

May 15, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: Jeremiah

Jeremiah 29:4-14

The great King Josiah, who had refurbished the temple, mandated observance of the Mosaic law, destroyed altars to foreign gods, expanded Judah's borders, and restored pride in the nation was dead. He had taken his army to fight against the king of Egypt, Pharaoh Necho, who wasn't even threatening Israel but just passing through on his way to fight someone else, and Josiah was killed in battle. But he had three sons, and the eldest son, Jehoahaz, was promptly installed on his father's throne and reigned for . . . oh, a couple of months. You see, Pharaoh Necho wasn't done with Judah. Having defeated the Judean army, he marched into Jerusalem and declared that Judah was now officially a vassal of Egypt. To prove his point, he took King Jehoahaz back to Egypt with him, a sort of hostage, and put Josiah's second son, Jehoiakim, on the throne. "And you'll be obedient to Egypt, right?"

"Yes, sir," said King Jehoiakim.

This wasn't just Pharaoh Necho flexing his muscles, though. By this time, it was not only clear that Assyria was done for but also that they would be immediately replaced by new empire: Babylon. Necho wanted a loyal Judah to serve as a buffer state between Egypt and the inevitable Babylonian invasion. That was the world King Jehoiakim inherited as he ascended the throne in Jerusalem.

In the first year of Jehoiakim's reign, the young prophet Jeremiah strode into the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple and lifted his voice. "You who come to the temple of the Lord today! Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'Change your ways, Israel, and I will dwell among you. But do not trust in these deceptive words, *This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!*' Yes, I understand, the temple is very nice. Well done, King Josiah. But the temple cannot save you! God wants reconstructed lives, not refurbished buildings! Amend your ways, do justice with each other; protect the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow; do not shed innocent blood; do not follow false gods. And yes, I know you're still doing it. Josiah made it harder to worship idols, but you've been diligent, haven't you? You're still bowing to the Queen of Heaven, still dedicating your children to Moloch! Stop. Change your ways, and then God will dwell among you! But if you trust in earthly things – your temple, your priests, your sacrifices – you will fall. Remember, before this temple, the shrine of the Lord was at Shiloh. The priests and the people turned from God, and now Shiloh is a ruin! That can happen here, too! God can destroy this temple!" (7:2-14)

That last bit was going too far. Jeremiah was right that Israel had come to place their dependence in the temple. "Look at what we built to God! Surely God wouldn't let anything happen to that. As long as we stay near the temple, God will protect us from all enemies." So when Jeremiah suggested not only that the temple could be destroyed but that it might be God who did it, that was too much. A crowd grabbed hold of him and dragged him out of the temple, preparing to stone him to death. They would have, too, if it hadn't been for a city elder who intervened. "One thought, before you kill this man," he said quietly, "I suppose you're quite sure he's not speaking for God? Because if he is, and you kill him, that feels like something God might take badly, yes?" The crowd hesitated, and the elder continued. "Remember, the prophet Micah said something very similar to King Hezekiah – that the temple mount would be plowed

like a field – but King Hezekiah listened to him, changed his ways, and the disaster didn't come. Perhaps we should let the king hear him.”

The mob listened to the elder and turned Jeremiah over to the king, who ignored his words, but at least chose not to execute him. Instead, he simply imposed a lifetime ban on Jeremiah entering the temple.

So who was this Jeremiah? We mentioned him in passing last week, as one who was less enamored of Josiah's kingdom-building reforms, but where did he come from? Jeremiah was from a priestly family, but *not* from the inner circle of the Jerusalem priesthood. He was from the nearby town of Anathoth, which had been used in the past as a place to exile disgraced priests. When Jeremiah was a young man, barely more than a child, God spoke to him, saying, “Jeremiah, before you were born I knew you, and I have chosen you to be a prophet to the nations.”

“Um, me?”

“You.”

“I'm not good at public speaking. And I don't like arguments and confrontations. I think you're thinking of someone else.”

“No, I've chosen you.”

“And besides, I'm still a boy! Nobody's going to listen to me.”

“Well, that much is true, anyway,” God said. “I'm sending you to speak to nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. But you're right, nobody will ever listen to you.”

“Why would anybody say yes to this?”

“Jeremiah,” God said. “I told you: I have known you from the beginning. I know what you want more than anything: to be with me. Well, I will be with you. People will attack you, vilify you, hate you, but I will always be with you, and they will not prevail against you.”

“You're not making this sound as attractive as you seem to think you are, you know.”

“Look, Jeremiah, I'm touching your lips. Now my word is in you –”

“God, I don't want to do this.”

“Look over there, Jeremiah. What do you see?”

“Um, a pot, boiling over from the north.”

“That's right. I am sending disaster on Jerusalem from the north.”

“*That's* what you want me to proclaim? That'll be miserable!”

“I told you I'd be with you. Isn't that what you've always wanted?”

“I didn't know being with you would mean giving up everything else!”

“Yeah, a lot of people make that mistake. But I will be with you.”

And that was how it started. During all the years of Josiah's reforms, Jeremiah was the lonely voice calling for reform that went deeper than building projects and new laws. While he hated idolatry, too, it seemed to him that Josiah's laws only created an appearance of righteousness, not the thing itself. And sure enough, as soon as Josiah was dead and it became clear that his son Jehoiakim was less religious than his father, the idols came out of the closets and people returned to business as usual, which is what prompted his temple sermon, which in turn led to his banishment from the temple courts.

One day, God spoke to Jeremiah. "I want you to go to the potter's house and watch." So Jeremiah went, took a seat, and watched the potter at his wheel. As the potter worked, a flaw in the clay appeared, and as the pot spun around and around, the flaw spread and soon the entire pot was ruined. So the potter took the ruined pot off the wheel, smashed it into a lump again, worked the flaws out, kneaded it violently, then put it back on the wheel and started over. "Jeremiah?"

"I get it, God. The lump is Israel. We're about to be smashed so you can start over."

"You're a smart boy, Jeremiah. Go tell the people that."

Of course, that was difficult, what with being banished from the temple, where people gathered, but Jeremiah had a friend named Baruch who was a scribe. So he dictated a long series of prophecies to Baruch, who diligently wrote them down. "Excellent," said Jeremiah. "Now, you go read those in the temple."

It seems that Baruch was a *very* good friend, because he did it. He went to the temple and began reading Jeremiah's words, and this time at least a few people listened. Remember when the book of the law was found in the temple, and Shaphan the king's secretary read it to Josiah? Well, the grandson of that Shaphan, a young man named Micaiah, was in the temple that day, and he heard Jeremiah's words. Micaiah said, "The king needs to hear this." Micaiah took the scroll to his father and the other royal officials and read it to them. Then they summoned Baruch. "Jeremiah dictated this to you, did he?"

"That's right. Word for word."

The men looked at each other. "Would you like us to read it to the king?" Baruch nodded. "All right, we'll do that. But we're going to wait a couple of hours. That should give you and Jeremiah time to get out of town for a while."

And so Baruch and Jeremiah went into hiding, and the officials went together to the king's throne room. Now it was winter, and a fire burned brightly in a brazier near the king. One of the men read the scroll to King Jehoiakim, and every few minutes, the king would stretch out his hand, holding a knife, and cut off a length of the scroll to feed to the fire.

"Baruch, do you still have parchment?" Jeremiah asked, when they heard how Jehoiakim had responded.

"You want me to write it all out again, don't you?"

"Oh no, this time it'll be longer."

Meanwhile, the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon were heading toward Jerusalem from the north. Jehoiakim, you'll remember, had sworn allegiance to Egypt. He wasn't entirely consistent with that oath, but he did seem to prefer the Egyptian devil he knew to the

Babylonian devil from the north. Jeremiah declared to everyone who would listen that God was the one sending Babylon, and their only hope was to capitulate, but that just got Jeremiah branded a traitor and landed him in the stocks. Jehoiakim, believing that Egypt had his back, defied Babylon. Egypt did not, in fact, have his back, and Nebuchadnezzar marched unhindered to Jerusalem. At that point, with the Babylonian army encamped outside, King Jehoiakim mysteriously died, and the city surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar did not destroy Jerusalem. Yet. Instead, he simply looted it of everything of value. He emptied the king's treasury, took all the gold and silver vessels from the temple, stripped the gold leaf off the walls. Then he had half the city chained to march them as slaves back to Babylon. The half that he took included nearly every nobleman, every scholar, every high priest, and every trained artisan, leaving primarily poor laborers and farmers behind. Last of all, as his most valuable slave, he took the king into exile: Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin, who had worn the crown for only a few weeks. In his place, Nebuchadnezzar installed yet a third son of Josiah, named Zedekiah. "And you'll be obedient to Babylon, right?"

"Yes, sir," said King Zedekiah.

Thus began the Babylonian Exile, in which at least some of the children of Israel were, like their ancestors in Egypt, slaves in a foreign land. Jeremiah, though, remained in Jerusalem. Everything he had said was going to happen had happened, except that Jerusalem hadn't been entirely destroyed. But being right did *not* make him popular. He continued to be treated as an outcast, a traitor, a Babylonian collaborator, an object of hatred.

"God? I don't want to do this anymore. You lied to me. Said you would protect me, but I've been arrested, banished, spat at, imprisoned, mocked. Find someone else, will you? I'm tired of being your stooge. I'm done.

"And yet ... every time I say that, every time I swear I will no longer speak your cursed word, that word swells inside me and ignites and becomes fire in my bones and I have no choice. I can't hold it in.

"Will you let me go, already? Just leave me alone!

"All right. What do we do next?"

"I told you, Jeremiah, that I am sending you to pluck up and destroy, but also to build and to plant. This is the hard part."

"Are we almost done with the hard part?"

"Not yet," God said. "I know that there are other prophets saying that this exile will be short, that soon the captives will return, that the vessels of my house will be restored."

"Will they?"

"One day. But not in your lifetime. Or theirs. I want you to write a letter to the exiles, telling them that. Tell them to get comfortable in exile. Tell them to make new lives. Tell them to trust me, because I am with them in exile, too, because I'm the one who sent them there." Jeremiah sent for Baruch and dictated a letter. We read from Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian Exiles. Jeremiah 29, verses 4-14:

⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

¹⁰For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

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Final word: As I tell Bible stories instead of preach, I tend to use this last moment – this final word – to draw a few connections between the ancient story and our life today. This week I don't even know where to start. Are we the oblivious people living in a doomed city but refusing to admit it? Are we the lonely voices that no one will listen to? Are we exiles, trying to work out a life of faith in a culture where we don't belong? I don't know; it's hard to tell when you're in the middle of it. But this I know. If we call on God, God will hear. If we search for God, we will be found by God. It may not be comfortable being with God – indeed it is guaranteed to be uncomfortable at least part of the time, or we're doing it wrong – but it's still better than *not* being with God.