Testament prophets, as we have been doing this summer, it is important to recognize that we are covering a big span of years. It's kind of like jumping from Christopher Columbus one week, to the American Revolution the next, then the Civil War, then landing on the moon. Just to give you some handles to grab a hold of, the glory years of Kings David and Solomon are in the 900's B.C., Elijah and Elisha in the mid-800's, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah in the late 700's, and today we come to Jeremiah whose ministry was around the year 600 B.C.

Last week we looked at Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem at the time that the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and was wiped off the map. The Southern Kingdom of Judah managed to preserve its existence by paying tribute to Assyria. This arrangement continued for about 100 years until a new empire, Babylon, overthrew the Assyrians and set its eyes on Judah. Under the leadership of the king with my favorite Biblical name, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 597 and made Judah a vassal state. Over the next decade, Judah made attempts at freeing itself from the Babylonian yoke, trying to get the other powerful empire in the region, Egypt, to help fight the Babylonians. Egypt made some promises of help, but didn't follow through with them. Nebuchadnezzar returned in 587 B.C. and this time made sure that there would be no more revolts in Judah. He destroyed the city, including the temple built by Solomon, he murdered the sons of King Zedekiah, then put out Zedekiah's eyes and took him and a large portion of the population of Jerusalem into exile hundreds of miles away in Babylon.

It is difficu

lt to exaggerate the enormity of this crisis for the people of Judah. They were God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, the people to whom God had given the Law through Moses. Their faith was based on a 3-legged stool -- the Law, the temple in Jerusalem, and the dynasty of King David. Now there was no more king, there was no more temple, and many were even questioning if there was a God. The stool had no more legs.

These turbulent years were the context of Jeremiah's ministry. The book begins with Jeremiah's account of receiving a call from God to be a prophet. He was a young man at that time, perhaps in his late teens or early twenties. He protests to God that he is too young for the job. But the LORD says to him, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you." In his vision, Jeremiah then sees the LORD touch his mouth and say to him, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

And that's what Jeremiah did over the next forty years. His ministry was a difficult one. Like the prophets who preceded him, he spoke hard words to his contemporaries, accusing them of being unfaithful to the LORD God by worshiping other gods and ignoring God's demands for justice in their society. Jeremiah was seen as a troublemaker, a gadfly whose words stung his hearers. It is a general characteristic of human beings, including us, that we do not like to be told that some aspect of the way we are living our lives is displeasing to God. We do not like to be told that we are sinful. We do not like to be told that if we continue our present course of action we are going to experience pain and sorrow. The LORD God gave Jeremiah the task of doing exactly that to his own people, his own family and friends, people he loved and cared about. The LORD God told Jeremiah to tell the people that because they ignored and disobeyed the law, there would be consequences -- Judah would be conquered. With a message like that, you can understand why Jeremiah was not a popular man around Jerusalem.



Take a look at this famous painting by Rembrandt. The painting is entitled *Jeremiah Laments over Jerusalem*. To me, Rembrandt here portrays well the inner turmoil Jeremiah feels at confronting his people with their sin. Jeremiah has no joy in speaking this message. Speaking the truth to friends and neighbors about their sinfulness is difficult and unpopular. Jeremiah's words in chapter 8 could be a caption for this painting: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick...For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me."

I saw Rembrandt's original painting in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam 28 years ago and I bought this print for my dad, who is also a pastor, because I saw in this Jeremiah a glimpse of what many pastors experience when faced with the responsibility of speaking God's word to a community. In our Lutheran tradition, when a person is called by a congregation to serve as its pastor, he or she is called to preach God's word as both Law and Gospel. Lutherans pack those terms, law and gospel, with a lot of meaning. To preach the law means to make people aware of the ways in which they don't measure up to the expectations God has for his people -- not only in their personal lives but also in society. If you were here a couple weeks ago when we read from the prophet Amos, you recall that Amos used the image of holding up a plumb line to see if the people were "plumb," living according to God's law. Preaching the law is holding up a plumb line and making people aware in what ways they and their society do not measure up. Preaching the law is to confront people with their personal and corporate sin.

Just like Jeremiah, parish pastors don't receive any joy from preaching the law. It's much more satisfying to preach the gospel, and by "the gospel" I mean making people aware that, even though we are sinful, reconciliation with God is made possible through Jesus Christ. God's grace and forgiveness supersede our sinfulness. To preach the gospel is to assure people that God loves us not because of what we do or don't do, but because we are his.

Some people get the impression that the law is bad news and the gospel is good news, but that's not the case. Both law and gospel, when proclaimed together, are good news. We can illustrate this by talking about a family; parents and children. If parents speak to their children only in terms of law -- do this, don't do that; oh, you really messed up this time! -- and never speak a word of encouragement or forgiveness, the children will learn to fear and resent their parents. On the other hand, if parents speak to their children only in terms of gospel -- I love you unconditionally, I'll always forgive you -- and never speak a word about rules and consequences, the children will learn to not take their parents seriously. Parents express their love for their children best when there are both expectations and forgiveness, law and gospel. And so it is with God and God's people, whether it is communicated by Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem or by a parish pastor to her congregation.

For Jeremiah and the other prophets we've listened to this summer, the key issue is that the people of Israel and Judah were worshiping other gods than the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were worshiping the Baals of the Canaanites or fashioning their own personal gods out of wood or stone. The prophets spoke sternly against this, for it was breaking the First Commandment -- I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods. We may think that we're off the hook here, that the message of the prophets doesn't really apply to us, because we know there is only one God and there's no such thing as Baal or Zeus or Apollo. But we're not off the hook. The message of the prophets is very relevant for us. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther expands the image of what a god is by saying "a 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart." The gods who compete with the LORD God for our trust include technology, power, family, nation, and money and possessions.

Furthermore, Luther says that this First Commandment is the most important of the ten: "If the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own." With that understanding, we can say that by confronting the people with breaking the First Commandment, the prophets are in reality confronting them with their failure to keep all of the law.

What happens when the law is not kept? What happens is that there are consequences. Jeremiah understood that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was God's judgment on the people for failing to keep the law. That brings up the question, Is God a punitive God? That is, does God punish us for breaking his law by sending an illness or a natural disaster or a conquering army? There are passages in the Bible to which one could appeal to make that argument. But if we take scripture as a whole, it is clear that God does not deal with us on a tit-for-tat basis -- that this sin results in this punishment. On the other hand, it is also clear that God gave us the law because God loves us and wants us to experience life in all its fullness. As a general rule, if we live according to the commandments, our lives will know joy, peace, and contentment. And as a general rule, if we ignore the commandments, our lives will know sorrow, pain, and regret.

God's words to Jeremiah in his call vision were: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." I like to paraphrase that as, "I appoint you to preach both Law and Gospel to your people."

The vast majority of Jeremiah is law, confronting people with their sin. But Jeremiah also fulfilled his calling to "build and to plant" -- to give a gospel word of hope to people who had lost everything, including their faith. We see that word of hope when Jeremiah buys a field in Anathoth as he goes into exile, an action that lets his neighbors know he does not despair for the future. And every year on Reformation Sunday, we read these words of Jeremiah from chapter 31: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt -- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days....I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Jeremiah preached both Law and Gospel to the people of Judah. He continues to preach Law and Gospel to us today.