

## Jeremiah 1

We are now onto the summer Narrative Lectionary series. First will be six weeks of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a prophet just before and during Judah's exile to Babylon. Before we dive into Jeremiah, a little bit of history is going to be helpful. Maybe for most of you this will be a review – but it's important to be clear about the historical setting in which the prophets worked to understand their role.

The 4 major prophets and 12 minor prophets all did their work in the years just before, during and after the most tumultuous time in ancient Israel's history. That time included Israel's defeat by the Assyrians and Judah's defeat by Babylon and the exile of many of their people to Babylon.

Some of the earliest prophets prophesied in the north – Israel. They spoke dire warnings that were largely unheeded by Israel's rulers. Assyria essentially annihilated Israel. The Israelites were deported and other defeated peoples moved in. Israel ultimately became Samaria.

Then Babylon defeated Assyria and Babylon became the big threat in the region. With Israel essentially gone, all eyes turn toward the southern kingdom – Judah.

I won't go too deeply into the history but a few keys are important. Judah was caught between Babylon and Egypt. Judah's rulers variously sought protection through alliances with Egypt or Babylon and some of the other nations of the region.

Like the prophets to Israel had before them, Judah's prophets condemned these alliances. They essentially tried to convince Judah's rulers that they were making a deal with the devil. And ultimately those alliances failed to keep Judah safe.

Babylon defeated Judah, sort of in stages. But in 587 BC Judah was conquered completely, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and a significant proportion of the best and brightest of Judah were sent into exile in Babylon.

That's the brief history.

But Jeremiah and the other prophets were not so concerned with recording the history and political maneuvering. The exile was a profound historical event for the people of Judah.

But it was also a profound theological event. It shook to the core everything they believed about themselves as God's chosen, and their relationship to the God who chose them.

Jeremiah's issue...and the issue of the other prophets...was the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant God had made with them...a covenant that began with God's deep mercy and faithfulness to them.

In a nutshell, faithfulness to the covenant meant two things. First, it meant faithfulness to the one God, Yahweh, and not the worship of idols.

Second, the covenant laid out how they were to live in community with justice and mercy at the forefront. And they were to show the rest of the world what a blessing life could be under God's rule. God's plan was that all the world would be blessed through Israel.

That covenant was made first with Abraham, and was continually renewed and fleshed out, especially through Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Jeremiah, as well as the other prophets, warned of the dire consequences of unfaithfulness. Defeat and exile were not just random political events.

Jeremiah was given the uncomfortable task of declaring that this was God's doing. God withdrew God's protection and let Israel and Judah have their own way. The consequences were disastrous.

At the heart of how the people of Judah viewed themselves and their relationship with God was what theologian Walter Brueggemann called the Royal-Temple ideology.

The priests and kings believed that the system of kings and priests ruling together was too important to God's purpose to ever let fall – that God would sustain that system no matter what they did.

The defeat of Judah and destruction of the Temple in 587 BC proved otherwise. The kings and priests end up standing helpless in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the end of Judah as an independent political entity. Just as Jeremiah prophesied.

The royal and priestly courts are likely the prime targets of the prophetic message from Jeremiah, but those words speak also to the people who bought into that system – which was probably most of the people.

The most unpopular part of Jeremiah's message was that their defeat and exile appeared to be as a result of Yahweh's rule, not in spite of.

It was not God being weak. Rather God used the forces of history to bring an end to the unfaithful rule of the kings and the temple.

I can't emphasize enough how important this is if we are going to let the prophets speak to us today. God does act in the course of history.

But when a people is unfaithful and fails to live in accordance with God's justice and mercy, God's action may be to leave us to our own devices and let the chips fall where they may.

This was a shocking realization for Judah. It's an uncomfortable one for us. Judah's defeat and subsequent exile seems awfully harsh for a God who is a God of love.

But the words of Jeremiah and the other prophets are not just words of God's anger. They are also words of what is called the pathos of God.

The pathos of God arises out of God's deep yearning and love for God's people. The pathos of God shows God as a heartbroken parent, anguished over the unfaithfulness and cruelty of the people God so loves. The pathos of God means Judgement and punishment are not the last words for Jeremiah to speak.

That pathos of God offers Jeremiah the opportunity to also offer hope.

Jeremiah is called by God out of a place of deep intimacy...Jeremiah is known so fully by God that God knew him when he was still being shaped in his mother's womb.

The call of Jeremiah gives us some historical data. It sets him in place and time. But the word of the Lord is key. Jeremiah will be speaking God's word. But that's a scary proposition – and like many of the prophets, Jeremiah tries to convince God he's not up to the task. He's too young...doesn't know enough.

And God wants him to stand before kings and priests and speak words of God's judgement? No thanks!

But God persists. Jeremiah will speak God's word – words which will announce destruction and the overthrow of those unfaithful kings and priests...and the very nation they ruled. You can imagine not wanting that job.

Jeremiah will stand in the Temple and warn them that if they worship Baal and the other idols, if they continue to mistreat the widow and the orphan and the alien, if they shed innocent

blood, God's judgement will be on them. Like Jesus 500 years later, Jeremiah will accuse the priests of making the Temple a den of robbers.

But God does not just give Jeremiah harsh words of judgement to speak. It's not just pluck up, pull down, destroy and overthrow. It's also to build and to plant. It's death...and resurrection.

Judah will be defeated...the unfaithful kings and priests will lead their people right into the heart of disaster. They will be forced to come face to face with the realization that God let them...that this is God's doing.

But out of the ashes of that disaster, God will build anew. Jeremiah will speak those words of hope and salvation as well.

God has continued to raise up prophets. They are recognizable by the same sort of word spoken by Jeremiah. They are those who have spoken words of truth to people in power.

They have spoken words of truth to those who believe they are appointed by God and immune to God's judgement.

They have spoken words of truth to those who put their faith in earthly rulers and in power and wealth.

They have spoken words of truth to those who have mistreated and oppressed those who are the least powerful.

They have spoken words of truth to the church when it fails to be faithful to God and to be a force for God's justice and mercy.

This week is Juneteenth. It's a celebration of the end of slavery. That end was brought about by prophets speaking words of truth, often at great risk.

Prophets are still speaking. As we work our way through Jeremiah, we'll lift up the themes that help us recognize prophets in our own time and place. Maybe it will even encourage some of us to speak prophetically.

But for all of us, the words of Jeremiah will remind us that yes, God does judge when we chase after other gods and when we mistreat the most vulnerable.

But the words of Jeremiah will also remind us of God's deep, abiding love for us...a love that will not abandon us. And ultimately, Jeremiah will remind us, it is a love that brings life out of death.

