

1-30-2022 – “Meet the Prophet Jeremiah” – Jeremiah 1.4-10, Rev Mike Eggleston at St Benedicts

Introduction: An American vice president half a century ago taunted his detractors by calling them “Jeremiahs,” and also “nattering nabobs of negativism.” That vice president later resigned in disgrace, while the words of Jeremiah live on forever. Yet while today we may have more words from Jeremiah than from any other Biblical prophet, we perhaps rarely read them. They’re not easy to hear. Therefore, our guest preacher Mike invites us to take in all the span of Jeremiah’s long life in one sitting, by inviting from out of the past the very aged prophet Jeremiah to speak with us. Mike said he thought he knew where to find Jeremiah, living in forced exile in Egypt in about the year 585 BCE.

Baruch: So, you’re looking for Jeremiah. He’s gone. He vanished weeks ago from our little cell here in Egypt. Search the room. Search all Egypt. You won’t find him. I think the enemies of Jeremiah have finally finished him. It was coming. When the last tattered shreds of Judah’s armies assassinated our last governor, and then the assassins were themselves ambushed by another faction, the last warlord standing begged for Jeremiah’s advice. “What would God have us to do now?” Jeremiah prayed and answered: “Stay here in Israel and live. Whatever you do, don’t flee to Egypt where you’ll surely die.” True to form, that last warlord did just the opposite of what Jeremiah said and fled to Egypt, dragging us with him. True to form also, Jeremiah performed one last prophetic act. The old prophet took large stones and sank them like foundations in the fresh clay of Pharaoh’s new courtyard. Jeremiah said, “on these stones the king of Babylon will set his throne. He will destroy Egypt. The Egyptians and any Jew who seeks refuge here will be shaken as a shepherd shakes his cloak free of vermin.” That was the last word of the Lord I heard him say. Now Jeremiah is gone. I don’t know where.”

So who am I you ask? I thought you knew. I’m Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary. I’ve written his words for 30 years. Jeremiah was one of the first prophets to record his words on scrolls instead of only speaking them. He had a reason. I’ll tell you why.

This scroll is a copy of one he had me write almost twenty years ago. He dictated it to me because he was forbidden to go into the temple to speak. But Jeremiah’s words could go without Jeremiah. Jeremiah dictated, then sent me into the temple to read his words. Words of doom, words of life, words of God spoken over many years declaring that if Judah followed God’s ways we could still live. Well, not everyone hated Jeremiah. Some of the nobles who’d served under King Josiah asked me to read the scroll again to them. After hearing it was from Jeremiah, they took it to King Jehoiakim to hear. This was in winter. Jehoiakim sat close to his fire. His secretary Jehudi read every line. The king took his knife, and no sooner were lines read than Jehoiakim cut them off and threw them into the fire. The nobles begged him to listen, but the king burned every word. Then he ordered for Jeremiah and me to be arrested, and probably suffer the same fate as the scroll. But the nobles warned us, and God hid us. After that, God told Jeremiah to dictate another scroll including all that was in the first and more. Here it is. So you see why Jeremiah had me write his words on scrolls. His words could be heard where Jeremiah could not. His words could be heard, even if they were not heeded.

Do I say too much? Do you see this scroll, and do you think this is all that remains of Jeremiah? Burn the scroll, burn Baruch too you may think, then you’ll be rid of those pests forever? Hah! Think again, if you are enemies of Jeremiah. There are many more copies. You’ll never destroy all the words of Jeremiah. Even if they lay hidden a thousand years, the oracles of God will live!

But you're not enemies of Jeremiah, are you? You're not Egyptians, nor Jews, nor dressed like any people I've seen before. What are you? Americans? Christians? Nations I've never heard of. And you have your own scrolls of Jeremiah, you say? Then read them yourselves, you don't need me. What's that? You don't read Jeremiah for yourself? Why not? You're just like the doomed souls of Jerusalem if you have the prophet's words but don't listen to them! Why don't you read them? Because they're hard to read? Of course they're hard, an easy word never came from the tongue of Jeremiah. But they're words of truth and life! So read them! Oh, I see. You have many ancient words of God, you haven't time to read them all. So you want me to. . .summarize. . .Jeremiah for you? Impossible! That would be like shrinking the Sahara to the size of a sandbox! But if I don't speak of Jeremiah and whet your interest, you may never read his words nor heed them? So I'm invited to condense Jeremiah, so you can judge if he's. . .relevant? I see. All righty then. "Come, let us reason together!" Hah, fooled you there. Isaiah said that, not Jeremiah. Now. Are you ready to hear what Jeremiah said?

Here goes. God called him to be a prophet when he was just a child. "I'm only a boy," Jeremiah protested. "Jeremiah," said God, "I knew you before you were born. And I have set you to pluck up and break down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." Notice the preponderance of painful words? Pluck up break down, destroy? Jeremiah lived in a terrible time to be a prophet.

In his early years, it wasn't so bad. Our last fair king, Josiah, tried to lead the people back to God. Josiah started the Passover again, he reinstated the laws of Moses. We'd worshipped so many foreign gods that Jeremiah said Israel was worse than a camel in heat in our lust for foreign gods. Josiah and Jeremiah labored to lead the nation to repent. But it didn't go deep enough. "Judah did not return to me with her whole heart but only in pretense," Jeremiah said. Then it got worse. Far worse. Josiah died in battle. The Egyptians took his son into exile and set up another son who was of course Egypt's puppet. That was Jehoiakim. He led us in worshipping Egypt's gods, when he wasn't busy switching sides to Babylon's gods. Jeremiah kept calling us to return to the only God, our God of love and justice who has created all things.

Jeremiah was dramatic too, did whatever God told him. One time Jeremiah took a big earthen pot, expensive, that one man could barely lift, and Jeremiah gathered the priests for a message from the Lord. He shattered the amphora before them and said, "this is Jerusalem. God is going to shatter us like that broken vessel unless we change our lives." Another time Jeremiah bought a new loincloth, wore it in public, that got people's attention. Then God told him to bury it on the banks of the Euphrates. Months later God had Jeremiah dig the loincloth up, to display it. Of course it was rotted and ruined. Jeremiah explained. You Judahites are supposed to cleave to God as close as fine underwear. Instead you've wrapped yourselves around other gods and until you're ruined and rotten. Jeremiah spoke words of hope sometimes but more often terrible words of doom, none of it heeded. So the Babylonian armies came, 598 BCE as you mark time. Jerusalem surrendered. God took the king and leading citizens into exile. But they were merciful, for Babylonians. There was still a chance. They sat up Zedekiah another son of Josiah as king. Jeremiah spoke out again, saying that if we made our peace with Babylon while trusting the LORD we would live. But the priests and the patriots wanted to rebel against Babylon. They favored war. God would surely fight for his people, they said. Jeremiah said you could not be more wrong. If we fight against Babylon, God will fight against us on the side of Babylon. You can see how some people thought Jeremiah was a traitor.

It was downhill from there. Jeremiah got himself a heavy wooden yoke like for oxen. He wore it over his shoulders, saying, "God says, wear the yoke of the king of Babylon and live." The court prophet Hananiah publicly broke Jeremiah's yoke, said, "No, God is going to free us from those foreigners." Jeremiah answered, "Amen, I sure hope you're right." But soon after Jeremiah returned and told Hananiah, you've broken wooden bars only to forge heavier bars of iron. You've led the people to trust in lies. Now all the nations around will wear the heavy iron yoke of Babylon and by the way, you, Hananiah, will die within a year for false prophesy. Which he did. But Judah did rebel against Babylon. Their armies came again and destroyed our cities one by one. Jeremiah called out, "Surrender and live!" For that, people of his own family tried to kill him. Jeremiah survived and was held under house arrest. Then he tried to leave town on an innocent errand, but he was arrested at the gates as a traitor. He was thrown into the mud at the bottom of a dry well and left to die. But an Ethiopian rescued him. King Zedekiah knew Jeremiah was a true prophet, so he kept him prisoner in the palace. Though in truth it was the king who was the prisoner. He came to Jeremiah many times, pleading for a word from God. Each time Jeremiah prayed and answered, 'It's the same word as ever, don't fight, surrender and live.' "I can't, Zedekiah moaned. "The priests and generals won't let me, in fear for their lives." "If you don't surrender all Jerusalem will die," Jeremiah told him. But Zedekiah was a prisoner to his own fears. He was king, he knew what was right, and he wouldn't do it. So Jerusalem starved under siege. People killed one another for food. Finally the Babylonians broke through the walls, caught the fleeing king, and killed his sons before his eyes before putting his eyes out. Then they burned the temple and the city. Whoever of the leading people they didn't kill they took away into exile. Jeremiah's work, as God had told him, was to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow.

And also, don't forget, "to build and to plant." When all hope seemed lost, Jeremiah began speaking of hope and healing. Remember how I said he went on an innocent errand but got arrested? That errand was one of redemption. There was property that belonged to Jeremiah's family, land that the Babylonian army now occupied. But Jeremiah under Moses' law had the first right to buy that land and redeem it for his family. A cousin asked him to buy it for a large sum of money. It was a hopeless thing. Paying for that land while the Babylonians held it was sheer folly. But Jeremiah saw it as the word of God. He paid the high price and bought the land. He gave me the deed to store where it could not be destroyed. Because, he said, the time would come when houses and vineyards would again be bought in peace in the land. For even after bringing the kingdom to an end God would still be faithful to God's eternal covenant.

More. God would plant and built up. God would make a new covenant with people, not like the old one we broke. The new covenant would be somewhere where it could never be broken. God would write the new covenant on people's hearts, said Jeremiah, and everyone from the lowest to the highest would know the Lord. That new covenant would surely come. . .but wait, let me think. . .is that why you don't read Jeremiah's words? Because you don't need to read them, for God's words are already written indelibly on your hearts? In my time we had to be told by others the laws of God. Are you among those blessed people of the new covenant, who can know the ways of God within your hearts?