

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 7:1-11

Now the word of the Lord came to me 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.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me,

'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.'

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
'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.'

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The last two weeks have been challenging. We spoke about Isaiah's incredible vision of God's plan for peace, with soldiers turning their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Where everyone would have enough, and be safe and secure in their having enough. We spoke about Micah's directions for how to get there, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

The problem is, it's difficult to live that way. It goes against everything out there around us, where we keep hearing that greed is good, that we should hate and kill our enemies before they have a chance to do it to us, and that only the ambitious and loud can possibly succeed in this world.

These things we hear out there are not new. They are as old as Cain rationalizing killing his brother Abel. They are the underlying philosophy, if you can call it that, behind the speech of the Assyrian noble to King Hezekiah two weeks ago.

These things we hear out there are no less wrong today than they were twenty-five hundred years ago. But they don't come up any less. They are no less of a challenge for us in how to live than they were back when Jeremiah was walking the Earth.

God's people have always had an addictive relationship with all these things out there. We keep coming back to them, even when we know better.

God could have just shaken God's mighty head at human stupidity and left humanity to its fate. But no, God loves these people, even when they are being cruel, and greedy, and stupid. So God sent prophets like Jeremiah to tell the people to change their course.

And the people changed their ways. For a generation or so. Then they went right back to behaving as if they were not God's people at all. They went right back to living as if being

crueler and more vicious than their neighbors would make them thrive. Spoiler: it wouldn't.
Spoiler: it won't.

And God would send another prophet. Lather, rinse, repeat.

The Northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and the people were taken away into exile. The Southern kingdom of Judah kept going in the same cycle for another hundred and fifty years. That's where we are now in our story. Being conquered by Babylon and the Babylonian Captivity are coming, but they aren't here yet.

When God called Jeremiah, God told him that, "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." God had a plan for Jeremiah before Jeremiah was even conceived. Jeremiah tries to offer up excuses, but God won't let him. God literally puts words in his mouth, telling him that his life's work will be to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

God knows Jeremiah intimately, knows him better than he knows himself. Just like God knows me, and just like God knows you.

God is involved with Jeremiah. God walks with Jeremiah as he comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Just like God walks with us as we fulfil the plans that God has for us.

We have free will. God does not make us fulfil the plans that God has for us. God does not force us to do the things that we were born to do, and God does not force us to do things in the way that God has in mind.

God does not force us to do what God has planned, but that does not mean that there are not consequences.

Jeremiah stands in the door of the Temple, the center of religious and social life for the nation of Judah, and he tells them to change their ways.

Those false preachers whom Micah complained about last week are still at work, telling the people that everything they're doing is OK. They're telling the people that this is the Temple of the LORD, and that means that nothing bad can possibly happen to them, no matter what bad stuff they do. It seems that powerful people can always find that kind of sycophant who claim to speak for the LORD, but who really say whatever powerful men want to hear. That hasn't changed in twenty-five hundred years.

You see, when Jeremiah looks around him, he sees a people of Judah who deceive each other and call it "just business."

And God's heart grieves.

Jeremiah sees a people of Judah who oppress the foreigners in their midst. King Solomon conscripted them into slave labor gangs to build the Temple, and their status has never really recovered.

And God's heart grieves.

Jeremiah sees a people of Judah who oppress orphans and widows, anyone without someone strong to stand up for them.

And God's heart grieves.

Jeremiah sees a people of Judah who shed innocent blood.

And God's heart grieves.

Jeremiah sees a people of Judah who follow other gods, gods that can't possibly deliver on the promises that con men make for them.

And God's heart grieves.

Jeremiah tells the people that, if they will amend their ways, that God will dwell with them in this place and they will be safe. But here they are, continuing to steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, and make offerings to idols. They then have the unmitigated gall to stand before God, who knows all this, in God's Temple, and say to each other that they are safe, that the Lord will protect them from the natural consequences of their actions.

Do they believe, Jeremiah asks, that God's Temple has become a den of robbers? And God notes, for the record, that God is watching what they do.

A people who act like that are not acting like the people of God. They are not even trying to live like God's people. Not even trying to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

That means that, just as surely as you don't get to Cleveland from here by driving south into Kentucky, they will not end up with the future that Isaiah envisioned, the peace where soldiers beat their swords into plowshares and where everyone has enough.

The directions are clear in the Scriptures for anyone to read. These prophets are not superhuman geniuses who know things that no one else could possibly guess. The prophets are people who love God and who listen when God talks.

If God's people are on a journey, then God has sent them prophets to point out the road signs that any of them could see, if they would just look. In the one hundred and fifty years between the Assyrians conquering Israel and the Babylonians conquering Judah, God sent three prophets to Judah who are important enough that we have their writings. Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

All three of these prophets tell the people what is coming. All three of these prophets tell the people to stop putting their faith in a strong military and treating their neighbors badly, to put their faith in God and living like God's people.

All three of these prophets tell God's people that, if they want to be God's people, the people who whom promises have been made, promises of peace, that they need to make a course correction. If they will make that course correction, then God will be overjoyed. God will delight in them and God will fulfill every promise that God has ever made.

If they won't make that course correction, then God will not punish them. God will let things happen, though. The natural consequences of living a cruel and vicious life. The natural consequences of living a life full of violence, either physical violence or spiritual. The only way for them to avoid those consequences is to make a U-turn, change their course.

These prophets did not just speak to the people of Judah, a tiny country in the Middle East thousands of years ago. The reason we have their words now when the words of the prophets of Baal are long-forgotten is that their words speak to us today.

We are still tempted by those things out there. We are still surrounded by people who devote their lives to those things out there, to greed, to violence, and to oppressing and taking advantage of anyone who is not strong enough to resist. This is true on an individual level, and this is true on a societal level.

Look around you. See where God's heart grieves.

Thank God, we have a chance to make a U-turn. Many of us make lots of U-turns in our lives. I pray that all of us, here in this building and around the world, would do a better job of heading in the right direction together. Because, as God has told us through the prophets, that's the only way that peace is going to happen.

May it be so.

AMEN.