

22 November 2020

Josiah and Jeremiah

Jeremiah 7:1-15

I usually offer a few words of introduction before the scripture reading – just to put it in its original context – but today’s introduction is longer than usual. Before we get to our reading in Jeremiah, I need to tell you about King Josiah.

Josiah reigned in Judah – the Israelite southern kingdom – about six centuries before Christ. He came to the throne as an eight-year-old child, which sounds like a recipe for producing a spoiled, entitled brat, but he must have had some good teachers, because he seems to have turned out all right. When he was eighteen, for instance, he summoned Hilkiah, the chief priest, and asked him, “Why is the great temple, built by my ancestor Solomon, such a shambles? You have offering boxes at the entrances, don’t you? Use them.” Hilkiah’s eyes lit up. Was the king about to back a temple renovation? Hilkiah set about at once doing all the much-needed repairs and renovations that the temple had needed for years.

Then something happened. Josiah got regular progress reports on the renovations, and one day the messenger bringing the report said, “Hilkiah told me to read this to you; he says he found it in the temple. The messenger then read aloud a scroll containing the Law of Moses, which had apparently dropped out of regular use, because Josiah had never heard it before. When the messenger finished, the king rose to his feet, tore his robes in a ritual sign of grief, and said, if this is the law God gave us, we’re in trouble, because we haven’t been following it. Josiah set about fixing that.

He began by having all the images and symbols of the Canaanite gods taken out of the temple. Yeah, there were Canaanite gods in the temple. That itself is proof that the Law of Moses really had been forgotten: that’s the first two Commandments right there. Josiah had the images of other gods dragged outside the city and burned, then made laws banning such images in all the nation of Judah. He sent troops throughout the land, to tear down shrines to other gods wherever they found them. In fact, even all the regional shrines to Israel’s God were torn down. Josiah issued a decree that the people were only to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, where he and Hilkiah could keep an eye on things. When the temple work was done, Josiah summoned all the nation to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, a mark of their renewed faithfulness to Lord, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God who had brought them from Egypt and made covenant with them.

The book of Kings regards Josiah as the greatest king of Judah’s history, and you can see why. He’s impressive. He still has a fan club. When I was in the Old Testament program in seminary, it felt as if half of my colleagues in the program had named their kids Josiah. After all, he reformed the Israelite faith – both the temple and the practice. Yes, he was a little heavy-handed in his methods. He was king, after all, and when you’re a king the first tool in your toolbox is the royal decree. But his decrees were good; they removed the physical temptation to worship Canaanite idols by, well, by burning them and destroying their shrines. And, also true, his decrees could be seen as potentially self-serving. Requiring everyone to worship in Jerusalem surely worked to centralize his power and influence, too. But remember what he started with: a temple and a faith that were both in disrepair. He restored both to prominence and glory. In the freshly renovated temple, he gave the people of Judah something to be proud of in their faith,

and that's not a bad thing. No wonder 2 Kings 23:25 says, *Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.*

Josiah died just short of his fortieth birthday. The king of Egypt marched an army through the land of Israel. Now, Egypt was only passing through, on the way to fight Assyria, but for some reason Josiah took his army and attacked the Egyptians. Josiah was killed in the battle. Having defeated Judah, the King of Egypt took advantage of the situation to take Josiah's second son, have him swear an oath of allegiance to Egypt, then install him on the throne. This second son of Josiah was named Jehoiakim, and in the first year of his reign – the same year that Josiah died – a young prophet named Jeremiah walked into the courtyard of Josiah's grand, refurbished temple and began to preach. We read Jeremiah 7, verses 1-15:

7 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2Stand 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. 3Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. 4Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

5For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6if 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, 7then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.

8Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 9Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10and 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? 11Has 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. 12Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. 13And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, 14therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. 15And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Whatever the author of Kings thinks about Josiah, Jeremiah clearly has a less adoring attitude toward the royal reforms. He starts with the temple. “Stop patting yourselves on the back over your pretty temple, as if your renovations pleased God and guaranteed divine protection. Stop saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ Have you actually read the Law of Moses? It says more than just build a nice temple; it says to care for the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. It says not to oppress the innocent, and it says to stop following other gods, and you're not doing any of that!”

(Now that last accusation – that the people were following other gods – is interesting. Hadn't Josiah stamped that out? Jeremiah apparently doesn't think so, and in the last part of his Temple Sermon – after our reading – he lays out his proof and names all the different gods that

the people are still worshipping. Maybe there's a difference between issuing a royal decree against idolatry and actually ending it.)

After that, Jeremiah runs through most of the Ten Commandments for the people, finding them lacking in all of them: *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?* Finally, Jeremiah reminds the people that the Jerusalem temple was not Israel's first shrine to the Lord. Before this, there had been the tabernacle in the city of Shiloh – which, Jeremiah points out, is now a ruin. “Don't think that can't happen to Jerusalem, too!” he declares.

Now, throughout this speech, Jeremiah never once mentions King Josiah by name. Maybe it was too soon after his death. Nor does he directly criticize Josiah's efforts at reform. But he still makes it crystal clear that he thinks those reforms failed. Josiah tried to reform Israel's faith from the outside. He fixed up the temple, then destroyed the other temples, then laid down official rules and penalties to enforce the worship of Israel's God. Jeremiah, on the other hand, says that that's the wrong approach. You can make the outside of your faith look impressive and still be rotten at the core. In fact, making the outside look impressive can make things worse, by encouraging you to trust in those appearances. Instead, Jeremiah calls for a reform that works from the inside out, beginning with the way the people treat the least and the last, the helpless and friendless and vulnerable. First, he says, change your heart and amend your ways. Then you can worry about the externals, if it still matters to you.

It's easy to apply Jeremiah's message beyond his own time. Throughout history, we see that when churches put all their energy into the externals, they very often decay from within. Europe is dotted with vast, gorgeous, drafty, and generally empty cathedrals, in which priests occasionally rope off a small section for a sparse worship service surrounded by gawking tourists. Our own American cities are filled with huge downtown churches that were once the pride of their denominations and that are now lying empty, or being repurposed as spas or artists' studios or upscale apartments. I imagine in another thirty years we'll see the same thing happening to the vast worship-entertainment complexes of the modern suburban megachurch, as they get parceled out for office space. It's not that there's anything wrong with having a nice building and keeping it from falling part – Josiah *wasn't* wrong to do his renovations – it's just that the more impressive a church is on the outside, the easier it seems to be to lose perspective and think that impressive on the outside is enough. We have to remember that the One we're trying to impress first is God, who is not really a fan of buildings. What *is* God a fan of? God has told you, O Man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God?

(That wasn't Jeremiah, by the way. That line was from Micah, an earlier prophet who influenced Jeremiah.)

So what does all this mean for us? Well, we have this great building – and it's a good thing. In it we have space for learning, for gathering, and for hosting ministries to the community. In it we have this sanctuary for worship with an altar and stained glass windows – and *those* are a good thing, too. Let no one sneer at stained glass; it genuinely enhances a sense of worship. I didn't realize how much until the pandemic, but now I have seen the effect of this space on people who have been deprived of it. They enter and take a deep breath and then,

generally, sit down and begin to pray. We have other blessings here, too, worship leaders and teachers, and people with skills in music or plumbing or electrical work and gardening. These are externals, but Josiah wasn't wrong: the externals matter.

But even though Josiah wasn't wrong, Jeremiah was right. Yes, it is a good thing to maintain the externals of faith – buildings and programs and all that – and since those things cost money, just as Josiah's renovations did, we ask for that support – your gifts and pledges. But don't give so that we can have a nice building and program. Give so we can care for people. The tricky balancing act we have as a church is to maintain an operating budget and a building and staff all that stuff without losing sight of the purpose of them all. The externals may be impressive, but our first job is to impress God. And how do we do that again? Let's try the prophet Amos this time: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a flowing stream."