

## ***Jeremiah 19:14-20:6***

### ***Preface:***

This week was not the first time, in this Jeremiah series, that I've thought to myself "What was I thinking?" as I sat down to prepare a message. I have no idea why I thought this passage would be worth focusing upon. I don't know what I was thinking. I assume the Spirit was guiding me, which is, like, one of the worst assumptions a person can make, maybe? But it is what it is.

I think we'll be able to talk about what it means to represent an institution or a people and to make use of the time we have that we think is useless time. But we'll see. Let's pray, first.

### ***Prayer:***

Oh, Christ.

### ***Introduction:***

So, there's a basic, fundamental issue for us this morning, in that the the easiest most natural way to connect with Jeremiah in today's passage is as a persecuted person of faith.

But I am talking to a pile of people who have never, ever been locked in stocks and publicly, shamed for trusting Jesus by authorities who everyone esteems. And likely

never will be. So...what do we do that? I don't want to waste our time inviting us to, like, "imagine how we'd feel if we were persecuted."

There *are* places in the world we can go and be harassed and persecuted, killed and flogged and our property seized for our faith. These things happened to the earliest Brethren; without their experience there's no Smoky Row Brethren Church.

That's not our place, and likely won't be, so. I'm not even sure, outside of the simple reminder that this does happen, and those Christians do need our many, ridiculously-ample resources, what the point in me mentioning it is.

Now, we can all act in ways that result in our marginalization and harassment, which we can blame on Jesus.

Do we live in a pluralistic society with ever-broadening civil rights for minority ways of expressing basic human longings? Yep. Is that a fundamental persecution of religious beliefs? No. But some people really, really don't like it, and some people don't like it because they are sure God doesn't like it even more than they do. And so they can act in ways that result in their own persecution and harassment. This is all, just...stuff. Ways of things. Not religious persecution in any biblical sense. Let's not act in

ways that will only result in our isolation or punishment or marginalization. But this way of engaging with others is a basic posture of faith; we're either oriented toward bridges or walls, unaware of the ways our beliefs position us toward one or the other. If by now you don't know I'm Team Bridge then you haven't been paying attention, right?

Here's a problem: I always have a hard time with these persecution passages because the simple truth is that none of us are persecuted for our faith. We may be side-lined, occasionally, for certain theological stances that we take. But we can always find a community of Christians to tell us we're right. By-and-large, American Christians aren't persecuted, we're persecutors. We aren't Jeremiah in this passage, we're "Terror On Every Side." So instead of pretending ourselves into a persecuted mindset, this morning, at least, I want to do something else with what we see here.

### ***The Plot:***

First, let's talk about this as generally as we can. I'll read the text again, and then summarize the plot.

***14 Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the Lord's temple and said to all the people, 15 "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and all***

***the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.’”***

***When the priest Pashhur son of Immer, the official in charge of the temple of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, 2 he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord’s temple. 3 The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, “The Lord’s name for you is not Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. 4 For this is what the Lord says: ‘I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will give all Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. 5 I will deliver all the wealth of this city into the hands of their enemies—all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. 6 And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies.’”***

### ***Interesting Things:***

This passage is interesting for various reasons. It’s the first

time we see Jeremiah publicly punished by Israel's leaders, although he's been threatened long before this. It's also the first time Jeremiah preaches that Babylon is going to do the Exile thing, not Assyria. The "foe from the north" Jeremiah has mentioned before isn't Assyria; it's Babylon.

There are all sorts of interesting dynamics in play, you know? Jeremiah says that the destruction is going to come on Israel because they are stubborn, and haven't listened to what God says...and in response, the Temple's leaders, who are representatives of Israel, act stubborn and don't listen to what God says. Whatever Jeremiah says here, there's very a much a "You made your bed and now you're allowed to lie down in it" thing happening.

### ***The Plot:***

But the plot is easy to make out, here, right? Easy beats:

*Jeremiah preaches a prophecy in the Temple Court against the Israelites.*

*Jeremiah is beaten and put into stocks in the Temple Gate by Temple Leadership.*

*Jeremiah is released by Temple Leadership.*

*Jeremiah preaches another prophecy against Israel.*

Jeremiah preaches; He's persecuted for it; He's released; He preaches again. All of this is super public; this isn't in a private chatroom or some weird corner of Israel no one ever

goes. It's in places everyone goes; the Temple Court, "Ol' Benjamin," the Upper Gate, and it's stocks.

And I've already shared the wrangling I've had to do with this passage. It's been like trying to fold a basketful of fitted sheets, only they're, like, Jesus' sheets? So you do care that they're vaguely rectangular? Good metaphor, right?

But a handful of things have come to mind from this simply-plotted scene:

### ***Things: Using Power Well***

We can consider "Terror On All Sides," formerly known as Pashhur.

But it's not until this person, "the official in charge of the Temple of the Lord," a priest with important responsibilities, does what he does that Babylon is invoked.

I'm not saying it was this leader's actions that brought Babylon into the picture: We saw already how maybe--maybe--the whole ruined belt thing might have been buried near the Euphrates, Babylon's border, and hinted at what Jeremiah says here. But if we are lingering in this moment, the pronouncement that Babylon is coming follows Terror's behavior. In some real ways, Pashhur enacts the very stubbornness and refusal to listen that Jeremiah declares.

Jeremiah declares stubbornness and ignorance of God, and Pashhur makes it real in his own body and his reaction to Jeremiah. And Pashhur is in charge of the Temple; he's its representative. His choice to be stubborn and refuse God is an accidental speech-act, an accidental making-real the judgment Jeremiah declares.

I love this. It's deeply poetic. I wonder if anyone else cares? But we can reflect on this!

Because we are all representatives of something: Christ, of course. But the organizations we've affiliated with, the communities we're a part of, the family name we proudly carry. We represent.

And people make claims about the nature of those groups we represent. They probably aren't from the Lord, are more likely opinion than word-of-God. But still, our reactions to the claims people make about the organizations we represent--from Christ to our neighborhood, our congregation to our employer--our reactions to the claims people make about the organizations we represent may very well make those claims real.

I'm talking about our behavior, here. We are always representatives of someone or something, someplace or some people. We have to stop kidding ourselves that our actions only communicate about us; we are networked in,

locked into circles and circles of community. And how we act may make real, for someone, their opinion of us. How we act will make real for someone their own opinion of us. It may mean our destruction, it may mean our blessing; it may have nothing to do with God at all apart from the way our character always reflects the God we represent. And very few of us think that our responses might determine the future of those groups we represent. But we're probably selling our influence short, honestly, and need to recognize the power we have.

What truth do you want your behavior to reflect for the communities you represent? We represent something, somebody, someplace, some people. Our behaviors embody truth, speaks truth. We can enact our stubbornness, our sinfulness, our own judgment, or we can embody all the virtues of Christ. Imagine if Christians could be named "Blessing On Every Side" by every single person who accuses them of anything, by God Himself?

### ***Things: The Space Between***

I've been struck, too, by Jeremiah's day in the stocks. People are coming and going into the Temple area right past him. In Jeremiah 7 we saw him condemning the Temple perhaps at this same gate; here he is, proven wrong. His condemnation of them the day before is certainly common knowledge, good gossip. And he's been proven wrong, right? He's been publicly shamed--a huge

thing that we just can't relate to, because our society doesn't run on honor and shame the way Israel did. It's crucifixion without death, crucifixion of his reputation, the most important thing you could protect.

He's been publicly shamed, proven wrong, and is just...there. In stocks. There's no indication he thought he'd end up there. He's said and done a lot of things that have annoyed and irritated Judah's authorities before this. We don't know if he was surprised or not, if he wanted it, even. We can ascribe any number of expectations to him. But: Whatever he expected, here he is. And this is empty space in the story. He's trapped, then he's released. And I'm always drawn to empty spaces in a story, because they're the places our faith-driven imagination can explore.

We know what comes after this empty space: Jeremiah's release and impassioned, damning condemnation of Pashhur and Judah itself.

So what happened while he was in stocks, you know? What happened inside of him? Of course he would have been ridiculed; that was the point. Of course he would have been made a shameful spectacle, and noticed. That was the point. He'd been physically hit, too. But what went on inside of Jeremiah while all that was happening outside him?

I dunno! Who knows?!

But whatever it was it readied him to speak for God as soon as he was able. Whatever went on in Jeremiah's gut, his heart, his mind, it prepared him to speak for God as soon as he was able to speak. He stayed on God's side when many of us would have felt God left ours. As soon as his moment of public shame, of punishment for attacking the status quo was over, he was ready to speak for God.

And I think we can consider--or at least let me project, because I can consider--the ways I use the time-out moments in life, when they are forced upon me.

Now, they're basically never forced upon me for faithfulness; I've never been publicly shamed for speaking for God, and I probably never will be. But life brings plenty of moments in which I am forced to wait for something.

We are often forced by circumstances to wait on God's rescue. We've found ourselves in a situation we didn't think would happen, with nothing we can do but wait, and so we are waiting. What do we do with that time? How do we ready ourselves to speak for the Lord--to act for the Lord, do for the Lord--as soon as that waiting is over? Or do we just sit around?

See, moments that are empty are playgrounds for spiritual growth if we let them. Moments in which we're forced to

wait are times that can be incredibly fruitful for our relationship with Christ, and our readiness to act for Christ when those moments end. In the moments when we've been forced into nothing, do we ready ourselves? Or do we, you know, just sit around and wait?

If we were to take this one step further, we could point out this is not an entirely empty moment; it's one of ongoing suffering and ridicule.

### **So...?**

And I think that we can take these two interesting things, which is all they are, and consider them together.

First, again: the times when we are forced into time-outs can be times that ready us to speak and act for God as soon as they are over. This can be all the more true if those times are times of suffering.

Second, again: We represent the groups we're a part of, and the things we do with ourselves can have impact on those groups--church or family, neighborhood or organization--negative or positive impact.

So how can we use the time-outs of life, especially if they are ones of suffering, so that when time restarts we are ready to act and speak on behalf of the Lord? Broadly, look: COVID is a time of societal time-out, and for many of us a

time of suffering. But each of us have moments when we are forced into waiting for some reason or another, and often that period of waiting has some kind of suffering in it. Are we making use of our times of waiting so that we can act on behalf of the Lord when they are over?

***Challenge:***

The next time you are forced into a time-out, consider how you can use it so that when the clock restarts, life picks back up, you can speak and act on behalf of the Lord. Because you represent the Lord in the places you're going to go, digital or real, along with Smoky Row, along with your neighborhood, your company, your family, your club. We are representatives whose actions can determine the future of those we represent, and in our time-outs, our forced waiting, we're given opportunities to ready ourselves to speak and act for the Lord. This will come up sometime; when it does, remember to make the most of it. For yourself, for the Lord, and for those you represent.