

Jeremiah 25:1-14

Let's begin with prayer, friends!

Prayer:

On Linear Longing:

We've said before how Jeremiah isn't, oh, a historical book, in the sense that it doesn't move linearly through time. And today's passage points that out: We're in Chapter 25 today, and in it we read about a prophecy against Babylon, which is given, "in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon." But in the previous chapter, Chapter 24, we would read a prophecy given "After Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah [is] carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon." So all of a sudden, in Chapter 25, we've sort of dropped backward in time. Chapter 22, 23, 24 build to this second, larger exile, never really mentioning a first smaller one that took place...and then now, all of a sudden, we're back in time, before it happened.

I want to make sense of that. And I think one way to make sense of that is to highlight what Jeremiah himself highlights from here on out: Israel's future.

Christians tend to be less focused than other people on things ending over-and-above what comes after the end, less focused on endings than prologue. We tend to not stop at the end, but We look forward, after all, to consolation on the other side of death. We look forward not to the end of the world, but to the world being remade. We're resurrection-minded. But we live in a society obsessed with the end of things, with cataclysm, with failures, with endings. It's what makes the news, you know? It's what captures imagination. We're apocalyptic people in an apocalyptic time, and there's all sorts of very legitimate reasons to be obsessed the way we are. The fact that Jeremiah 26 through 52 exists reveals that Jeremiah's last word isn't on the end of Judah, but on what will come after the end of Judah. We've built and built to the end, to exile, in the Chapters up until now, but we're going to back up a step for awhile, recalibrate, and talk about the end with Babylon explicitly in mind. And so it makes sense to talk about Babylon for a second.

On Babylon:

Remember that Israel, as we think of it, was not united very long as one Kingdom. After Solomon died, they split into two; a Northern Kingdom, which deeply

promoted pagan worship and built an alternative Temple than the one in Jerusalem at Bethel, and a Southern Kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem. All God's People were called Israelites, but Israel was the name given to the Northern Kingdom, while the Southern Kingdom was called Judah. The Northern Kingdom disappears in 722, exiled by Assyria. Much of what we read early in Jeremiah was him just trying to get the Southern Kingdom, Judah, to pay attention to Israel's example, and run from it. Now, the Southern Kingdom lived on until it is exiled in 586 by Babylon, then granted the chance to rebuild itself by Persia in 536. The Northern Kingdom lasts for less than 200 years; the Southern Kingdom, minus exile's 50 year hiccup--or 70 year hiccup, depending on how you measure the time--lasts for almost 800, all the way up through Jesus, through a second Temple, until the Roman Empire destroys it in 70 AD.

But to mention the Roman Empire is to remind us that these two kingdoms always found themselves surrounded by enormous Empires who more or less did whatever they wanted to these two little kingdoms. Their entire history is as a bullied underdog, sometimes in weird, extortionist protection rackets with them, so that they won't get squished.

Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt all exist early in their history. Then, of course, there's Assyria, which wipes out the Northern Kingdom. Then comes Babylon, who wipes out Assyria, and in turn, will wipe out Judah. The Babylonians often get called the Chaldeans. But the empire is the same. And no surprise, but Babylon will fall, too, to Persia.

Then Greece after Persia, Rome after Greece.

What Jeremiah and all the prophets make so clear, what we've heard over and over and over these past weeks, is that how close God's People kept to their covenant promises with God determined how untouched they would be by these Empires. More Covenant Faithfulness always meant more of the blessing of Covenant Protection.

We could go to Minor Prophets, to Habakkuk, who was a contemporary of Jeremiah and preached during the reign of Jehoiakim, at the same time today's passage, and we'd learn much of the same themes of today's passage: That Babylon is definitely, definitely coming. And if we went to other minor prophets--Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi--we'd realize they only exist

because of today's passage, too, and it's hint that Babylon's destruction of Judah won't be the last word on Israel, but God will have more to say, will keep his side of their marriage promises even if they don't.

Babylon, see, is just one part of the puzzle for Israel. It's funny, because we're going to see this name, or Chaldean, their Hebrew-alternative name, come up over and over, but honestly: They're just one more empire to be used by God in God's great purposes of redemption and restoration, of making Israel the pathway to all creation's salvation. Brenda walked us through some of this when we talked about Romans 9. So I don't want to make Babylon too small or too big. They are just one more empire, one God will use for God's Covenantal purposes.

And here's what they're doing today:

Text:

8 Therefore the Lord Almighty says this:

“Because you have not listened to my words, 9 I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the

surrounding nations. I will completely destroy[a] them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. 10 I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. 11 This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

12 “But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians,[b] for their guilt,” declares the Lord, “and will make it desolate forever. 13 I will bring on that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations. 14 They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”

Babylon:

God is going to use Babylon as an agent of judgment on Israel and on the nations around Israel. Right now, as Jeremiah preaches, Babylon has allowed the puppet

king they put on the throne to rule. Relatively soon that puppet king will try to do a side-hustle, align with Egypt and shake of Babylonian control. So they simply raze Jerusalem to the ground. The Northern Kingdom was long gone; the Southern Kingdom will be taken captive for 70 years. But only 70 years, and the reason, we learn today, is that someone else will come and do to Babylon as Babylon has done to others. That empire is Persia, their king Cyrus.

If we were to turn to Isaiah 40 through 48 we could read all about the ways God is going to deliver Israel from their Babylonian Exile through Cyrus. Isaiah talks about this Persian Emperor in messianic terms, with messianic language. In 539 BC God will allow Cyrus to destroy Babylon, and a year later, will allow Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their walls, their Temple, their people.

So, a lot of good historical background stuff, right? I mean, that's what compelling sermons are made of, you know? Look, we have to understand that there is context to things. We have to enter into Jeremiah's world enough to see his worldview, the understanding that God has always chosen, now and then, here and there, to raise up individuals and orchestrate nations

for his Covenant purposes. I am deeply convinced, but it's a point we can disagree on without losing our salvation, that this doesn't mean every individual and every nation is automatically part of some grand, enormous Israel-focused design. It does mean, necessarily, that we who make up the Church, who are connected together as God's covenant partners and Christ's body on earth, that we're meant to live led by the Spirit and Jesus' character in all sorts of dispersed, different situations.

But what this passage, and others like it, reminds me of is this, at least:

God's Use & Questions:

God has used groups of people to reveal to God's People some truth about their relationship, about how they ought to live and what consequences there are for them if they live another way. This is true in just after Jeremiah's time; it'll be true just after Jesus' time, and it can still be true in our time.

What have we learned about God from those who aren't Christians? What are we learning about God from those who aren't Christians? Again, what are we learning about God from those who aren't Christians?

I hope we're not learning about our own failures in faithfulness, the way Israel did. But...I don't know. And it's hard not to preach this toward each of us as individuals right now, although ideally, this is meant for all of us as a congregation.

I think it's a virtue for us to learn from others about God, for us to take whatever we can from the world, much of which doesn't worship God, and bring it into dialogue with the Lord, check our understandings about God against what we're learning from those who don't worship God.

Well:

It takes curiosity, compassion, and character to do this well. Curiosity to care at all about whether our trust in Christ fits with something we're learning, and curiosity just to learn. Compassion to live like Jesus lived, unafraid of becoming dirty, or unclean, or unholy by offering attention to those who don't know God as we do. Character to stay faithful, to keep what's good, adjust to what's better, reject what's wrong about what we believe.

It was utterly inconceivable to those who thought God

was on their side that God could use Babylon to teach them anything, much less that they weren't on God's side. Later, it was inconceivable that God would use a gentile outsider to restore Israel to Jerusalem, and give them what they needed to rebuild the city and their Temple. God did both those inconceivable things. Jeremiah never lived to see them, but he believed in the God who told them they would happen.

Do we believe that God might teach us something new, even about God's own relationship with us, by those who don't know God? Do we believe that enough to be curious, compassionate, and filled with character as we go about living and learning? We have the Spirit, we have Scripture, we have one another to test what we learn against what we already know...but are we learning at all?

Conclusion:

I want us to be learners, you know? I want us to receive truth from whatever places we can find it, discover Christ in the 10,000 places Christ plays, discover as much about God's love and being as we can from all of creation. I want to be a part of a church that is known for being curious and compassionate and filled with character. I don't want to God to use

those who don't know Him to give me the harvest of the sin I sow.

What have we learned about God from those who aren't Christians? What are we learning about God from those who aren't Christians? How can we keep learning faithfully? Small questions from a small passage, but their answers have huge implications for the posture we take toward others as we live our Christian lives.