

Jeremiah and the Temple || Jeremiah 1:1-11; 7:1-10

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Introduction

Today we continue studying the Old Testament prophets with Jeremiah. We have two Jeremiah passages this morning, Jeremiah 1 and Jeremiah 7, and I read the second one for you earlier. The first is an introduction to Jeremiah, and the second is a sermon Jeremiah preaches at the Temple. While Jeremiah preached 2700 years ago, listen for how the word of the Lord through Jeremiah speaks to us today.

Last week we talked about how Ezekiel was a prophet who was exiled to Babylon, and preached on the hope of Israel one day returning to the land. Jeremiah was the prophet in Jerusalem just before and during Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem. Jeremiah predicted the destruction of the temple due to injustice and disobedience. Turns out he was right. Let's take a deeper look at what Jeremiah said.

Introducing Jeremiah

God's Call

We begin with Jeremiah 1. Here, God calls Jeremiah into the role of prophet. God does it in a beautifully poetic way, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah responds as many of us would. We are often quicker to think of reasons why we can't do something than how God could do something through us. Jeremiah says, "Ah Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

But God persisted. The Lord says, "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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

When God calls Jeremiah to act, Jeremiah says he is too young. "I'm just a boy" he says. Clearly Jeremiah is insecure about being too young or too inexperienced to fulfill his call to be a prophet. But God can act even in the midst of our insecurity, in the midst of our weakness. Paul, the author of so many New Testament letters, had a similar dilemma when he discussed a weakness he had - what he called a thorn in his flesh. He says this in 2 Corinthians 12: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast

all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Whenever I am weak, then I am strong. God's strength shows up in our weakness, in the places we think would keep us from living out God's calling. If God called you to act, what would you say is your weakness? So many in Scripture made excuses when God called them to act, and God used them in mighty ways. How could God use you? And what are your excuses? Jeremiah said he was too young. What are you? Too young? Too old? Too poor? Too rich? Too uneducated? Too educated? Too naive? Too savvy? Haven't been a Christian long enough? Have been a Christian for so long that you're stuck in your ways? If God called you to act, what would you say is your weakness?

Pluck up and pull down; destroy and overthrow; build and plant

After God reassures Jeremiah that He is with him, we are told that the Lord touches Jeremiah's mouth and says "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."

As is the job of a prophet, God tells Jeremiah that he is going to bring bad news and good news. He is going to pluck up, pull down, destroy, and overthrow. That's the bad news. But Jeremiah is also going to build and plant, that's the good news. This is an

important list because this is a lens through which we can read the whole story of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is going to pluck up injustice and plant justice. Jeremiah is going to pull down and destroy disobedience and build righteousness. Let's look at one chapter of Jeremiah's story that demonstrates this.

Jeremiah at the Temple

In Jeremiah 7, the prophet is called to stand at the gate of the Temple and give this sermon. When we read this, we probably agree with Jeremiah and think that this is normal. But this was a sermon that disrupted and disturbed the people hearing it. What makes this uncomfortable is the context, I imagine him standing at the gate as worshipers walk by him. He's talking about how those walking by him were worshiping all wrong. It would be like someone standing on our lovely blue stone steps as you walk into worship and telling you that Presbyterians have it all wrong and we are not truly worshiping God. Full disclosure - I don't think any denomination has it perfect, but we're trying! But that's the scene. It would have been upsetting. It would have left everyone feeling uncomfortable. Perhaps that discomfort is a part of our covenant relationship with God.

In our journey through the Old Testament, starting with Noah, going through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, through Joshua and kings like David and Solomon, through the preaching of the prophets, covenant has been an important theme. The word we studied in the book of Ruth, *hesed*, is rooted in covenant. We have a covenant relationship with God and Jeremiah points

out that we too often see this relationship as one way. God is with us, God blesses us, God loves us and offers grace and mercy. All true and all good things. But we have to be serious about what we give back. This week we are especially aware of giving God thanks. That's one part. But we are also called to respond to God's side of the relationship with obedience, with how we lead our whole lives, with how we worship, with how we love God and others, with how we use our money - not just tithing and offering, but also how we spend. How do we live in this covenant with God? Do we live up to our end of the relationship?

When I put myself in the shoes of someone hearing this sermon, I also think of a story my pastor in Los Angeles would tell. This has never happened to me, but he said that he would often preach a sermon and then stand in the Narthex to shake hands, and someone would say something like "Wish my husband was here, he really needs to hear that." And my pastor would think, "But what did you get out of it?" When we hear Jeremiah's Temple Sermon, we may think, "Yeah, if only - fill in the blank - could hear this." But it's not about fill in the blank. It's about us.

Jeremiah holds up a mirror to our worship, where is it incomplete? Jeremiah says, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." In other words, the people were not meant to think that having a temple was enough. They thought that because they had a relationship with God, shown in the temple, they could get away with anything - murder, adultery, idolatry, injustice - but you can't. You can't worship God fully and do those things. As I was

studying this passage, I found this quote about how Jeremiah in this passage, and other prophets, addressed worship: “Many a prophet pointed out that if Israel allowed their society to be riddled with injustice, oppression, greed, sexual and physical violence, and the loss of all righteousness and compassion, then whatever or whoever they might have thought they were worshipping, it was not the Lord. Nor would the Lord accept the worship of such people, however outwardly orthodox or enthusiastic.” In other words, you can say all the right prayers, sing all the right songs, hear all the right sermons, but if you leave this building and ignore injustice and oppression, or if you are a part of that, you’re not worshipping God fully. And maybe it’s not God who you are worshipping. For the Christian, worship is not just an hour every Sunday, it’s a 24/7 commitment to follow Jesus.

God sends Jeremiah to destroy idolatrous, wrong worship and to build complete, true worship. Where do we need that?

Where do we depend on ourselves or on a church building or on the pastor instead of worshipping God with our whole lives? Can we worship God and allow our society to be riddled with injustice, oppression, greed, sexual and physical violence, and the loss of righteousness and compassion? Is worship more dependent on Allen playing the organ well, or me preaching a sermon well, or the choir singing well, or is it about moving us to a place where when we leave this building, we seek God’s will, we fight for justice and against the oppression of the alien, widow, and orphan? Jeremiah’s sermon should make us uncomfortable. And that’s a good thing.

Jesus at the Temple

The New Testament reading this morning was Jesus cleansing the temple, where he flips over tables and says that people have made what should be a house of prayer into a den of robbers. After hearing Jeremiah's message at the temple, it's no surprise that this was the secondary reading. Jesus, among other titles, is a prophet in the same line as Micah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. And the story of Jesus in the temple can also be read through the Jeremiah 1 lens, the tear down and build up lens. Jesus comes and drives the money changers out, all the ones making a profit on the worship of the Lord. He plucks up and pulls out the moneychangers; he destroys and overthrows the systems that keep people from truly worshiping God. But then, how does Jesus build and plant? In the story, after he flips over tables and drives the wrong people out, he invites the right people in. The people who are vulnerable and need help. Matthew tells us that immediately, the blind and lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them.

When we proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we need to be aware that he plucks up and pulls down and destroys and overthrows. He does this in our lives to begin the rebuilding process, because he also builds and plants. A field needs to be plowed before planting new seeds. A fruit tree needs to be pruned before it can grow further. Jesus needed to be killed before being resurrected. We need Jesus to overthrow some things in our life before we can grow and thrive as disciples. We need Jesus to pluck up our past sins and replant righteousness. We need Jesus

to destroy the shame and guilt that our actions or the actions of another have left in us before we can be whole. We need Jesus to pull down the systems that oppress before the Good News can be made real for all. This is uncomfortable, but necessary.

Discomfort is a part of following Jesus, but so is joy. Jesus is one who one minute is flipping over tables and the next minute healing a blind man. Destroy and build. Overthrow and plant.

Conclusion

Jeremiah, especially this sermon at the temple, was a precursor to Jesus. We can learn two things from this morning's Jeremiah passages. First, when God calls us to act, he calls us to act just as we are and just where we are. God does not wait, and doesn't have to wait, for us to get our act together. God's strength is enough. God's strength is demonstrated even in our weakness. We're called to follow God's call no matter our hesitations or excuses or weaknesses. Second, we are called to worship God with all we are and at all times. We must fight the temptation to think that worship is *just* something that happens for an hour every Sunday, and we must fight the temptation that worship is limited to singing, praying, and hearing a sermon. True worship is a lifestyle, true worship happens at all times. True worship is our end of the covenant. So let's go from this place confident in God's call on our lives, and motivated to worship and love God with everything we are.