

Sermon: Stewardship in Tough Times

Year C, Proper 19

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10](#)

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Jeremiah has a reputation for raining on everyone's parade. He goes around Jerusalem telling everyone to repent. And no one does. And he goes around some more. Until he gets arrested for being a complete pain in everyone's neck and only escapes a death penalty because he wasn't the first prophet to be that annoying. And in the meantime, every now and again, we get to hear him complaining to God about how tough a gig it is to be a prophet for the God of Israel. Basically, Jeremiah is the dude who never gets invited to a dinner party because he's just sooooo annoying, sooooo negative.

And, yes, he is all those things. And more really. But he was also right. There was an enemy coming from the north and it was going to end very badly for the people of Israel. Furthermore, he saw under the current reality of his world to understand what God was telling God's people in a way that no one had ever done before. It's worth looking at what he said.

In the royal court in Jerusalem, there were professional prophets. They were people who told the king what he wanted to hear. They might be specialist, experts in particular areas, but in the end, they were kept on staff in order to tell the king that he was right, that he was making the right call. Ever since Solomon had built the Temple in Jerusalem some 500 years before, the professional prophets' job was to remind the king, the priests, the people, everyone, that God lived in Jerusalem. Right in that building on the Temple Mount. Remind everyone that God had made a special deal with the people of Israel, a deal that could never be broken. God would be the patron of the people of Israel and therefore nothing bad would ever happen. Army of Assyrians coming from the North. Nothing bad would ever happen. Army of Egyptians coming from the Southwest. Nothing bad would ever happen.

Jeremiah was *not* a court prophet. He was free-lance. He was a prophet who named what the people were numb to. He looked around him right at the end of the 7th century, somewhere between 626 and 609 BCE¹, and said to the people of Jerusalem, "Seriously? Seriously? How can it not be bad news when there is an *army* coming from the north? This is bad." And he also has something to say about the idea that God had made a deal with Israel that could never be broken. Jeremiah was pointing out it wasn't a deal. It was a covenant. Israel would do some things. God would do some things. If either side failed to keep up their end, then the covenant was broken. God had not failed. God had created the heavens and the earth. God had brought light into the world. God had filled the skies with birds and made the earth fertile.

But our side of the deal? To love God, to be obedient to God's commands? That did not appear to be going so well. And here we see the first of Jeremiah's deep insights. Humanity, particularly those who follow the God of Israel, can change the world.² Think about that for a minute. An all powerful God who can bring the world into being has set up a world that human action can fundamentally change it. We fail to keep our side of the covenant, and the steps of

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 177.

² Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25*. [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988], 4.

creation, so beautifully laid out in Genesis, can all be undone. Indeed, that's what the covenant says will happen if we drop the ball. God will undo what God has done.

Today, that is not so shocking. Nuclear weapons, climate collapse, environmental contamination. These are all ways that we change the world and we're used to the idea. But back in Jeremiah's day, no one had any idea that humanity could ever do anything to change the physical structure of the world. Jeremiah, thinking theologically, saw something that everyone else had missed; that everyone else was numb to.

In Jeremiah's day, gods were all powerful. They brought the rain and the earthquake and everything else that made and unmade the world. In Jeremiah's day, the point of worship was to figure out the rules the gods were playing by and color within the lines. Because a drought meant someone or some groups of people had failed to comply with a requirement. An earthquake happened because someone had crossed a line or forgotten a sacrifice or done something really terrible that they shouldn't have done. In Jeremiah's day, there were rules in place and the gods were as bound by those rules as the people were.

Jeremiah's other great insight was God's heartbreak.³ God had made the world, had freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, had brought them into the land of milk and honey. God had given them the Law to live by, had made a covenant with the people. All we had to do was be obedient, to love God and love our neighbor. And when we could not do that, the covenant said that that was it, God was going to turn the car around and go back to where we started, where all was waste and void (Jeremiah 4:23). Jeremiah thought theologically and realized that God's love for God's people was so much a part of God and God was so powerful, that nothing, not even God's own rules would bind God.

Jeremiah saw that indeed, God would return the earth to waste and void (Jeremiah 4:23), God would cause the mountains and the hills to quake (Jeremiah 4:24), that God would remove all life from the earth (Jeremiah 4:25-26), birds, plants, cities. *The whole land shall be a desolation* (Jeremiah 4:27). That's how powerful God was. And how angry, frustrated, betrayed God was.

And yet.

Yet I will not make a full end (Jeremiah 4:27). God goes on to say *Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back* (Jeremiah 4:28). OK. Fine. All that is true. But God also said, *Yet I will not make a full end*. That's how loving God is. The reality of God is that there appear to be contradictions in God's own self. Angry and powerful enough to destroy; loving and powerful enough not to. Maybe it's a contradiction. Maybe when we get to the other side of this life, we'll see that there's no contradiction at all. But 2500 years ago, Jeremiah saw that God is so powerful that no rule, not even God's own rule, can limit God's power and love.

In Jeremiah's day, the priests and the prophets, professional and freelance, and even the kings were in the business of figuring out what the rules were to keep God happy. Jeremiah is arguing that it's not nearly as complicated as they made it out to be. You see Jesus doing the same thing in today's reading from Luke. How much does God long for us to return to God? As much as we long for a missing sheep or a missing coin. How much does God invest in bringing us back to God? As hard as we look for a missing sheep or a missing coin and more beside. Our keys,

³ Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, 4.

our sheep, our coins go missing all the time. And we may be crazy exasperated with them and with ourselves when they are lost, but we don't give up. We keep looking for them. And we're ridiculously pleased when they show up. We even come up with new rules to keep them from disappearing again, although we know they likely will wander off and end up in the craziest places. When we'll have to look for them all over again.

Neither Jesus nor Jeremiah is saying that the tough times won't come. The sheep and the coins are going missing. The world is going back to waste and void. Especially if we continue on our path, thinking that obedience to God is an optional extra. Or something that we do from 10:00-11:00am on a Sunday morning. We've figured out that we can change the world. Indeed, we may not need God to turn it back to waste and void. We seem to be doing pretty well with that ourselves.

We still need free-lance prophets around us. Sure, we may not need to be reassured that God is living in a particular building on a particular hill in our town, so nothing bad will ever happen. But we act like because we're white or middle class or American citizens or live in a quiet rural town that nothing bad will ever happen. We act like because we're church going people, God has made a deal with us. We still need some Jeremiahs in our lives to make sure we don't lose sight of what God really promised. God promised hard times. And God promised that God would not yet make a full end.

That's what we need stewardship for. Not just money in a basket somewhere that we can draw on when things get tight. But investment in people who will bring us back to reality. Making sure that those voices don't get lost. Making sure that we are ready to accept that hard times are going to come. Making sure that we are ready to accept that God is going to keep looking for us a bazillion times harder than we ever looked for our keys or sheep or coins. Stewardship for tough times is about money, of course it is. Money is the most flexible resource that can be transformed into whatever is most needed. Stewardship for tough times is also about remembering what God really promised and what we really need to do. Stewardship for tough times makes sure that we have loving people around us to remind us that all our privileges mean we also have responsibilities. Stewardship for tough times means that we have systems in place to remind us to remain in the service of God even when we are doing things that we don't think of as being in the service of God. Like looking for our lost keys. Stewardship for tough times means making the changes so that in the midst of the waste and void we can still hear God's "yet". *Yet I will not make a full end* (Jeremiah 4:27).

Because Jeremiah was right. We can change the world. Not just destroy it, but build it back up. Jeremiah was right. God is angry and powerful and loving and powerful. No rule can contain God. Obedience to that power will save us and our world. We just need to remember. And we'll need to help each other remember, how much we are loved, how hard God is searching for us when we are lost.