

Sermon: Jeremiah

Text: Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; then 31:31-36

If you ever have any doubt about the relationship between God and politics, the prophets will settle it for you. Their job is to speak truth to the powerful – to those who govern. It rarely goes well.

Way back in Israel's history, at Mt. Sinai, God made a covenant with the people he had led out of slavery.

God brought them to freedom and would bring them to a place where they would flourish. They were to be God's people and show the world the beauty of life with God.

In turn, they were to live according to the laws God gave to them through Moses. The 10 commandments are part of that law.

There were also laws about how the people were to worship. The most important of that set of laws was that they were to worship only the lord God.

That's like the number one law...and the one the people routinely failed at. Kings made alliances with other nations and that typically included adopting their gods. That tended to work its way down through the ordinary people.

There were laws about justice in the courts. There were laws about how they were to treat one another – especially the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the aliens – people we would call immigrants.

As we know from the last several weeks, they didn't do so hot. And God...through the prophets...lays the responsibility for that squarely before their corrupt rulers. Israel and Judah's kings have mostly proven to be every bit as bad as old Samuel said they would.

With bad leadership, the whole population swirled into a cesspool of idol worship and mistreatment of one another.

Here is a snippet from an earlier sermon God told Jeremiah to preach outside the Temple gates. I'm using the NIV which uses simpler language:

You must really change the way you live and act. Treat one another fairly. ⁶ Do not treat outsiders or widows badly in this place. Do not take advantage of fatherless children. Do not kill those who are not guilty of doing anything wrong. Do not worship other gods. That will only bring harm to you. ⁷ If you obey me, I will let you live in this place. It is the land I gave your

people of long ago. It was promised to them for ever and ever. ⁸ But look! You are trusting in worthless lies.

⁹ “ ‘ “You continue to steal and commit murder. You commit adultery. You tell lies in court. You burn incense to Baal. You worship other gods you didn’t know before. ¹⁰ Then you come and stand in front of me. You keep coming to this house where I have put my Name. You say, ‘We are safe.’ You think you are safe when you do so many things I hate.

That sermon is in chapter 7. Now, in chapter 36, God is still trying to get the people to turn back – to change their ways. At this point, much of the land has been destroyed and some of the people have already been taken into exile. Jerusalem is in danger of falling.

God doesn’t know for sure what the people will do when they hear Jeremiah speak – but, God says, it might be that they’ll change.

Jeremiah at this point has been banned from the temple. So he has Baruch, his scribe and assistant, write down the words. Then he sends Baruch to read it at the Temple on a high holy day when the audience will be large – and will likely include powerful people.

There’s a part left out in our reading. In that part, the scroll makes its way up the echelons of power.

An important man in the congregation hears it and sets up a chance for other government officials to hear the scroll read.

Those officials let the king know of the scroll. The king sends for it and has it read to him. And you see what happened...piece by piece he burned the scroll in his fire.

The king refuses to accept this indictment on his reign. The prophets repeatedly speak God’s truth to those in power...and are rejected. It hardly gets any more political than that.

Well, nothing changed, and at this point it was probably too late anyway. Jerusalem did fall, the king and royal family were killed, and many of Jerusalem’s inhabitants were captured and taken to Babylon to serve the Babylonian king.

Jeremiah has one foot in the time right before the exile. Like the other pre-exilic prophets, he speaks God’s words of judgement.

But Jeremiah is also a prophet during the exile. So his written words are sent to a people in exile...a people crushed and heartbroken. To them he writes words of promise and hope.

That is true of all the prophets – they all make clear that God’s judgment is meant to purify and that God still plans a good future for them.

It's just that now the people of Judah are much more desperate to hear that word of hope.

The book of Jeremiah goes back and forth between the two messages. So the second part of our reading for today switches gears. This promise of a new covenant gave the people hope that they could once again live peacefully and fruitfully in the land God chose for them.

But this covenant would be different. The people of Judah couldn't possibly know how different it would be. They expected to go back and have things be the way they were.

Eventually, they did return to Jerusalem and rebuild. But things were never as they'd hoped. Their land was occupied by one foreign nation after another.

Roughly 500 years after the exile, Octavius defeated Marc Antony in a classic sea battle. Octavius declared himself emperor – Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire was born. 30 years later, Judea fell under Roman occupation.

The hope of restoration and a new covenant just seemed to get further and further away.

Jeremiah, and the people to whom he wrote, didn't really have any idea how God was going to establish this new covenant. All they could do was cling to that promise.

There are some things you can say about the new covenant even before we jump to Jesus.

A first thing to note is that this covenant included both Israel and Judah.

Israel and Judah had split several hundred years before. And the people of Israel didn't really exist as a distinct people anymore. By the time Jesus was born, the people living in what was once Israel were the Samaritans.

But nonetheless, this new covenant would bring reconciliation. We begin to see that in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, and in his encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well.

This new covenant would also create a different relationship between God's people and the law. The law was supposed to shape the people of Israel. They heard it read regularly, they recited the pieces of daily, they passed it on from generation to generation.

But in this New Covenant, the way God wants people to live would be written in their hearts. It would become a part of their very heart and soul.

We see that ultimately fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

And this New Covenant would not threaten God's people with destruction for disobedience. Instead, it would be a covenant of forgiveness.

In the future, God, in the person of Jesus, would be the one punished by the world's sin. Jesus would speak truth to power...and would be killed for it. God in Jesus would be the one to suffer.

But really, that was true all along. God's heartbreak and God's anger always went hand in hand. Human sin has always caused God to suffer right along with the people. Sin causes human suffering, but it also causes God to suffer.

The people to whom Jeremiah wrote had no way of seeing how this New Covenant would take shape.

But we do. The New Covenant is sealed in the body and blood of Christ. In the word and in the sacrament, that covenant becomes a part of our inmost being. As we live and grow into this new covenant, we trust in God's promise... written in our hearts.