

Good News from Jeremiah  
Mountaintop Presbyterian Church August 2, 2009  
Grace Chapel, Bear Creek, August 20, 2009

Scripture: Jeremiah 31: 31-34:

31. “The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was their husband to them,” declares the Lord.

33. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (NIV)

And, from the gospel of Luke, Chapter 22:19-20, the words of Jesus at the Last Supper:

19: And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body broken for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

20: In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (NIV)

Prophets don’t enjoy a good reputation. Oh, yes, we honor them. We respect them for their courage and dedication. But if you want good news, do you send for a prophet? Imagine Zedekiah, King of Judah, under siege by the Babylonians: “Gee, everybody seems so down today. Let’s send for that cheery fellow Jeremiah!” Or Ahab: “What should we do to entertain my dear queen Jezebel. Oh, I know, we’ll call for the prophet Elijah and see what he has to say. I’m sure he’ll have something positive and upbeat!”

Well, as you know, that’s not exactly what we think of when it comes to prophets. Elijah is perhaps the example that first comes to mind. “Thus saith the Lord!” Followed by a message of warning or doom. Condemnation on Ahab and Jezebel. Or a message of a famine to fall on the whole land. Jeremiah also, in the waning days of the Kingdom of Judah, had a message of doom: The Babylonians will win, and will bring the destruction of the Temple and all Jerusalem.

That’s what we think of when we think of prophets. Nathan confronting David over his sin with Bathsheba. Elijah and Ahab. And many others who brought “bad news” to the King, or to the people. The prophet Amos spoke to the wealthy of his day who ignored the needs of the suffering. Those words of prophesy still resonate today, and can be taken as a powerful call to social ministry.

This indeed is an important role of prophecy. It is a challenge to those in authority, or possessing the means, to be good stewards of God's blessings and resources, and to use that authority in a way consistent with God's Law. This isn't just a matter for Old Testament times, either. Many of Jesus's words challenge us in the same way.

But today, I'd like us to focus on a different aspect of prophecy. The circumstances Jeremiah has in mind in today's scripture are vastly different from those where he was predicting doom. In fact, they are the opposite. Jeremiah brings good news to people who have been hammered by defeat, failure, and hardship. His words bring hope and comfort. God cares, and will save. This is much the same as the Gospel, isn't it? That God cares, and He has provided for our Salvation.

Let us put ourselves, for the moment, in the time and place of the listeners to this passage from Jeremiah. As we read this passage from Jeremiah, we are not the proud king, or the haughty courtesans of the palace, or the respected priests supervising the temple, or wealthy merchants enriching themselves. No, for whatever we may have been before, we have lost it. We are now captives of the Babylonians. Or we are refugees who have fled from them, in the years following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Are you familiar with Psalm 137? "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" Read the whole psalm sometime. The bitterness is wrenching.

Our relationship with God, based on the Covenant of Moses, is in ruins. Jerusalem is desolate, many are dead, and we are captives. We have received our deserts for breaking God's Law. We are estranged from God. We know only Defeat, Abandonment, Bitterness, and Death in a foreign land.

To us, in those circumstances, Jeremiah has these words. I read them again:

31. "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was their husband to them," declares the Lord.

33. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (NIV)

The prophet comes to us with a different message! A message of hope! A message that a new covenant will be made. We will be drawn closer to God than we can imagine. A day in which God's Law will be in our minds, and in our hearts. A day in which we will not need the other voice of the prophet: warning and threatening, in order to know and do God's will. A day in which we are so close to the Lord, that all of our past wickedness and sin are forgotten.

As Christians, we understand Jeremiah's words as speaking to us of the coming of God's Word in Jesus Christ, and as speaking of life in the Spirit in the new age of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. The days of the New Covenant.

So, our first point is that prophets are not just messengers of bad news. This is good news! And of all Jeremiah's prophesies, this is the most important!

The perception that prophets bring bad news to some extent applies to popular conceptions of what the Church is about. In the every-day news and even jokes or the comics, the Church is often portrayed as a habitation for stern joyless critics of the more "free" practices of modern secular culture.

These days to come, that Jeremiah is looking forward to, are the days of the New Covenant. Our day. Yes, not just the New Testament times, but also here and now.

Jeremiah says the Lord proclaims: "I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (NIV)

We understand, from Christian tradition and experience, about God's law being written on our hearts. We accept Christ's sacrifice as demonstrating God's love for us, and redeeming us from sin. Which allows God to pour his spirit into us, and in that Spirit, we know that we are vessels of his Love to others. We might not always live up to all that we know we should do, but God is indeed with us. When we truly seek his guidance, we will surely find it. And, we are to be living blessings to others.

Further, Jeremiah proclaims that the Lord says:

"No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (NIV)

What's this about no longer "teach his neighbor" or "teach his brother?" This seems an odd thing to include. Jeremiah is telling us about this wonderful new age to come. But he includes only this one snippet about our relationships with each other. And, this doesn't even quite seem to make sense; either. Won't teaching and instruction still be needed? How will people learn things?

To answer, Jeremiah follows this puzzling statement up by saying, in effect, that this kind of "teaching" will no longer be necessary, because, in this Kingdom of God that

he says is coming, your neighbor and your brother also already know God, and have His law written on their hearts as well. Now, let's set aside for now the issue of the "neighbor." What about my brother? Or my sister? Jeremiah says we don't need to teach our brother, or as we understand, our sister, because God's Law is already there.

My own brother was 14 years younger than I was, and we never really had problems. But my two sisters and I got along about as well as Jacob and Esau, at least, that's how it seemed sometimes. Better than Cain and Abel, at least! Brothers having problems, and neighbors having problems, has been part of the human condition from the beginning. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3 NIV) That sounds like us, doesn't it? We are readier to correct things in our brother or sister, than in ourselves.

Notice that in Jeremiah's example, the brother says to another, "Know the Law!" That is as if to say, "You know what you ought to be doing. Now do it!" This doesn't show teaching, really. It's a sport of one-upsmanship. It is a "put-down." The brother saying this is, in effect, bragging that he knows the law, and upholds it, better than his brother. His brother needs to shape up! In effect, he is using God's Law as a bludgeon, not a blessing.

This kind of thing may sound familiar. In Jesus's day, his criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees often focused on exactly this. The Pharisees clothed themselves in self-righteousness while staying within the limit of the Law as written, not on their hearts, but in their documents and oral traditions. Jesus asked, as he was about to heal the man with the withered hand, "Is it Lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matthew 12: 8 NIV) He received no reply from the Scribes and Pharisees, who were seeking only an excuse to condemn him.

We see this kind of thing in our day too. It seems sometimes that people are preoccupied with showing they are better than someone else. It is pervasive. It seems to be the way of the world. For example, in showing one is superior in tastes, or in one's diet, or having the more "correct" attitudes on social issues, or energy use.

Even on the "funny pages," the jokes so often revolve around a clever put down of one character by another. Sometime, notice how much of what we call "humor" is centered around put-downs.

Here's one from Friday's comic strip "Pardon My Planet." The "teacher" at cab driver school asks, "Mr. Dilby, what is the shortest distance between two points?" The student answers, "Uh, I have absolutely no idea whatsoever." The instructor replies, "Correct!" If you have ever been taken on a circuitous route by a cab driver, it is easy to see the humor. But, the joke is in fact a put-down of all cab drivers.

On the same page, Charlie Brown is told by yet another member of his baseball team who is quitting: “I think you get sort of a neurotic pleasure out of losing all the time.” Charlie Brown seems to exist to be put down by everyone else in the comic strip.

Folks, what Jeremiah is saying is that this should not be necessary. We are not to act that way. That’s not what the New Covenant is about. Jeremiah has gone out of his way to say so. The Good News, the knowledge that God loves us and redeems us, and is willing to be with us so closely that his Word is present within us, is ever so much more important than anything else. If someone is a brother or a sister or a neighbor, in the sense of being a Brother or Sister in Christ, or a neighbor within the Kingdom, it should not be necessary for us to challenge that neighbor to live up to our expectations. If God’s Law is written upon his heart, he will know what is needed. Our pointing to our brother’s flaws just hurts, rather than helps.

Not only do prophets bring good news. Our second point is that, the good news is intended to make unnecessary the earlier task of the prophet, of bringing warnings to His people. Those within God’s new covenant will be so close to God, that sin is wiped away. As the Church, living under the New Covenant, this applies to us as well. But, what about reality? Why did the apostle Paul have to write those letters to the Corinthians, for example? Paul is dealing with practical problems of reality: real people in a real Church. Even among the faithful, problems will arise. Paul’s letters deal with some pretty difficult problems. But even so, he points out that the guiding principle is God’s love for us, and our love for each other.

Listen to Paul, 1 Corinthians 1, 11-12:

11. “My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

12. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” (NIV)

Did you get that last one? “I follow Christ.” In other words, “All you other fellows are following just various apostles or teachers, I’m the REAL follower of Christ himself!” Very clever. It’s a brilliant put-down. And, as Paul recognizes, it’s destructive, and not at all in keeping with Jesus’s teachings.

Paul used 15 chapters to convey his message to the Corinthians. In other writings, he teaches young Timothy how to handle such problems in the Church in as constructive a manner as possible. Jeremiah, in his brief prophesy, makes just this one important point about our relationships to each other under the New Covenant.

Paul is consistent with Jeremiah’s prophecy. God’s love for us is so generous, and our love for each other should be so important, that the one upmanship and posturing can be put aside. After all his discussion of problems in his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul inserts that wonderful Chapter 13, about Love. I believe you

know the one; you have heard it at weddings and other occasions, and it never grows tired or wearisome. I read some excerpts:

1 Corinthians 13,1: If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

4: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5: It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

13: And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

If God's Law is upon our hearts, and the Holy Spirit is in us, we should indeed not have to play dominance games with each other. They do not show love for each other. God's mission is more important. And, that mission is the Good News that God loves us, and all peoples. Lift each other up! Praise God, and be Thankful for his mercy. And His blessings.

So, why does Jeremiah wait until the dark days of the exile for this message? We don't know that he did. It may well be that he pronounced these words earlier, amid the prophecies of doom. The king didn't want to hear those other prophecies; he would not have listened to this one. Most of the People would not have listened either. But, in the midst of the devastation of defeat and captivity, God made sure this prophecy through Jeremiah was heard.

Isn't that so amazing, the way God works? Jesus calls to us not from an earthly throne, but from the Cross. The very symbol of a cruel and shameful death is transformed, by God, into a symbol of hope, a symbol of God's true love for us. So, here we have a third point from our scripture: We are often most open to God's word, His good news, in times of trouble.

Jeremiah's prophecy indeed looks forward to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. We live in the blessing of knowing that the Lord is indeed with us, in Spirit, dwelling within each of us. As in Jeremiah's time, the world remains a difficult place. We suffer losses, and disruption, and even death. But the voice of prophecy and of promise comes to us, saying God loves us, and saves us, even in our final day. Then we shall see fulfilled Jesus's promise made to his disciples, that where he is going, there shall we be also. (John 14: 3) And, in that day, we need no longer teach our brother or our neighbor, for we are all His children, and we shall all know him, safe in his Love. For He will forgive our iniquity, and remember our sin no more.

Amen.