

Church of All Nations

August 31, 2025

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Last week we looked at the call of Jeremiah. Today a sampler of the message Jeremiah was commissioned to deliver to the nation. Because we only have 2 weeks to stick with Jeremiah (moving onto Seasons of the Spirit next week) I will roam a bit wider than just the actual biblical text today.

Unlike some who seem to be energised in their condemnation of others, or being proved right, Jeremiah's prophetic charge, to "pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow" (Jer. 1:10) gives him no pleasure. Quite the opposite is true; he is joyless, grief-stricken, and sick at heart. His God-given task to announce the anger of God and to urge his people to a complete change of heart and life is not a task that he finds fun. A prophet, he implies with this confession, should not take pleasure in excoriating his people.

I remember when at theological college one of the students was using the weekly worship service to launch a tirade on some group in the community - I can't remember the details but I do recall quite powerfully the comment of one of the professors. "I don't have too much of a problem with you taking this group to task (whoever they were). But let me ask this question have you first prayed for them"?

At one point in the book Jeremiah confronts God and lambasts God. You have deceived and toyed with me. Gave me a chilling message that was guaranteed to prove the wrath of all who heard it and so I decided I would keep quiet and not deliver your message; but I could not; my bones burnt within as I tried to withhold the word of the Lord. So I am trapped by you Lord God, whether I seek or keep silent I lose.

"My joy is gone; grief lies on me; my heart is ill" (Jer. 8:18).

Then, in deep dismay, Jeremiah himself cries out in horror in the face of the lack of help: "Is there no ointment in Gilead; can no physician be found there?" (Jer. 8:22). When we know that in the 6th century B.C.E. Gilead was specifically known as a place of healing and medical care, we understand the anguish of Jeremiah who laments the lack of help in

the very place where help is to be expected. If there are no physicians in Gilead, if YHWH does not appear to be in the midst of YHWH's own holy city, hopelessness seems the obvious result.

All truth telling is contexted by a careful listening to the pain of those very people. "Look! The sound of the cry of my poor people from every corner of the land: Is YHWH not in Zion? Is it's king not in the city?" (Jer. 8:19) The people of Jerusalem have been taught from their youth that the holy city is the place where YHWH is surely to be found. Yet, as the city is first threatened and partially destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 597 B.C.E., and then finally obliterated by that same king in 587 B.C.E., the Jerusalemites cry out in horror and wonder concerning the presence, or absence, of this YHWH in their city. If Jerusalem is YHWH's city, then where is YHWH? This is a reasonable and heart-felt question, and Jeremiah hears it with real sensitivity.

The ability to utter that phrase with genuine conviction is the way that one gains the right to speak a prophetic word. Until I can fully identify with their pain and suffering, until I can raise with them the questions of why things have not turned out as we all have hoped, until I can respond to their anguish with my own genuine tears of compassion, I can simply never be a prophet to them. I simply can never speak a hard word of God's truth until I have earned the right to do so as Jeremiah earned that right.

But the extraordinary thing in much of Jeremiah is that it is not the people's anguish that is being portrayed but God's. Yahweh is the spawned lover as Israel's idolatry is portrayed as adultery.

Israel is 'a bride', a newlywed bride at that. In other words, this is the honeymoon period, and there were no limits to Israel's devotion to her divine husband.

'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown' (v.2b).

Ah do you remember falling in love? How captivated and illogical you were?

How demented your critical faculties became. How exuberant and passionate you became? For some who experienced a conversion in a particular point in time the same things apply in their relationship with God.

History can even be written to incorporate these passions. Even the national history! For what we read today is not an entirely literal recollection of Israel's wilderness story! As we read Exodus, Leviticus,

Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we can see many instances of the people's grumbling, lack of trust in God, and dissatisfaction with the leadership of Moses. It is true however that large scale worship of other gods, however, is largely absent; with the one exception of the golden calf incident – which could possibly be interpreted more as a mistaken attempt to make an image of Yahweh than as a move to abandon him.

All in all, then, Israel was a joyful and faithful bride, happy with her husband and happy to follow him through some rather unpromising country on the journey to the home he had promised her

And then we get a trial like scene, maybe a courtroom situation, maybe just a lover's argument.

I am old enough to recall when Australia introduced no fault divorce. Automatic divorce after 12 months separation. And that actually was the grounds for divorce. Before that it would be a grubby attempt to prove the other persona was committing adultery or the like. Photographers and private detectives following your spouse and jumping out from rubbish bins and cupboards to catch the person in the act - literally often.

'Was there something I did wrong?' So many jilted spouses have said this, or at least thought it! 'Didn't I love you enough? Was it something you wanted me to do that I didn't do? Was it something I said? Tell me, and I'll make it up to you!' In this passage Yahweh is boldly taking this imagery of the jilted spouse and using it for himself.

This is not the impassive unmoved and unmovable god of the philosophers, the one who is immune to any pain caused by others. This God has taken the risk of binding himself in covenant relationship – in marriage – to a nation of human beings. To act like this is to take the risk of being wronged. Yahweh has been wronged, and in deep pain because of it.

What is the wrong?. Idols of course are in view here. Israel was rescued from the gods of Egypt, but now – irony of ironies – she has abandoned the one who rescued her and returned to the worship of 'the works of (her) own hands' (1:16).

Furthermore, it is an inevitable fact of human life that we become like the things we worship. Psalm 115 spells this out: They 'went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves'

they 'went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves' (v.5). The Hebrew word is actually the same as the one used in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and variously translated there as 'vanity', 'emptiness', 'meaningless', 'useless', 'pointless'. A more literal translation here might be 'they pursued emptiness and became empty', but the NRSV and NIV translations make explicit what is implicit in the text, that the 'emptiness' is actually idolatry.

There is one more striking image in our text that shows the folly of forsaking the true God. It derives from the climate of the Promised Land, which had the rainy season (winter) and the dry season (summer). When it was summer, Israel needed a source of water, or they and their crops would perish. The best thing was a spring, a constantly flowing spring. The next best thing was a cistern, a hollowed-out piece of ground, preferably rock, that could store the water that fell in the rainy season. But if the cistern had cracks in it, all the water would seep out and folks would die of thirst.

God uses that well known feature of ancient Israelite culture to convict his wayward people. "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." You had me, a never failing, always flowing spring of life. But you forsook me, because you thought that you could do it better. You had to do it yourself, dig your own cistern, but that is always a useless endeavour. Your do-it-yourself gods always crack and break and in the end are as worthless as a broken cistern.

We crack good things by insisting they serve as gods. Perfectly good things are destroyed – cracked – by the need to be gods for us. The biblical call is to turn away from these false gods and come back to the one true God.

There is no promise to us or to Jeremiah or any prophet that we will personally see the change we called for. Jeremiah has his calling - we read it in the first week - 4 negative words but two positives - to plant and to reap, So where is the hope? Yes there is hope but the promise is that the way of the Lord will prosper, not that any individual will prosper. Not even that Jesus will thrive and prosper but that the reign of God cannot be defeated. Mark's gospel has a bit of this. No resurrection stories in the original. But a call to take up your cross and follow. Opposite of the The prosperity gospel