

Every year when the pastoral team or other leaders begins to work at identifying texts for a season like Lent, we have some choices to make.

Last year we were in our Year of the Bible. We had just spent about six weeks or so on the life and teachings of Jesus. So it seemed to make sense to follow the activities of Jesus during his final week on earth. Starting on the Sunday after Ash Wednesday, we picked up the story of Jesus in Mark as he instructs his disciples to prepare for the Passover. Then, with only a flashback to Palm Sunday, we worked our way through the rest of the book of Mark, ending on Easter with what's known as the Longer Ending of Mark.

We've used the same kind of approach in a couple of other years, working through Mark another time and also through Luke.

I like that approach. We get to talk about the events of that final week of Jesus' life, what we as Christians might consider the most important week in history. It's the week that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and preached some of his most compelling sermons. It's the week he cleansed the temple and washed his disciples' feet. It's the week he was arrested, tried, and crucified. It's the week that gives meaning to Easter morning.

And then there's years like this year, when we follow what's known as the Lectionary, a three-year cycle that guides us through the whole of scripture. The Lectionary makes sure our spiritual diet isn't filled with just the meaty highlights and those easier texts that might be considered the graham cracker fluff of life. The lectionary approach makes sure we eat our vegetables as well, and for someone like me, with a reputation for not eating enough vegetables, that's a bummer. I have friends who are vegetarians. I have friends who are vegan. I respect them. But I prefer the meaty stuff, on my plate and in our sermons.

So that's a bit of what I was feeling when I got the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent to preach on. In each year of the Lectionary cycle, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent is the one where the Old Testament reading for day comes from one of the major prophets – Isaiah, Ezekiel, and this year Jeremiah. And in the high season of Lent, I'm not looking for Old Testament prophecy in my spiritual diet any more than I want to eat lima beans when there's another burger on the grill.

Jeremiah. The longest book of the Bible in terms of words and verses. When we did our Year of the Bible reading last year, it took more than two weeks to wade through that thing. A commentary I read this week said, "The book of Jeremiah is long, complex, and difficult. To the modern reader it appears to be a

repetitive mess, a mixture of prose and poetry, in no particular order... The reader who is not confused by reading the book of Jeremiah has not understood it!"<sup>1</sup>

One of the reasons we may not understand Jeremiah is that we don't know for sure who wrote what parts of it and when they did it. Apparently there actually was a guy named Jeremiah. He probably wrote part of the book, but likely not all of it. We're pretty sure he asked an assistant to take some dictation, and there was probably an editor that came along later to finish it off.

But Jeremiah is part of a family of priests that is outside the loop of religious authority. From outside the loop, Jeremiah begins his prophecy around 627 BC. That's a good time to begin prophesying, because it's under King Josiah and his reforms. But, things went bad, and we think that he some of it as late as 587 BC, because he has some comments about the Exile in the later chapters.

Ah, the Exile.

That other climactic period in the history of God's people. I say "other" because we often talk about the Exodus, where God's people were freed from 400 years of slavery after God's covenant with Abraham. [HANDY-DANDY YOTB INSERT?] And in the Exodus, God's people wandered in the desert for 40 years and got another covenant, this time with Moses. The Exodus gets lots of ink in our Bibles, and it has lots of good stories, but the Exile is a big deal in Jewish history as well.

You see, the state of Israel, presided over by the House of David for 400 years, was a unique experiment in the ancient Near East. Not only was it a state committed to a single God in its religious life, its political life was based on a tradition of covenant with this God. So not only is the state small and vulnerable politically, it's got a peculiar self-understanding of what it means to be a country in the first place.



And then along comes Assyria, soon followed by Babylon. And these kingdoms had the policy of deporting the leading members of captured societies. That limits the hassles they would have with conquered peoples. All the leaders in Jerusalem were kicked out, in at least three different waves, sent to Babylon.

This forced exile makes good political sense. But for the Jews it was more than a political crisis. Because of their relationship with Yahweh, this crisis was a theological one as well. It's this theological crisis that makes up the book of Jeremiah.

So that's the background on Jeremiah. But I still want to know -- in the midst of Lent, in the midst of a time when we should be talking about Jesus and all the meaty stuff that he said and did, why do we have to eat our lima beans? Why do we have to read Jeremiah? After all, Jeremiah is just, as I said, "a long, complex, difficult, ... repetitive book." It's written to God's people in exile, and we as God's people are no longer in exile.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Jeremiah* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), p.1.

Or are we.

Theologian Walter Brueggeman describes Exile as going into the “abyss,” and he names a couple of abysses that we should consider as North American Christians. The first is a societal one – the abyss of 9/11, an event that happened 15 years ago this fall. Most of us over the age of 18 or can remember where we were that fateful day. Those of us under that age can’t remember a time when the U.S. wasn’t at war as a result of 9/11.

Now, taken as an act of brutality, it wasn’t overly spectacular in that it had in a relatively modest number of deaths. Not that the 2977 deaths that are now attributed to those events is ever insignificant, but there were more than 30 times that number of alcohol-related deaths in 2013 alone. In 2012, according to the Center for Disease Control, there was an average of 1915 abortions in the United States every *day*. Those are much more spectacular numbers, but they are such a part of our culture that I think that we’ve become numb to them.

But taken as a symbolic event, 9/11 is of huge significance in our culture. It introduced us to a depth of vulnerability that was previously unthinkable. And where has it led us?

- 9/11 has led us to a state of fear that keeps our politicians from enacting even the simplest of gun controls in a country...
  - Where the demand for assault rifles outstrips the ability of manufacturers to make them,
  - Where American children are 16 times more likely to be killed in unintentional shootings than their peers in other high-income countries.
- 9/11 has led us to such a state of fear of the *other* that a man whose candidacy many of us initially thought was a joke, a man who repeatedly demonizes anyone who doesn’t look like him has a good likelihood of winning the Republican presidential nomination. And he might win the election, perhaps primarily because a lot of people have a fear of the alternative!

This culture of fear that we live in, heightened by the events of 9/11, has put us into a societal abyss, says Brueggeman. It has put us into exile.

There’s a second kind of abyss or exile that Brueggeman names. These are the “minor” abysses we each face in our day-to-day life. That is, they are “minor” when they happen to someone else. But to anyone who has faced the threat of a failed marriage, a bad medical diagnosis, a pink slip, a disabling accident, the betrayal of a friend, or any one of a thousand things, the abyss – the exile – is anything but minor. Our brother Mike named some of these abysses in last week’s sermon, including naming how sometimes this exile hits us from out of the blue, as it did for sisters and brothers in Hesston, Kansas, recently.

There's another abyss that Bruegemann didn't name, but Mike did last week. That's the abyss we are in when we feel ashamed about our past, thinking that no one will ever love us and that we are worthless. Because it's so often something we carry alone, it can be the deepest exile of all.

As I consider those things, I have to say that as Christians -- as human beings, for goodness sake -- we have all been or are currently in, the abyss. We have all been or are currently in Exile. It may be a different kind of exile than what Jeremiah is writing about, but it's an exile nonetheless.

So with that in mind, let's dig deeper into what Jeremiah had to say....

I spent some time talking about the context in which the book of Jeremiah is written. Today's text is part of a book within a book. Chapters 30 and 31 are sometimes referred to as the "Book of Consolation." Look back to verse 2 of chapter 30: "Thus says, the Lord, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you."

Then, through chapters 30 and 31, Jeremiah recites 14 oracles, 14 short poems of hope and consolation for the people. They're from God. Ten of them begin with "Thus says the Lord," and many of them would be worth a sermon on their own.

But the one Tim/Sharon read has been called the "climax of Jeremiah's teaching." It has been called the "apex of Old Testament salvation history." It has been described as "one of the profoundest and most moving passages in the entire Bible." It actually is the source of the name "New Testament." And it is quoted, virtually word for word, in Hebrews 8, where it is the longest Old Testament passage repeated in the New Testament. Maybe it's pretty meaty, after all!

Jeremiah begins this oracle by saying that "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Judah and the house of Israel."

Covenant is an important word, an important concept, for the Jews. I've said it five times already:

- God made a covenant with Noah when he came out of the ark.
- More importantly, in Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." "Abraham," God says, "I make this covenant with you that I will give you this land forever."
- But things go bad, and the children of Israel get stuck in slavery in Egypt. Then, God remembers the covenant he made with Abraham. He hears their crying, and he takes notice of them.
- They leave through the Exodus and then at Sinai, God makes another covenant, this time with Moses and the people, this time it's conditional: "If you obey my voice," says God, "If you keep my covenant, then you shall be my people, my treasured possession."

But we know how the story goes. Time and time again the people do *not* obey God's voice. Time and time again they do *not* keep God's covenant. So many times they pay the price for disobeying, until they

are stuck in a foreign place, far from the Promised Land, and far from their beloved temple. Stuck in exile.

The people didn't keep the covenant, and God could have walked away.

But God doesn't.

Instead God says, "I will make a *new* covenant."

There are many significant parts about this new covenant, but I will name just three this morning:

- First, it will be with the house of Judah and the house of Israel, both the northern and the southern kingdom. This covenant, this promise is a word given to a defeated, dispirited, and divided people, a people stuck in a place where they thought God may have rejected them. It is for ALL God's people stuck in exile.
- Second, this new covenant will NOT be like the covenant Yahweh made with the people at Sinai. It will NOT be the law written on tablets of stone. Instead, the law will be written on their hearts. It will be internalized in such a way that the people won't need to gain their access to God through the priests. No longer will the people need to teach each other, in fact, for they will know God. Every one of them, from the least of them to the greatest, will know Yahweh themselves. They will know Yahweh in their hearts.
- And finally, Yahweh offers what may be the most important part of the covenant. "I will forgive their iniquity," God says, "and I will remember their sin no more." This is *not* a conditional covenant. It is *not* dependent on the people to obey. It is *unconditional*. No matter what the children of God say, no matter what the children of God do, they will never be rejected by God.

To a people in Exile, that is consolation. That is powerful. That is meaty.

So it's meaty. But there's still no Lent here. There's still no preparation for Easter.

Or is there?

Turn with me, if you will, to Luke chapter 22, verse 20. In an act that we will gather to remember in 11 days, Jesus took the cup and he said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

- In this season of Lent, and every day, for that matter, Jesus says to us, "Are you feeling defeated and dispirited? Are you feeling stuck in a place where you think God may have rejected you? Are

you in exile? No matter who you are, northern or southern kingdom, Jew or Gentile, male or female, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. And it is poured out for you, all of you.”

- Jesus says, “Are you feeling bound by the law? Well I did not come to abolish the law, but I came to fulfill it. Because I live, you also will live. You will know *in your heart* that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Every one of you, from the least to the greatest will know me in your heart. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. And it is poured out for you.
- And most importantly, Jesus says, “This is not a conditional act that I am doing – it is unconditional. No matter what you do, you will never be rejected. I forgive your iniquities, and I will remember your sin no more. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. And it is poured out for you.”

That, my friends, is the meat of Jeremiah. That is the meat of the gospel.

The book of Jeremiah knows that at the bottom of the abyss, at the bottom of the exile, there lingers the Lord of creation and the lover of Israel, reaching out to all of us in unconditional terms. Jeremiah gives access to that “Saturday” moment in when the dread of Friday is overcome by the anticipation of Sunday.

Thanks be to God.