

1 Sermon, December 1, 2013

Texts: Jeremiah 7:1-11

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: the Prophets"

1. Prophets are important to the love of God – Justice
2. Prophets called attention to what was wrong and what God wanted
3. Jeremiah – his times – his relationships
4. Jeremiah – his message

1. Prophets are important to the love of God – Justice

One of the most important stories of the love of God, that we don't often talk about is actually many stories; the stories of the prophets. The 15 books of the prophets make up over a third of the Old Testament.

Often the scripture readings for Advent (this season before Christmas) are from the prophets, because the prophets speak of one who is to come – and speak of the hope that Christians believe has come in Jesus Christ.

In Hebrew, the word for prophet is נָבִיא (navi), which means "spokesperson." The meaning of navi is described in Deuteronomy 18:18, where God said, "...and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." In this way, the prophet was to be the "mouth" of God.

2. Prophets called attention to what was wrong and what God wanted

As the "mouth of God," the prophets were often thought of as loudmouths, and often got into trouble. They were bothersome, because they acted as a conscience to the people, and most people don't like to be told they're doing something wrong.

The prophets got into even more into trouble because the people they criticized were often the most powerful – especially the kings.

Jesus acted as a prophet when he criticized Caesar and Herod, and when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. We know how Jesus got into trouble.

2 Sermon, December 1, 2013

The prophets not only spoke out, they acted out their message with a kind of "acted parable." Jeremiah, about whom I'm talking today, buried a linen belt (Jeremiah 13) so that it got ruined to illustrate how God intended to ruin Judah's pride. Later, Jeremiah bought a clay jar and smashed it in the Valley of Ben Hinnom in front of elders and priests to illustrate that God would smash the nation of Judah and the city of Judah beyond repair (Jeremiah 19).

Later still, God instructed Jeremiah to make a yoke from wood and leather straps and to put it on his own neck, walking around showing how God would put the nation under the yoke of the king of Babylon (Jeremiah 27-28). These dire predictions did *not* make Jeremiah popular.

In fact, God said to Jeremiah (1:19), "Attack you they will, but overcome you they can't."

3. Jeremiah – his times – his relationships

We might tend to think the prophets were wild-eyed wierdos doing strange things like shaving their beards with swords and scattering the hair in various places, or lying on their side for a period of most of a year. But the evidence is that the prophets were not alone.

Jeremiah was probably trained as a scribe, and had relationships with leaders; he had at least one follower, and probably several. He also had the sympathy of many of the people who thought his message was needed. They felt the people *had* become disobedient to God.

Jeremiah was certainly no simple eccentric. He did not willingly go into the prophethood. When God called Jeremiah, Jeremiah made excuses, saying he was only a child and did not know how to speak. However, the Lord insisted that Jeremiah go and speak as commanded, and he touched Jeremiah's mouth and put the word of the Lord into Jeremiah's mouth.

God told Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) to be unafraid, to stand up to speak, to speak as told, and to go where he was sent.

Jeremiah's ministry was from the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah (626 BC), until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in (587 BC). This period spanned the reigns of five kings of Judah: Josiah, Jehoiachaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.

3 Sermon, December 1, 2013

Jeremiah supported Josiah, who was a Godly king who instituted many reforms, but Josiah was killed in battle, and his successor was shortly replaced by a puppet king installed by the Egyptians. For the rest of his life, Jeremiah fought against the efforts of the kings, because he believed they were acting contrary to the word of God.

At the end of his ministry, the Babylonians had conquered Judah as Jeremiah had predicted. But Jeremiah still continued his preaching, hoping that the people of Judah would repent and turn back to God.

4. Jeremiah – his message

Today's scripture reading, from Jeremiah 7, is the famous temple sermon of Jeremiah. It represents a real change in his ministry. Jeremiah had been almost a public relations person in support of King Josiah's God-centered program. But here Jeremiah attacks the blind faith of the people in the protective power of the temple of God.

Picture the Jerusalem temple, a beautiful building, far more beautiful than any other structure most of the Hebrews had ever seen. It had pure bronze columns, golden incense altars and lamp stands, wooden cherubim, each ten feet tall with outstretched wings. In the innermost part of the temple was thought to be the dwelling place of God.

God told Jeremiah to stand in the doorway of the temple and preach to the people of Judah, saying: Don't trust in the temple saying "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

This was probably a saying that people spoke about the temple similar to "Jesus loves me, this I know..." a familiar phrase that represented their faith.

Jeremiah told them something that shook their superstitious belief in the temple. The temple would not protect them. God would not dwell there unless the people did the right thing. God would live with them there only if they truly act justly one with another, and do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood, and if they did not go after other gods.

If they did these good things, then God would dwell with them in that place forever.

4 Sermon, December 1, 2013

Instead, the people were known to steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that they had not known (these are violations of the Ten Commandments).

They would do these things and then come and stand before God in the Temple and say, "We are safe!"

But, no, God was watching, and they were not safe. I hope it's not too vulgar to say paraphrase Jeremiah that God

Sees you when you're sleeping

He knows when you're awake.

He knows when you've been bad or good,

So be good, for goodness' sake!

They should not place their trust in a building, no matter how beautiful. They should place their trust in a relationship with God, which begins by doing what God wants, and following the commandments.

Jesus had similar feelings about the temple. It wasn't the same building as in Jeremiah's day 700 years before. But people had come to place their trust in it. When some people spoke about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Today, both Jeremiah and Jesus would tell us that we can get spiritually lazy. We can believe that God is love, and forget that love has a demanding side to it. Love does not just pat us on the head and say, "You're OK." Love demands that we be the best we can be. Love demands that we treat people fairly. Love demands that you not waste God's resources in alcohol and other drugs, or in gambling or in anything destructive.

Love demands that employees give their best effort, that employers pay a living wage, that children care for their elderly parents, that parents raise their children with love and respect.

Love demands that the marriage bond be held with trust and complete loyalty. Love demands honesty in our dealings with each other. Love demands that we put our relationship to God before our other relationships, and that all our other relationships be conducted according to God's commandments.

The message of God is consistent. It speaks with the same demands of love as it did 27 hundred years ago through Jeremiah.

5 Sermon, December 1, 2013

"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 forever 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." Jeremiah 7:1-11, NRSV.

For example, in order to contrast the people's disobedience with the obedience of the Rechabites, God has Jeremiah invite the Rechabites to drink wine, in disobedience to their ancestor's command. The Rechabites refuse, wherefore God commends them. (Jeremiah 35:15-16)

(Jeremiah 1:19) was fulfilled many times in the biblical narrative as Jeremiah warned of destruction of those who continued to refuse repentance and accept more moderate consequences. In return for his adherence to God's discipline and speaking God's words, Jeremiah was attacked by his own brothers (Jeremiah 12:6), beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and false prophet (20:1-4), imprisoned by the king (37:18), threatened with death (38:4), thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials (38:6), and opposed by a false prophet (28).

Other disciplines that contributed to the training of the young prophet and confirmation of his message are described as not turning to the people (15:19), not marrying or fathering children (16:2), not going to weddings or funerals (16:5), not sitting in a house with feasting (16:8), and not sitting in the company of merrymakers (15:17).