

Jeremiah Conclusion, 51:59-64: Independence Day:

Preface:

Well, friends. Let me start by saying I am honored to speak with us again. It's just such a gift, you know? And a responsibility, too, of course that I do take seriously. So thank you.

Today we're finishing our collective walk through Jeremiah. Some of us will think "Finally!" Others will be like, "Jeremiah? I forgot what we were looking at; it's been a long week!" Still others of us will weep, for we've loved this book God has given us.

Let's pray, and then I'll offer us some concluding thoughts on this prophet and the words God gave him for God's People.

Prayer:

Introduction:

So the real problem I have this morning--and I'm owning this--with concluding Jeremiah is that today just doesn't feel like an ending to me. I can't get there emotionally, get in the place where I'm finishing Jeremiah, you know? In part, because I was gone for a few Sundays, and I've got some weird distance from the book, and in part because we're

moving forward with a new way of gathering together this morning--which feels like a new beginning, not an ending, even if we all know that this is a little bit provisional as we ease out of COVID things and get used to the digital-and-in-person nature of this time we're setting aside for God. Plus, *plus*, it's Independence Day, which means a pile of us are thinking about parties and gatherings and freedoms and the like.

So the idea of doing a Jeremiah summary, and trying to force myself into not only a summary-mindset, but also a huge downer of one is really, really, hard this morning.

And, yet, not impossible. We can let our minds drift to recent tragedy, deaths and sorrow that makes the news and those that we know of, that doesn't, all of which remind us of how quickly anything can come to an end in violence and grief.

Jeremiah's book ends today. Much of it is violence and grief, too. His last words are condemnation, circling around Judah--North, West, South, East, then even further East, lingering on Babylon and all that will come their way for what they've done to Judah. And the judgment he proclaims doesn't skip Judah, either; they're included. Jeremiah's last words are chapter upon chapter of judgment, and they're given far from the Promised Land. He and Baruch, his only advocate, were kidnapped by their own people who had run

away *en masse* from the Babylonians to hide in Egypt--even though God told them, through Jeremiah, that Egypt would not save them.

Which is deeply ironic, right? They don't trust Jeremiah's words at all, don't want to hear what he's saying, but they want him around.

This is one of the things I want to linger with us this morning. But before I come back to it, let me summarize Jeremiah one more time, just in case we get caught in a hot and heavy game of Bible Trivia later!

Summary:

Jeremiah is a prophet of Judah, Israel's southern kingdom, which is all that's left after Assyria took the Northern Kingdom into exile. He's got one message, which he says over and over: "If, Judah, you don't stop it with the idolatry, what happened to Israel will happen to you." And it happens. Judah is partially exiled by Babylon. But not entirely. So Jeremiah keeps prophesying: "If, Judah, you don't stop it with the idolatry, what happened to Israel will happen to you." And they don't, and Judah is totally exiled. Now: Jeremiah promises everyone of Judah's bullies will be decimated in turn, empires coming and going, and promises that finally, someday, what's left of Israel will be freed from Babylon when they receive what they've been dishing out, and they'll be able to return to Jerusalem and have a

closeness with God they can't imagine. That promise gets picked up by Jesus' first followers at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, and with power and faithfulness, they go out into the world.

But this is Jeremiah's message, basically: Stop it with the idolatry or you're going to be destroyed. And no one ever stops.

That in mind, I want to focus on a few things we can take away from Jeremiah, painting with the broadest strokes I can muster.

A Few Things:

First, this idea I just mentioned: That faithfulness can take the shape of failure. Faithfulness can look like failure. We'll talk about this.

B, I think the arc of Jeremiah's life--what we have of it, anyway--can remind us that people do recognize when God is with us, and people do want God with them. We'll talk about what that means.

Next, Jeremiah can remind us that God keeps better promises for better reasons than we do. God in Jeremiah is a keeper of promises.

Finally, we'll end with Baruch, who ends Jeremiah's words

for him. Jeremiah, of course, didn't write "The words of Jeremiah end here." Baruch did. And so we'll remember what it means to be like Baruch.

Faithfulness Can Take The Shape Of Failure:

Whether or not it's good, what lingers most in mind with regard to Jeremiah the person is the fact that during his lifetime he never once experienced a positive thing on account of his faithfulness. Nothing good came to Jeremiah, and nothing good seemed to come of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry.

He spoke thousands of words on God's behalf, and no one ever listened to him. He marched all over the place, did all sorts of things, and none of it made a difference to the people who treated him as entertainment. He was thrown in a well, trafficked by his own people into a dangerous place where he told them they'd all die. Jeremiah's life was futile.

It was futile.

And we can do some very real and very reasonable spin on this, right? I mean, the good he promised way down the line was realized. Israel came back from exile and captivity. The promises Jeremiah makes that the Early Church and the New Testament lift up were really, really good for the we who follow Jesus. But in his life, during his life time...he got nothin'. You don't even get a vibe that he had some great

sense of purpose or meaning or pleasure in God choosing for him this powerfully important job.

We live in a beautiful age of beautiful calligraphy-embossed signs promising that you can live, laugh, and love, that you should pursue your dreams, that self-actualization is the highest virtue. COVID hasn't changed this much. And, honestly, I'm right there culturally, you know? I'm both a product of and a producer in a culture where self-actualization--I mean, the idea of doing what makes you feel fulfilled and purposeful--is a polestar.

You know who never, ever self-actualizes? Jeremiah. His life is hard, no one listens to him, and he fades out of history after being kidnapped. The most positive thing you can say is that he didn't outlive is only friend.

But he was very, very faithful. And God doesn't call people to self-actualization. God calls people to obedience, to do as God asks. Jeremiah did that. His faithfulness looked like futility in his lifetime. And so we should do two things, I think, in light of Jeremiah's personal story:

First: We should be grateful. Our faithfulness almost never looks as futile as Jeremiah's. We have stories of people responding to our faithfulness, our obedience. We've experienced self-actualization on account of our walk with God. We've got lists of good things, and providential

miracles, and joy from Christ that we keep locked and logged in our hearts.

Secondly: We should be cautious that we don't give up faithfulness when life gets difficult. Jeremiah can be a reminder that you don't always get sunshine and moon pies and puffins--or whatever you think is awesome if you haven't been to Maine recently--as a result of obedience. Sometimes you just get more opportunities to be obedient. That's okay. We have to take long views of our life, and resist the short-sighted temptation to give up faithfulness when our moments get difficult. And for those of us who can take heart in it, we can all know that our faithfulness might be made use of way down the line. That's no small thing, even though it can be hard to take encouragement in.

Others Recognize God In Us:

And I mentioned it earlier, but I am deeply struck by the un-ironic, unnoticed acts of those fleeing Judah. Jeremiah told them "Egypt will not save you." They ran to Egypt anyway. And, *and*, they kidnapped Baruch and Jeremiah. They've ignored every word Jeremiah has said, everything Baruch's written down. They left Jeremiah for dead, imprisoned him in a well. They clearly don't want to listen to him at all...but they want him with them.

This seems so wildly co-dependent, or, more graciously, this feels very childlike to me, almost stereotypically so. A child

will rage against his or her parents, and still cry out for them if they trip and hurt themselves as they turn in anger. A child will yell at their parents, and then turn around and defend them to his or her friends just moments later.

And whether they recognize God in Jeremiah or not, they at least recognize, I think, that he is the adult in the room. That there's something about him that is unlike them, something they want to have around--at the least, for good luck, but I think maybe at the most, and most likely, because they recognize the deep difference between him and them. He's never caved. He's never wavered. He's never been like them. If they asked, he'd say it's because he's faithful and they aren't, and he'll tell them about it anyway.

I think people still recognize that difference, in the same that children will recognize their need for an adult in moments of crisis and fear. What we might get is something Jeremiah never did, which is that someday someone may say, without irony, "There's something different about you. I want to have you around. What is it?" And we can say that it's the Spirit alive in us, the God who is present with us. We might even be able to say, without irony, that what others want isn't us at all, but Jesus, the one we're trying to be like. People never stop wanting an adult in the room, no matter how old we are, and we never stop recognizing God's close presence with another person, no much doubt about God

we might have.

God Keeps Better, Broader Promises:

Jeremiah's book reminds us that God's keeps promises better than people do. This was true 2600 years ago, when Jeremiah prophesied, it was true 2,000 years ago, when Jesus was born, and it was true about 20 minutes ago. God keeps promises better than we do. God makes better promises, knows what the promises that are made will cost, knows how to keep promises, and is just ridiculously, foolishly, generous in giving them. Promises of blessing aren't in any way treated like a commodity by God; they're treated as the natural outcome of a supernatural relationship, just part of the thing: God loves us, wants to be with us, wants to bless us, and promises to if only we can do all the work a good relationship requires.

And here's the rub: God is so deeply full of promise, practically Promise Itself, that God will keep on trying to make good on promises made even when nobody seems to care at all about what God wants, feels, believes, cares about. God is persistent in keeping promises.

Our word is rarely our bond; more often, it's our side-step out of an awkward situation, something given without any integrity, offered to shut another person up or get our agenda moving along. But God's word is never given lightly, and the promises God makes will be kept.

It might be worth considering opening up the New Testament again sometime soon and reminding ourselves of the promises made that God hasn't forgotten about, and will make good on.

Baruch's Example:

I want to end our time in Jeremiah, though, by remembering Baruch, the person who ended Jeremiah's book for us. God sent Jeremiah to an entire nation, and in the end only one person heard him and responded with faithfulness. Jeremiah spoke and spoke and spoke, and one person wrote it down, and then wrote it down again when he had to. Jeremiah only had one ally, but it was this ally, given as a gift by God, that made sure that Jeremiah's promises weren't forgotten, were ones God's People could recognize when God made good on them.

Baruch lingers in my mind because he is a hero, and probably much of Christendom never ever thinks about him. Baruch embraced his place in Jeremiah's story, and because of it he was able to tell Jeremiah's story faithfully, coherently, as an advocate and friend, not with jealousy or disinterest or disdain.

Baruch is largely forgotten among God's People. But his posture of faithfulness enabled us to know Jeremiah. And as I tried to compose this I just kept repeating myself to

myself, you know? But switching words around, too? “Baruch told Jeremiah’s story faithfully. Baruch faithfully told Jeremiah’s story. Did you hear? Faithful Baruch told Faithful Jeremiah’s story faithfully?” There’s something deeply powerful to me in the way Baruch doesn’t steal Jeremiah’s story, but made this huge effort to ensure Jeremiah’s words would last. Baruch made space for Jeremiah where there was no space; shuffled reality aside, and wrote down, twice, words on parchment so that God’s People could remember them like God did.

I guess I just really, really feel like Baruch is a hero of the faith, a wonder, a miracle and a role model, and this isn’t in spite of all we don’t know about him, it’s exactly because we don’t know much about him at all. All he was, was the person who made Jeremiah outlive himself, have a legacy, be as immortalized as a person can be in a world that will end. Baruch shares the stage with the one who hung by Jesus and asked to be remembered, with the woman who put in all she had as an offering, with the Egyptian Eunuch, and Simon of Cyrene, with Cleopas and their friend who invited Jesus in to eat after his resurrection, with all those who show up in ways that are momentary or fleeting or incomplete, but who play their part in the great immersive story of God and humanity’s relationship faithfully, honestly, and for the Lord. I’m drawn to them, the ones who are barely mentioned and who God’s People take for granted. They have been granted, gifted, to us, and I hope that we

can keep the same outside-the-spotlight faith of Baruch and his kind of people. To be counted among that group is to shape the world.

Conclusion:

So we'll move forward, now. I don't know when, if ever, we'll spend time in Jeremiah again, but I am sure we'll meet his and Baruch's legacy as we peer into other areas of Scripture.

Let's remember, though, what this book and this person offer us:

The reminder that faithfulness can look like futility, but isn't; rather, it's incredibly, inherently valuable.

The reminder that God will be recognized in us by those who long for the wisdom and maturity the Spirit bears in our lives if we draw close to God.

The reminder that God keeps promises, and the words God speak aren't forgotten or glib, and so neither ought ours be.

And last and maybe least, but least by choice, let's remember the example of Baruch, who trusted God enough to do for God what God needed when no fame, or power, came his way, and even his legacy is forgotten by many of those he served.