

## Baruch's scroll

We're now in our third week of Jeremiah. And honestly, old Jeremiah just doesn't get any easier, does he? God tells Jeremiah to have his scribe, Baruch, write down the words God needs the people to hear...words of dire warning and calls to repent. Jeremiah sent Baruch to read the scroll at the Temple. He'd ticked off the powers that be so much, he was banned.

Baruch went and read it to all the people who came to the house of the Lord.

King Jehoiakim learns of this and sends his assistant, Jehudi, to get the scroll and read it to him. So, if King Jehoiakim is a righteous king he'll listen right? I mean, this is God's word!

Surely, the king will say, oh no, we are not living the way God wants us to! We'd better change, right?

Uhh...no. Page by page the king burns it in the fire that warms his room. He rejects Jeremiah's prophesy that Babylon will destroy Judah as a punishment for their sins.

Surely, he thought, the kings of Judah are immune from God's judgment. He must have thought he was burning rubbish.

But of course neither God, nor Jeremiah, back off. Jeremiah's prophesy will come true. The end is in fact coming for Judah. God's patience has run out.

At this point, we are going to have to come face to face with the violence that the prophets were pretty clear was brought on by God. God is a God of love. But the prophets repeatedly tell us that God's love can mean that God gets really ticked when the people do not love one another as God wants.

If we understand the prophets right, they can help us live the sort of life God wants for us.

But if we understand this period of God's people incorrectly, we will just keep repeating the same mistakes Judah made.

The story of Judah's defeat by the power of Babylon and the subsequent exile has been used as a justification for our own violence throughout the centuries. The reasoning is well, if God used violence to defeat God's enemies, we can, too.

But a proper reading of the prophets can keep us out of that trap.

So, what do we need to look at?

The first thing that should catch our attention and bring us up really short is the clear words of Jeremiah and the other prophets. God viewed God's *own people*...as the enemy. They were living in a way opposed to what God wanted for humanity.

To help us address the violence of this historical event, we need to envision two bookends for this story. There is no clearer example than this period of Israel and Judah's history of how important it is to understand anything in the Bible as a part of a whole story, and not just a cherry-picked version that supports what we might already think. We need to hear the prophet's challenge as a challenge to us...not just an ancient story that has nothing to do with us.

The first bookend is God's creation of the people, Israel, and Israel's vocation... God's why for their formation. The second bookend is Jesus and the cross.

The first bookend. When God called Abraham and Sarah and the generations following them, the promise was that they would receive the blessing of land and descendants...they would be blessed. But they would be blessed so that, through them, all the families of the world would be blessed. The law was given to them as the way to structure life so that all creation would be blessed.

Generations of Israel's religious and political leaders failed repeatedly at their vocation.

To be sure, there were occasional flashes of hope.

King Josiah was King Jehoiakim's father. During Josiah's reign, a Temple repair and remodel was undertaken. One of the interior walls was torn out. Behind that wall, an ancient scroll was found.

Scholars believe most of the scroll was what we call the book of Deuteronomy. That book is almost entirely Moses' retelling the law to the people before they entered the promised land.

It laid out the way of life God commanded...a way of life that was very different from the eternal quest for earthly power and riches the kings favored.

The scroll also predicted doom if God's way of life was not followed. The book of Deuteronomy does list the curses that come from a life lived outside of God's way...a way that Jesus would come to call the kingdom of God.

Apparently Judah was so disconnected from the faith of their ancestors Josiah needed help to interpret the scroll. He enlisted the help of the prophet Huldah to interpret it.

Once they realized what they had, Josiah and at least some of his court were shaken to the core.

Oh boy, they thought, we are in trouble.

Then, Josiah did listen to God's word. He instituted reforms. He got rid of the idols in the Temple. He had the scroll read to people and they all tore their clothes and swore their allegiance to God and God's way of life. They repented. But it didn't last.

Jehoiakim was Josiah's son. It only took one generation for it to all go to hell. King Jehoiakim hears God's word... and burns it in his firepit. He can't imagine God's judgement falling on him...that he, God's anointed, and the people he led, had in fact become God's enemies.

In that first long bookend, we hear repeatedly about Israel and Judah's worship of other gods. That idolatry led them to practices that were not God's way – practices that led to bloodshed, exploitation of the poor and the workers by the rich, failure to care for the most vulnerable – listed repeatedly as the immigrant, the widow, the orphan, or just the poor.

The endless cycle of violence, greed, and injustice was just too much for God. This beloved people really needed to be shaken up. And first Assyria, and then Babylon, were who God chose to shake them up...to bring them to their knees.

But God's threats were always about bringing the people back to who they were called to be. God used Babylon to shake the rulers of Judah up.

So onto the other bookend. Jeremiah and the later prophets will begin to point to a time after the exile, a time when a new king to sit on the throne.

This bookend tells us some things about violence and God that we always forget. Jesus, like God, had this same vision of a people shaped by love and mercy and care for one another and all of creation. Jesus called his vision the kingdom of God. His vision is laid out in his teaching. A vision of love, justice, mercy. And like Judah before, humanity has not listened.

The clash between Jesus' vision and the vision of the religious and political rulers was so great, those two ways of life could not coexist. One of them had to be crushed. But instead of crushing the powers of violence and greed, God does something completely different.

Instead of using violence against the enemies of God, in the person of Jesus, God suffers the impact of human violence without retaliation. The cross represents God's ultimate solution to the violence, greed, and injustice of humans. In the person of Jesus, God absorbs it all. God lets

the powers do what they will. It's only on the other side...the side of resurrection...that God wins.

We get in trouble when we forget the whole of this story. We forget, like Israel and Judah before us, that we may in fact be God's enemies, not the people we want to smite.

We forget the message of the cross - that God's solution involved Jesus suffering the full effect of human failings, away that rejected destruction.

One bookend reminds us just what it is God wants, and what happens when we put ourselves outside what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

The other bookend reminds us that God chose the cross instead of the endless cycle of violence and destruction.

Today's reading leaves us in a pretty dark place.

But the tide will turn soon. We'll get to the messages of hope. We'll hear a message that points to the bookend at other end of the story of exile and despair.

In our present time, a time where peoples and nations seem to keep repeating the sins of Judah, reflection on those bookends could be helpful for all of us as Jesus' followers. It gives us a way forward. It is a way that calls us to point the way to cross. It gives us a promise that we don't have to follow a way of violence and revenge...a way that instead promises love...compassion...justice. A way that offers us the kingdom of God.