

Sermon 22 of June, 2014

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Topic: "Honest words"

Texts: Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 69:7-18, Romans 6:1-11, Matthew 10:24-39

Jeremiah the prophet has received a word from God warning about the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, but the people don't believe. The word that Jeremiah receives from God warns the people that the only way they can save their lives is to flee from the city and surrender to the Babylonians.

It is difficult to understand why an event as traumatic as the destruction of Jerusalem happened. What we know is that God warns the people through Jeremiah. Maybe if the people had listened to Jeremiah, many lives would have been saved. Jeremiah also understood the imminent exile of much of the people as a punishment for the people's infidelity.

Babylon became an empire just like that of the Spanish and began to conquer the neighboring countries like the Spanish came to Latin America to conquer. The strategy that they had after destroying the city of Jerusalem was to take all the rich and important people of Judah as captives. They left the poorest of the people in the land who had nothing. In any case the Babylonians were not good or merciful people. They only aimed to conquer and dominate.

Jeremiah's job was to proclaim the destruction of Jerusalem. It was not a popular message. We are a peace church of course, but the Bible helps us to see that a proclamation of peace cannot be blind; we can't say that there is peace when there isn't. In this case, Jeremiah knew that there wasn't a good reason to war against the Babylonians. It was only going to make the situation worse.

Today, scientists are saying that we are before a climatic crisis. If the countries of the world don't act soon, we are going to suffer climatic instability in the next 30 or 50 years: droughts, storms, heat waves and polar vortices, as the result of the pollution of the environment that we humans have produced. In this case, we aren't talking about a word revealed from God so much as scientific discovery. Even so, this is not a pleasant, nor popular message. That is why we see little response, because few people wish to confront the situation. The same thing happened in Jeremiah's day. Jeremiah offered an unpopular message and that is why the authorities of the people of Judah did all that they could to silence him.

Jeremiah encountered a lot of persecution. They beat him and then put him in stocks in a public plaza. It is in this moment that Jeremiah pronounces the bitter words that we read today and I will repeat now.

I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.

8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

9 If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

10 For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him."

Jeremiah had employment from God. His profession was to be a prophet. He heard the call of the Lord and accepted. He knew that his vocation was difficult, but he didn't establish his salary with the Lord. Now he realizes that the stocks are his salary and he is bitter. He has pronounced the words the Lord gave him and the people do not heed. He finds only resistance, rejection, hatred. "You deceived me," he says to God. I thought this job was going to be different!

Jeremiah is not having a crisis of faith, but a crisis of vocation; he does not doubt the fulfillment of the word of prophecy. The word doesn't deceive. His complaint is that his vocation as prophet only brings him suffering. He wasn't prepared for the persecution that the word brings him. He feels that God deceived him when calling him to be a prophet. And it seems to him that God has not delivered him from his opponents like God promised at the beginning. The worst is that the people instead of responding to him, only laugh at him.

Jeremiah feels trapped. He doesn't have a way out. He would love to have a few days of vacation, but he can't. If he stops speaking, the word of God burns within his heart. It torments him if he doesn't announce it. The word always prevails, always comes out. That is why he says that God is stronger. We might say that Jeremiah knows he can't be any other thing than a prophet. He keeps feeling the call of God and even he couldn't allow himself to do something else.

There is a name for words like this in the Bible. They are called laments. When we read these strong words of Jeremiah's we might feel a bit scandalized. In most churches they teach that we shouldn't talk to God like this. We should always express gratitude and praise. How can Jeremiah question God? How can he speak to God with such forceful words? Is Jeremiah losing or renouncing his faith?

As a matter of fact, no. That's not it. Some of you have noted that it is better in a relationship to express freely what one feels instead of repressing or hiding feelings. You have to say what you feel directly to the person. In this case, we are talking about the relationship that Jeremiah had with God, who called him to this job and gave him the words to speak. Jeremiah speaks directly to God. The people will eventually have the chance to see these words once the scroll of the book of Jeremiah is put together, and they will take them as an opportunity to repent.

So what is the problem for Jeremiah? The problem is that the people pay no attention to

him and they are persecuting him. They try to trap him, silence him, even kill him. Perhaps Jeremiah feels pain for the destruction of the city, but what he asks of God is vengeance against his opponents who didn't believe his word. We have to keep in mind that Jeremiah isn't a violent man. He never kills anyone. Rather he leaves this situation in God's hands, trusting that God is with him and will protect him. It is not the first time that Jeremiah pauses from his prophetic work in order to lament.

A few chapters ago he said: "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. (Jer 15:18 NRS)"

What we learn from this is that we can freely express our feelings before God because God wants an authentic relationship with us. God is not going to get scared by our words of lament, because God already knows what we have in our hearts. Worse would be a superficial prayer spoken almost as a lie.

Laments are common in the Bible. It's just that many Christians don't know that they are there and they are surprised to find such forceful words.

In the case of Jeremiah's lament, it seems like he finishes his words of anguish in order to begin praising God. But if we read a little farther than what we read this morning, once again we have even stronger words:

14 Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!

15 Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son," making him very glad.

16 Let that man be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon,

17 because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great.

18 Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

What crazy words! The only other Bible person to curse the day of their birth is Job, as far as I know. Imagine if Oscar and Catherine's baby is born and Leider calls all their friends to spread the news. And once the baby is an adult and goes through a rough time, he or she curses Leider just for having been happy that day.

What's happening is that Jeremiah is once again discharging his pain. The past is the past. He was born, now is here, now has his vocation. Jeremiah wishes to go back to the womb, but here he is, and the Lord has him here for a reason.

Jeremiah will continue working like before with another "Word of the Lord." If we kept reading we would find more not-so-pleasant words.

We don't know much about Jeremiah's last days. The last news we have of him are that he words to people that remain in the land after the conquest to not go anywhere. Once again the people don't listen. They go to Egypt and force Jeremiah to go along. That is the last we hear of Jeremiah. But later generations have always had the book of Jeremiah. The Lord was always with him. Without his work, our Bibles would be missing a book.

The Bible never promises us that serving God will be easy. We might think that difficult vocations are just for the great and important disciples, not for any Christian. It is true that God calls each person to a different vocation. Each person will have different experiences, and we can thank God they won't always be bad. But each vocation is a challenge. God believes we are capable of this kind of work. God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves.

So we can also trust God when we are in a difficult moment. Trusting in God doesn't mean that we have our lives under control, but rather accepting that we don't have that control.

In his lament, Jeremiah remembers that the Lord is with him and that is what we should remember as well. God loves us and works through our prayer. God cries as well when we suffer, but strengthens us to work in the vocation we are called to. The steadfast love and faithfulness of God don't change.

As I said, we have freedom to express what we feel before God, even accusatory language. God won't be offended. But after lamenting, we can't give up.