

June 25-26, 2011

Great People in God's Story Series

Title: *Jeremiah.....prophesies confirmed*

Theme: *Jeremiah was used by God to confront Judah and Jerusalem for their worship of idols. They had broken covenant community, and it's Jeremiah's job to tell them so. He demonstrates knowledge and wisdom that can only come from God. As followers of Jesus, we may be called to give correction when covenant community is broken among us.*

Text: Jeremiah 28: 5-9

Notes on the Text: Contrary to popular belief, Jeremiah was not a bullfrog. He was one of the most influential prophets in the history of Israel whose orations take place during that significant historical period called The Babylonian Captivity.

Jeremiah is a classic prophet in the sense that he never wanted to be a prophet. His call is from God in a beautiful, loving statement of God's foreknowledge and care for his servant in Ch. 1:5. In true prophet form, not unlike Moses and others, Jeremiah questions God's wisdom in choosing him, pointing out that he can't really speak that well and that he's only a child, so surely there must be someone more and better qualified to be the spokesperson for the Lord. But God holds fast and instead of agreeing with Jeremiah and dismissing him, he blesses and commissions him instead! This is the first and truest sign of the prophet's call – it's not Jeremiah who will speak but God, and God can/will use even those who we might deem as unqualified.

Jeremiah's mission is a tough one. He is called to speak out against his people in their unfaithfulness. The backdrop to his proclamation is a complex military and political campaign within the Middle East region spanning a period of nearly a century. The powers of the region (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon) wage war with one another in order to gain control of the region, and little old Judah is caught in between. At one time they side with Egypt, at another Assyria, all in order to retain their autonomy and retain some semblance of peace within their borders. All of that changes when Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon comes to power. His exploits are manifold and quite fascinating, but what's important to note is that he is responsible for conquering Judah, destroying Jerusalem and the Temple, and taking God's chosen people into captivity in Babylon in a series of military actions from 605 – 587 B.C.....all as God's agent of justice against His unfaithful people!

This national defeat and exile came as no surprise to Jeremiah. In fact it's exactly what he had prophesied would happen to Judah. Babylon is simply an agent of God against God's rebellious, idolatrous, unfaithful, sinful people. God calls His people to live in covenant relationship with Him, a relationship of reciprocal faithfulness begun by God and lived out by God's people. There are glimpses of that reciprocal relationship throughout the history the Old Testament, but they are contrasted by the stories of broken relationship – periods of time when God's people forget God, go their own way, even worship other gods from the surrounding region. During these times of unfaithfulness God remains faithful and sends a spokesperson to remind God's people

of His love and care, and call His people back into covenantal relationship with Him. Jeremiah is one of those spokespersons. He speaks the word of condemnation to a people unfaithful to God through their blatant disregard for the Law and their apathetic approach to relationship with God. He grows old preaching repentance to a people who refused to hear and change their ways. Instead, they condemned Jeremiah, vilified him, mocked him, and made his life miserable. Yet through all of his personal difficulties, Jeremiah continued to deliver God's message of hope and promise through repentance. Let's give him credit here. As the people press against Jeremiah, he stands firm in his faith in God and continues to proclaim God's word, no matter how unpopular it was with the people. Life was so difficult for Jeremiah that at one point he curses the day he was born and tries to shut himself up from speaking what God wants him to speak – but he can't. He remains faithful, even if his people aren't. But because the people refuse to repent, God sends the big hammer – Babylon – and destroys the Temple, the Judean Kingship, and the lives of the people as they go into exile in Babylon. When will they learn? When will they listen? When will they repent and return to the Lord their God? When will this misery end?

For Jeremiah, it will end only when people repent and turn to the Lord. But there were others who had something else to speak to the people. In our text for today we find that very thing happening. The people of God had been in exile in Babylon for years and the people saw no end to that reality in the foreseeable future despite having God's word through Jeremiah on how to make their lives different. Into this, another 'prophet', Hananiah, speaks to the people and the priests to declare a 'new word of the Lord'. Instead of calling the people to repentance, which is very unpopular, this new word is simply that God will relieve their burden by breaking the yoke of bondage of the king of Babylon! Good news! Their suffering will be over! Within a couple of years they will get to go back to their homes! The temple will be restored! Everything we've been hoping for will happen! God will deliver us! Yay Hananiah! Yay God!

It's what the people wanted to hear, the only problem was that it wasn't the true word of the Lord. The people's hearts were still far off – covenant relationship remained broken – and God's exile remained intact until a full 70 years of exile were completed. The often quoted Ch. 29:11-14 speaks to this reality, but it's not the bumper sticker triviality we like to make it. God's justice will prevail. The people of God will still suffer for their iniquity. Sin will run its course with great cost to the people – death, destruction, famine, pestilence, etc. It's nothing to neither make light of nor overlook. Jeremiah didn't, and he paid a high price for speaking an unpopular word to the people of God. But it was a necessary word for the restoration of God's people.

Jeremiah confronts Hananiah and calls him out as a false prophet who only speaks what the people want to hear. He goes on to tell him that because he speaks falsehoods, he's going to die earlier than planned. Hananiah lies, Hananiah dies. God will not be mocked nor let His people be led astray, no matter how popular the message may be. Congrats Jeremiah, you get to condemn yet another person and let them stand in God's holy judgment. You win the Mr. Popularity contest yet again!

Preaching possibilities

Having been gone for over a year, I certainly can't claim to have a read on the congregation these days. I am counting on you to help me discern where to take this sermon. But since I didn't have your input at the time of this writing, here's what I came up with:

Again we will need to spend a significant amount of time contextualizing Jeremiah to help people gain an understanding of just who this person was and is. I promise not to spend too much time talking about the military actions of Nebuchadnezzar (although I could!) nor will I spend an inordinate amount of time talking about the land of exile – modern day Iraq – although I've walked that ground and seen the handiwork of Nebuchadnezzar's regime. ☺

Instead, I'll take one for the team and make all the other preacher types look a lot better simply by speaking about God's judgment and the work of the law. The focus will not be simply to condemn people (really unpopular with church folks) but like Jeremiah, keep law and gospel in tense balance. Calling people who have gone astray to repent and return to the Lord is as unpopular now as it was back in Jeremiah's day, yet it remains a necessary function for life as God's faithful people. Even Jesus called people to repent for the kingdom of God is at hand! So we call out those things that people would rather keep hidden, or at least ignore and call irrelevant. If only God could look past sin and get over it, huh? Not so. Someone has to point that out - but unlike Jeremiah, who was held captive to the people's response, we will have the ability to speak a word of grace that only Jesus can deliver. God no longer waits for you to act – God has already acted in Jesus! Sin is real, and has real consequences, yet God has spoken into this sinful world and declared victory in Jesus. This is Good News! But it's not good news simply because it's what people want to hear (you can get plenty of that from prosperity theologians and some might even say Rob Bell these days), but that it comes paired with the unpopular message of the law, something none of us truly wants to hear. We cannot err on the side of Gospel alone, nor on the side of Law alone. It's both/and, not either/or! That's the work of God in this world, and what believers are called to share with others as we live together in covenant community.

Or.....? ☺