

Jeremiah 3:6-18

Preface:

So last week we saw as God called Jeremiah to difficult work: He would be set apart to declare Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. We talked about our need, as we walk through Jeremiah, to remember the promises we have in Christ, from Jesus, and lean on those many, many promises rather than try to claim Jeremiah's promises for our own. God gives us God's presence, power, protection, just like God promised Jeremiah, but God also gives us each other, a community to reach out and be Christ to each other, a reminder of what's most true in our lives.

Today we'll talk about the first of these prophetic messages Jeremiah has to pass along to his people. In the end, we'll be talking about learning from negative examples, and repentance...two really fun topics! But first, let's pray.

Prayer:

Remembering:

So today's passage only makes sense if we remember that Israel was two kingdoms during the time of the prophets, the Northern Kingdom, which was called Israel, which had a capital and an alternative temple at Samaria, and the Southern Kingdom, which was called Judah, where Jerusalem and the Temple stood. (By the time of Jesus, Judah was

called Judea, and was an even smaller area than it was during Jeremiah's day.) But by the time Jeremiah is called, Assyria had already destroyed Bethel, destroyed the Northern Kingdom, and exiled many of its inhabitants, although not all of them. So Assyria is on Judah's doorstep, right?

And today's passage is basically one of the only prophecies Jeremiah gives that we can date to the reign of Good King Josiah, who had launched the religious reform movement to bring God's People back to a right understanding of who Yahweh was and what Yahweh wanted from His People. It starts "During the reign of King Josiah." This is great; it's helpful. It's probably the case that Josiah has already begun his reform. Ultimately, we don't even know that for sure.

So all this is in play. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, isn't a kingdom anymore. Assyria has claimed their land. Judah and Jerusalem are undergoing or will *any moment* a top-to-bottom religious reform. Jeremiah, in the chapter before today's passage, gives a message from God describing Judah's total commitment to idolatry as joyful, wanton adultery. And then today's passage begins:

God speaks to Jeremiah. After all that description of Judah, though, it's not Judah God seems to talk about. We read this:

Have you seen?

...the Lord said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. 7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. 8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery.9 Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. 10 In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense,” declares the Lord.

As with everything God speaks, this is for both Jeremiah and his audience; for those who hear it and those who will read it. God asks Jeremiah “Have you seen?” Have you seen how bad Israel was? Did you see how deeply Israel cheated on me? How she enacted a divorce with her multiple adulteries, and how Israel got the “certificate of divorce,” that Israel wanted. Just like “adultery with stone and wood” is a metaphor for idolatry with little crafted idols, that “certificate of divorce” is a metaphor, and it’s a metaphor for exile, for Assyria’s plunder of Samaria and its temple and its people and its lands. And God thought, God hoped, that

Judah would see and learn from from what happened to Israel. God goes back and forth between Israel and Judah, here, building tension: Israel did all this, Judah watched; Israel did more of it, Judah watched; Israel got the divorce it was enacting, got all that the worthless gods they worshipped could offer, which was no protection from Assyria at all, and Judah watched. God hoped “Judah would return to God with all her heart,” but instead, Judah just learned from her sister, as God puts it. Judah just did what it saw Israel was doing, even though it costs Israel everything.

And then we read this terrible, ominous statement:

11 The Lord said to me, “Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah.

Faithless:

Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah.

Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah.

Israel, who was faithless like the worst, serial cheater is faithless to his or her spouse, was more righteous--kept their marriage vows better--than Judah does.

This is a scary, scary word of judgment, because what happened to Israel? It was emptied out. Assyria brought in captives from other countries, established a governor over it, and took thousands of people abroad. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was no longer a kingdom at all. And if Israel was more righteous, more faithful to their covenant, than Judah has been, what does this mean for Judah?

Still Longing:

But rather than linger there, God reveals to Jeremiah that he has compassion for what's left of Israel, still misses them as a spouse misses someone they've loved. He declares:

12 Go, proclaim this message toward the north:

***“Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord,
‘I will frown on you no longer,
for I am faithful,’ declares the Lord,
‘I will not be angry forever.***

***13 Only acknowledge your guilt—
you have rebelled against the Lord your God,
you have scattered your favors to foreign gods
under every spreading tree,
and have not obeyed me,’”
declares the Lord.***

***14 “Return, faithless people,” declares the Lord, “for
I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a***

town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. 15 Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. 16 In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,” declares the Lord, “people will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. 17 At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the Lord, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. 18 In those days the people of Judah will join the people of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your ancestors as an inheritance.

God sends Jeremiah to the Northern Kingdom, to what’s left of it, which is barely Israel at all--Assyrian and Babylonian and Median and full of these captives Assyria has brought in, alongside whatever Israelites were allowed to remain--God sends Jeremiah there to say, “Return to me.”

“Return, faithless people...for I am your husband.”

God is faithful, fundamentally, and will not give up on this Northern Kingdom if those who live there, whoever they are, would only return to him in faithfulness. God is waiting for the Israelites there the way the Father in the Prodigal Son

story is waiting on his oldest son to return home.

And Jeremiah's prophecies take a prophetic turn in this passage, away from what his hearers ought to do now, and toward a promise to come "in those days."

In Those Days:

We've talked a lot over the years about this prophetic idea of "the day of the Lord," a period of time in which God judges evil, all things are set right, and faithfulness is rewarded. When God talks here about "those days" that's the concept at play, here.

The New Testament took this idea in some really unexpected ways, with Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection becoming the dawn of "that day," that period of time in which all things are set right, and Jesus' return being it's sunset. We live in this weird time, where many of God's promises of presence, power, and provision have come true, but definitely not all of them, because death is still at work and evil still runs free without judgment.

What Jeremiah would have noticed, and what the Northern Kingdom who hears his message would have noticed, and what those in Jerusalem around him would have noticed is the way in which Jerusalem itself is elevated here. This isn't just a promise that faithful Israelites will still receive the reward of faithfulness, it's a promise that Judah will, too, and

Judah will be the center of those promises.

And this is big, because God has just said that Judah is worse than Israel ever was; that Israel, which is gone forever, will find its home in Jerusalem someday. It means that whatever else Jeremiah says, repentance will still be an option for Jerusalem, because God is faithful even when Judah is not, and God will see all his ancient promises to Abraham through to their end. It's crude to say, but for Jerusalem, this is the carrot to the stick of being told they are worse than Israel ever was.

Examples:

And this promise of restoration in spite of their ridiculous failure in following examples made me think, just generally, of how important it is that we choose wisely whose example we follow. Judah is described as Israel's younger sister, Jerusalem is Samaria's younger sibling, and Judah has been watching all the mistakes Israel has made, has seen the consequences of those mistakes, and chosen to enact the same journey in its own life.

We ourselves are always watching and always being watched. We are always both Judah and Israel. Any of us who are parents, grandparents, who work with others, live near others, who teach--well, all of us, really--we're always being watched and watching others. We're always being examples to others, and following the example of others.

And instead of focusing on the great, moral responsibility that comes of being watched, like Israel was watched, we should focus on Judah, the watcher. Because God does here, really.

And what I find so striking, so “on the surface” of Judah’s relationship to Israel’s, is the way that Israel was such a clear example of the worst consequences of certain behavior, and how clearly Judah seemed to think they could avoid those same consequences. Judah thought it wouldn’t happen to them. It’s going to happen to them.

Almost everyone I know who has some negative consequence happen from behavior that they know usually, often comes of it in the lives of others, is surprised that it happened to them! Not just surprised, but even resentful, upset. And this is you and me, too, right? We can think of little things--resentful that we got a speeding ticket when we were only ten above the speed limit--and larger things, from illness to broken relationships to real financial costs. We people always believe that the negative consequences won’t come our way. A few of us have burned out or had burned out whatever part of our heart might care; a few of us really have given ourselves over to the present pleasure or profit that can bring these bad things our way, but most of us simply operate with the belief that it won’t happen to us. We’re like Judah, and see the way someone seemed to enjoy themselves, and even though we saw that bad thing happen

to them, we really think we can dodge it. We're the exception, we'll be the anecdote someone else tells about how "So and so spent their whole lives doing this or that and they died happy and in their right-mind surrounded by loving family at 100."

Why do we think we're so exceptional? If we're staying here in Jeremiah, we have to deal with the truth that this promise of negative consequences has already been made. Jerusalem is going to reap what Israel reaped, because they have sown the same stuff. God's promise of what will happen "in those days" is a promise of after the judgment; the terrible silence after a storm passes through.

But that promise of restoration, of an in-gathering of the faithful, of God's presence, power, and protection restored to them...it follows the repentance of the few, if they choose to make it. What God says is that the rule will be negative consequences; the exception will be wonder and peace, rest and joy.

See, those in Judah--and we ourselves, too, I guess--need to realize that we are not exceptional; we are the masses, the ones who get what most people get, who aren't free from the negative consequences of the terrible behavior they've had modeled for them.

God is exceptional, though; and offers to those few who

repent, who return to God, something exceptional. God offers them the chance to repent.

And, say we do want to focus on Israel instead of Judah. If that's the case then we should focus on repentance, because it's what God calls Israel to, here. Unstated, of course, is that if Judah has been watching and still following Israel's lead, then they at least ought to have some integrity and consistency and follow those few in the Northern Kingdom who repent, too.

Repentance & Relationship:

Repentance, though, is hard to talk about well. In part, exactly because of that sense that so many of us have that we are exceptional. For Judah to pretend they could do as Israel did, and not reap the same effects Israel reaped, is to lie to themselves. God sent Jeremiah to tell them the truth; they were not exceptional, but God was, and would offer grace to any of them who would repent.

We can lie to ourselves. We ignore the reality of our need to repent, to turn away from the choices that will bring us the negative consequences we think we can escape, and turn toward the Lord who wants us.

And this wanting us is important. Over and over in this chapter, the previous and the next, God describes first his relationship with Israel, then his relationship with Judah, as a marriage relationship, one in which God has stayed faithful

while the other has done everything they can to ruin the marriage. God never wanted the marriage he had with His People to end, never wanted to divorce them.

Repentance is first of all about our relationship with God because it's first of all about the realization that faithlessness tears about our relationship with God. Yes, there are negative consequences, ones that we always think we can escape, but faithlessness erodes our relationship with God, the same way faithlessness in marriage erodes all that makes a marriage worthwhile: trust, love, support, compassion, selflessness.

Repentance is what happens when we come to our right mind and realize that our relationship with God matters, it matters so much that it's worth one of the most difficult virtues we people can muster: humility.

Humility:

It takes humility to recognize that you are not the exception to the rule of negative consequences. It takes humility to remember that other people are watching you, and you will be an example to them of how to behave.

It takes humility to repent, and return to God in regret and hope when you know that you have acted faithless. It takes humility to recognize that your needs are not the only needs in your relationship with God.

Or, let me put it this way: It takes humility for me to recognize that I am not the exception to the rule of negative consequences. It takes humility for me to repent, and return to God in regret and hope when I know that I have acted faithless.

Empty Space:

Today's passage reveals an enormous empty space in the life of first Israel, and now Judah, where humility should be. And I would ask only this of us, and let this passage launch us in this way when it comes to reflecting upon it: In your life, is humility where it belongs? Or is there an empty space there?

And, look: Empty spaces are always filled. For Israel and Judah, humility gave way to idolatry, to self-interest, to the belief that their faithless behaviors wouldn't cost them at all. It led to them abandoning the relationship that was meant to define their entire being. Our costs might not be quite as big, and of course God always waits for us to return to him, sometimes even freeing us from the effects our cheating betrayals cause, but why break what doesn't need broken in the first place?

Invitation:

Today's passage invites us to consider our present humility, consider what we think won't happen to us, weigh the cost

of returning to God or staying faithless. I hope, as always, the Spirit would guide us in these things the way we need led, and we'd respond remembering that the day of the Lord has already dawned, and we have time to choose for Christ before it comes to a close.

Going Deeper: Jeremiah 2:1-4:4

Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 is a long passage made up of Jeremiah's first prophecies after God calls him to his difficult work. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, has largely been exiled by Assyria at this point in the history of Israel and Judah (the Southern Kingdom).

Questions:

- *How would you define these relationships:*
 - *Israel and God*
 - *Judah and God*
 - *Israel and Judah*
 - *Jeremiah and Judah*
- *What does God seem to want most in today's prophecies?*
- *What would be the hardest thing for Judah to hear in today's prophecies? The best thing?*
- *How does repentance show up in today's passage? What virtues are required for repentance?*
- *What's the relationship between repentance and healthy relationships generally? How about with a group or individual's relationship with God?*
- *Do today's questions and reflection lead you to consider any personal action in your life?*
- *Bonus: Why is it so hard to think about these passages in a corporate rather than individual, way?*