

Sermon: Bottom Line Prophet

Scripture: Jeremiah 8 – 9:1

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Date: Sept 18, 2022

That is one intense passage, isn't it, Sarah has laid on you this morning?! The words of the Prophet Jeremiah known as the Weeping Prophet and now you know why – "Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for my people."

The Hebrew prophets were a remarkable group of people, mostly men, but the Tanakh says at least 7 women and probably more. The way we think of prophecy now is the foretelling of the future and while the original prophets did predict the future and their veracity was often dependent upon what they said, coming true, they are more importantly to be understood as the voice of moral conscience for the nation, speaking on behalf of God or in the words of God to the ways Israel had fallen away from God. The prophets were the original speakers of truth to power. And it was never very pleasant for them...speaking truth to power never is. Poor Jeremiah was one of the more tortured of the prophets required by God to ignite the flame of moral conscience of kings and rulers who frankly were at the top of the heap by ignoring their moral consciences.

Jeremiah was called by God as a teenager and like many of the prophets was like "uh, no thanks" and God was like "uh, yes thank you" And so began his miserable career as a prophet of God and we learn by reading the book of Jeremiah that he was - cursed by crowds, beaten and arrested, nearly lynched, thrown in a cistern, tortured, his hometown and friends came to hate him so much that they tried to assassinate him... remember Jesus saying a prophet is

never welcomed in his hometown? There you go. And you might think, well at least he was close to God... but that really wasn't so great either. He accused God of lying to him and failing him, saying "the God who was once a fountain of living water has become to me no better than a deceitful brook" and he became so utterly depressed that he not only cursed his own birthday. (from Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible, William Ramsay, pgs. 201-202)

That's all there in the book of Jeremiah. So you can understand why he was called, poor thing, the Weeping Prophet! And now you can also be grateful that God hasn't called you to be a prophet!

It was a particularly dire time in Israel's history when Jeremiah came on the scene so he wasn't the only miserable soul there. He was called by God in 627 BCE at a time when Assyria, one oppressive empire dominating Israel was being crushed by Babylon to become an even more oppressive empire and Babylon eventually destroyed the capital city Jerusalem in 587 and the grand edifice that marked God's presence among the Israelites, Solomon's Temple, sat in ruins there at the center of everything. This was particularly devastating because Solomon's Temple was a glorious monument to the God of Israel, a place of worship and sacrifice and devotion where the people were reminded of God's wisdom and righteousness, God's justice and holiness and where they were reminded to be that themselves – just, holy, wise and righteous! So when this temple was destroyed it was a devastation beyond comprehension.

Jeremiah spoke his prophecies just before it all went down, predicting it would. As Babylon was first coming on the scene he foresaw the destruction about to befall Israel and what he proclaimed was that this tragedy was going to befall them for two primary reasons: 1. Because of their idolatry, their turning

away from God towards other gods and 2. The injustices running rampant in their nation. The prophets were always hitting this, idolatry and injustices, injustices and idolatry. It mattered to God how they treated one another especially the most vulnerable and unless Israel changed their ways and turned humbly back to God they were going to be in a world of hurt! The bottom line of judgment from God to them - "My people, their evil deeds have no limit, they do not seek justice or promote the cause of the fatherless or defend the just cause of the poor and destruction will come." (Jer. 5:28) And "as you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own." (Jer. 5:19) And sure enough the hurt came at the hands of Babylon who first crushed them, destroyed the temple and then exiled them from the land... just as miserable Jeremiah had predicted.

And Jeremiah wept. The Weeping Prophet. Because he took no joy in the message he had to deliver, he wept out of compassion, as harsh as his words were about Israel's sins, his prophecy came from a place of love for his people who did not understand what they did. "Since my people are crushed, I am crushed. I mourn and horror grips me." Does that sound familiar? 600 years later Jesus would look over Jerusalem just before another great destruction - this time at the hands of Rome - and weep that they didn't understand what would make for peace.

Jeremiah well before that though speaks one of his most famous lines as he has this vision of his people being destroyed by Babylon, he says "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wound of my people?" The disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection as they are grappling with words to explain what has just happened look back on Jeremiah's

words and say “oh my gosh, this is it, this is He. This IS the balm in Gilead, the one come to heal the wound of my people and the sin-sick soul. He called people towards justice and righteousness and holiness. He spoke truth to power. He wept over our nation. He healed people physically, emotionally, communally, spiritually.

And when He was executed, like all the prophets before him and since him, he alone was resurrected and his followers experienced this remarkable transmigration of God’s Spirit that dwelt in Solomon’s Temple walls, a Spirit of wisdom and righteousness, justice and holiness, moved from the locus of the temple into their own hearts and began to believe that their lives drawn together became the new temple of God’s Spirit and they wanted to live the way of wisdom and righteousness, justice and holiness and in that way be a healing balm themselves for the world.

And that is the call for us, Jesus followers that we are today, Jesus’ church, to be 1. A presence of healing and care, 2. A voice calling for justice when we see injustice in our nation and world, and 3. a force of resistance against idolatry, the bowing to false gods however those false gods manifest themselves. And that’s a tricky one because the prophets hit this very hard and we Christians aren’t necessarily tempted to bow down before golden calves and graven images hoping to gain favors and sacrificing our children to them as did the cultures that tempted Israel, but this doesn’t mean we don’t have our own idolatries, our own idols, does it?

We can have a near religious devotion to, for instance, the invisible hand of the market that that’s what we put our trust in for the future more than God’s providence. And it could be argued that we feed our children to the jaws of a

uniquely American devotion to individuality and competition that values them based on wealth and success over generosity and service. And there's an idolatrous nationalism among us that would make the prophets cry out! A devotion to country which says America is God's country, the greatest nation on earth and it's a country run and dominated by white people and there's as much weight on the symbol of the flag as any of us Christians place upon the cross. And while there's no religious practice of child sacrifice per se, there is in our country a bizarre religious devotion to the second amendment that accepts even the death of children in its unwillingness to bend. And there is the caging and deporting of innocent children of other lands that the authorities do to protect our own citizens and the flying them from one state to another as pawns in political machinations. I can't imagine the prophets wouldn't cry out against the shamelessness of such things, setting our own gain against that of God's beloved children. It all suggests that there are deep and dangerous idolatries that hold sway in our lives and that we are far less liberated than we believe ourselves to be.

But we come into our churches and hear the voice of the prophets crying in this wilderness crying out for a different bottom line, one of justice for the oppressed, kindness to the foreigner, care for the most vulnerable, eschewing of violence and its weapons, care for the burning land. And we hear the prophet's cry that there is a deeper sickness among us than we know, that needs serious attention, that needs a physician and a balm for the healing of our people, for the healing of our land. Is there no balm for the healing of this land? Where are the humble who bow down seeking wisdom and strength from the Lord? The prophet says! Where are those who insist that justice and holiness join at the feet

of God? Where are those who are temples of God's Spirit who are giving their life, their breath, for the sake of healing and restoring, forgiving and blessing? Where are those who are dwelling here in Solomon's Walls?!