

Jer 34:1-22: Obedience I/II Highlight: 34:17-22

Introduction:

Oh, man, People of God: When it came to this passage my mind just jumped from place to place. I thought of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and their fall--what Judah ignored even though much of Jeremiah is a reminder to not ignore it. Of Jesus' moment, one we might remember, with a fig-tree. I thought of God's Wrath, what it is and isn't; of a small phrase from Jesus, a quote from Paul.

And so, here's what we'll do, now. We'll retrace these mental steps, my thoughts, jump from stepping stone to stepping stone, and in the end, I think we'll be moved from one place to another, from a passage that can be sort of weird to an insight about what it means to live faithfully.

Prayer:

First Stepping-Stone: Israel

Remember what happened to Israel, the Northern Kingdom, about 150 years before Jeremiah was born? The prophet Hosea talks about it. Speaking for God, he says "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." Israel had invested in what was truly nothing--false gods, false security of a weak Egyptian Empire's army, false idols that they'd come to treat as if the empty statues really had power, false

kings, set in place without God's approval--and because of all that they've "sown," that they've invested into these things that aren't anything at all, what they'll receive is their investment back, the harvest they've nurtured, which is...nothing. Nothing.

They've invested in nothing, and it's what will return to them, but when it does return, they'll be worse off for it. Hosea tells us that the "whirlwind" that Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is going to get is exile: A "whirlwind" of nothing: no national identity, no covenant blessings, no presence of God. God talks it out:

***Woe to them, because they have strayed from me!
Destruction to them, because they have rebelled
against me!***

***I long to redeem them but they speak about me
falsely.***

***They do not cry out to me from their hearts but
wail on their beds. They slash themselves,[a]
appealing to their gods for grain and new wine, but
they turn away from me.***

***I trained them and strengthened their arms, but
they plot evil against me. They do not turn to the
Most High; they are like a faulty bow. Their leaders
will fall by the sword because of their insolent
words....My people are determined to turn from me.***

Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.

But, but: God can barely stand it. If we kept reading we'd see God promise to restore His People. God takes no joy in seeing His People, who he loves like we humans love when we are most fully human--parent to child, spouse to spouse--he takes no joy in seeing them punished. He takes no pleasure in seeing them harvest a worse nothing than they've been seeding in their lives. In fact, if we read for awhile in Hosea we'd see God agonizing over their pain, and promising that someday--someday, somehow, through God's own power--His People would be restored.

Second Stepping-Stone: Fig Tree

We've talked about how these promises were realized through Jesus. And do you remember that time Jesus did that whole fig tree thing? We could read it in Matthew or Mark, see it as a parable in Luke. John gives it up like he always does.

Matthew puts it this way:

18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to [Jerusalem], he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never

“bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.”

A casual reading of this sees pouty, hangry Jesus having a tantrum and using his superpowers to destroy a tree. It sounds a little off-character...because it is, right? Jesus isn't throwing a tantrum here.

Jesus is purposefully communicating to the disciples, to anyone who's paying attention, information about the Temple. In the context of Matthew--and Mark and Luke's parable--this is entirely about the Temple. And, in fact, what Jesus is doing here is an acted-out parable, a speech-act like Jeremiah has done so many times.

A fig tree, of course, is for figs; it's not for anything else. Jesus comes to one hungry, on his way to the Temple. But the tree is fruitless; it's not living up to what it exists for. It's not meeting the need of one who is hungry. And Jesus curses it. If we wanted to, we could say that he simply extends its fruitless season forever.

Jesus isn't hangry and abusing his power here. He's making a point. In the context of Matthew, it's a point about the very Temple he is on his way to Jerusalem to condemn.

The Temple is meant for those who are metaphorically hungry, hungry for God, but it's become fruitless for them:

for the gentiles, for the lame and blind, for children--for the underclass, the powerless, the excluded. The Temple was meant as a place of God's presence, access to God's forgiveness, but we remember the Gospels, and all we know about it by the time Jesus shows up there: The Temple has been, oh, co-opted by cash, the Gentiles Court turned into a currency exchange and sacrifice market. Its power-hoarding leadership making it powerless for those who need God's power. It's broken. It's fruitless. And Jesus' words and deeds toward the fig tree are vivid representations of his words and deeds in relation to the Temple.

And this morning, Jesus wasn't just "hangry," you know? He was communicating to his disciples, to us, to any of the crowd that had hung around overnight, exactly where the Temple stood. The avenue to relationship, forgiveness, and awareness of God no longer bore fruit, even though so many were hungry for it, and so Jesus lets everyone know that the Temple, which has become pointless, will be given over to pointlessness, made non-existent.

We can say that Jesus cursed the fig-tree, or we can say that Jesus simply extended forever its current, fruitless, situation. Jesus gives the fig tree over to the fruitlessness it has. Just like the Temple, which is doing nothing, will become nothing.

So, is this an image of judgement, or is it an image of

something becoming what it really is? The Temple--it's leaders, sustainers, promoters--they are confirmed in what they want. They've been making themselves fruitless, and so fruitlessness is what they'll be forever. They get what they want. And if this reminds of us what Israel got, the worse-nothing after they planted nothing...well, then, good.

Let's jump to the next stepping-stone,

Third Stepping-Stone: Wrath

We should talk about wrath for a moment. We don't think about God's wrath, much, for all sorts of reasons, but one thing we need to understand is that wrath is not equal to anger.

We know what anger is, right? It's an emotion. And as Christians, we know that there is nothing wrong with emotions, we know that there is nothing wrong with anger by itself: it's an understandable result of the frustrations and limitations of life and its brokenness. But we're not supposed to act out of it, we're not supposed to act out of our anger. If we're typical, though, when it comes to being angry we rarely just experience it, you know: we almost always do something when we're angry--usually not loving--against someone or something else, when we're angry. Danger! Bad news!

And even though we use the word to mean, really, really angry, especially angry, wrath is not equal to anger. Wrath is basically God's judgment against sin.

When Paul, in Romans, tells us "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness," and goes on to say, "Therefore...we've been given over" to all sorts of stuff (summary), we realize that God's wrath isn't some anger he can't control, which rages against us, but it's simply letting us do what we want.

God lets us pursue the course we humans want to pursue, even though God knows it ends in our death, and it's the worse thing for us. God gives us the powerful gift of freedom to choose our own course of behavior, even though it has ended up screwing up all of humanity. Instead of a "sinners in the hand of an angry God" sort of God, when we hear "wrath" we need to think of a God who so powerfully wants to be in genuine, honest relationship with us, that He'll allow us to choose against Him, will self-limit his control over part of His creation--us.

He does this even though when he lets us have what we want--which is creation instead of Him--it changes creation itself. God is like a wise mother, a good parent who allows her children to choose against her, even though she knows it

will ruin them. If God's wrath sounds like what happened to Israel, and what happened with the Fig Tree, and what is happening in today's passage in Jeremiah, then good: Because it is.

Last Stepping-Stone: Two Lines

Two quick lines in the New Testament summarize, for me, what I think our take away this morning should be. They're they last jumps we need to make before we can get across this thing.

The first follows the fig tree in Matthew, not too long after that moment. Jesus is being arrested. One of the disciples pulls out a sword and cuts off the ear of the High Priest's assistant. It gets painted comically: the guy was so bad at swordplay, he chopped off an ear. It could get painted in another way, which is just that he barely missed the assistant's jugular. Jesus says, "Put your sword back in its place...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." And sometimes this is presented as a call for pacifism, sometimes as a reminder that the State will kill those who kill. Either way, there's this sense that what you give, you'll get. What you give, you'll get.

This is never, ever framed as a promise of blessing in the Bible, but only as a promise of sin. You can't buy success,

you can't tithe your way into riches, you can't. But if you sin, we're told, you'll get sin back. I could nuance this in all sorts of ways, would point us back to the moments in Israel with Hosea, in Jerusalem with Jesus, and the many statements of Jeremiah in Judah that answer the questions we might have around this. But I want to end on the second of the two little New Testament statements.

Paul, near the end of Galatians, writes "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what they sow. 8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." He'll go on to exhort us to not get tired doing good, because someday that "eternal life," that Resurrection Life, will come. "Therefore, as we have opportunity," Paul says, "let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

"God cannot be mocked; A person reaps what they sow."

The idea that you can't trick God, that what we give will be what we get, is enormous. This is covenantal language that reaches back from the future into right now; right now, if we sow sin--seed our lives with it--it is sin that will grow up and, in the far end, "destruction," as Paul puts it will be what we reap. If we sow the Spirit--seed our life with God--it is all the Spirit-given blessings of God that will grow up and, in the far

end, “eternal life.” We reap what we sow. We invest in nothing, we’ll get nothing, and we lose even God’s covenant blessings. We become Israel, Judah, a fig tree. And in this life, what we get is “the wrath of God”--what our choices reveal we have wanted all along.

Conclusion:

So, like: Let’s not do this. Let’s sow goodness, sow mercy. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up,” as Paul says.

And let’s realize something, too: Every time we don’t reap what we sow it is a mercy.

Very few of us are aware of the graces that abound in our lives. We so often don’t get back what we give. We so often reap what we haven’t sown.

And we serve the God who over and over allowed His People not to reap what they sowed. Who gave seventy-times-seven chances for people to stop their sin-sowing, return to him, and receive all the Spirit-given blessings they could have.

But God will allow us what we want, and death or Jesus’ return will mean an end to our ever-present chances to sow

better.

Judah won't turn around. In fact, that chance is over. Jeremiah is letting them know what to expect, now. And he'll pepper his prophecies with the promise or restoration, but for the king and priests, the promise isn't a person one anymore. We'll read more about that soon. Until then:

What are you sowing? Faithfulness? Obedience? Whatever is good, noble, or pure? Or the alternative? Where is God offering the grace of reaping blessing that you didn't plant?