

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

You Must be Born Again!

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*Called to Speak for the Lord – the
Book of Jeremiah*

Stop Sowing Among the Thorns

October 18, 2020

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 4

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21
(The Rich Fool)

Let's begin this morning by reading through this 4th chapter of Jeremiah, taking note of its main purpose and a couple of its particularly pointed portions. Then we will zero in on the first four verses.

Jeremiah 4:1-31 ESV “If you return, O Israel, declares the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, (2) and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.” (3) For thus says the

LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. (4) Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

(5) Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say, “Blow the trumpet through the land; cry aloud and say, ‘Assemble, and let us go into the fortified cities!’ (6) Raise a standard toward Zion, flee for safety, stay not, for I bring disaster from the north, and great destruction. (7) A lion has gone up from his thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out; he has gone out from his place to make your land a waste; your cities will be ruins without inhabitant. (8) For this put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned back from us.” (9) “In that day, declares the LORD, courage shall fail both king and officials. The priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded.”

(10) Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life.”

(11) At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, “A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse, (12) a wind too full for this comes for me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them.” (13) Behold, he comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles— woe to us, for we are ruined!

(14) O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?

(15) For a voice declares from Dan and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim. (16) Warn the nations that he is coming; announce to Jerusalem, “Besiegers come from a distant land; they shout against the cities of Judah. (17) Like keepers of a field are they against her all around, because she has rebelled against me, declares the LORD.

(18) Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart.” (19) My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. (20) Crash follows hard on crash; the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste, my curtains in a moment. (21) How long must I see the standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?

(22) “For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are ‘wise’—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not.”

(23) I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. (24) I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. (25) I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled. (26) I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. (27) For thus says the LORD, “The whole land shall be a

desolation; yet I will not make a full end. (28) “For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark; for I have spoken; I have purposed; I have not relented, nor will I turn back.”

(29) At the noise of horseman and archer every city takes to flight; they enter thickets; they climb among rocks; all the cities are forsaken, and no man dwells in them. (30) And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life. (31) For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, “Woe is me! I am fainting before murderers.”

There are at least 5 sermons here! More if I were a Puritan! But there are 50 chapters in Jeremiah and we want to look at the entire book before we are finished with this series, so I will just highlight some points and then as we said, move back to the first 4 verses.

Further Warnings of Judgment via Babylon

This is an example of God’s patience and mercy. So much of Jeremiah consists of warnings to these wicked people that if they do not repent, they are going to be wiped out, slaughtered, the whole land left desolate. They are given repeated and undeserved opportunities to repent. But they refuse.

The Deception of the False Prophets

Another theme that pervades Jeremiah is the wickedness of the false prophets who claim to be speaking for the Lord. They are liars and they tell the people there is no problem, better times are ahead, there will be peace, God will forgive them....just like we hear preached in the churches today.

Look at verse 10-

(10) Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life.”

This is not Jeremiah complaining that the Lord had spoken false words to the people. No, it is an example of this:

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 ESV The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, (10) and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (11) Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, (12) in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Because they had rejected Him, the Lord allowed these false prophets to speak a false, deceiving word to them. If a person rejects God's truth, eventually He will give them a lie and they will not be able to see truth any longer.

The Blame is Put Where it Belongs

(18) Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart."

One consistent characteristic of the unrepentant wicked person is blame shifting. They are never the ones to blame, you know. Never their fault – it is always your fault. And in the case of Jeremiah's wicked countrymen it was worse than that – *they blamed God!* Here is an example from Malachi-

Malachi 2:13-14 ESV And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. (14a) But you say, "Why does he not?"

It is this:

1 John 1:8 ESV If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But be sure of this, God will put the blame where it belongs. Always. And He calls us to do the same.

The Insanity of Sin

(22) "For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do

good they know not.”

Stupid. Sin is stupid. Sinners don't get it. Here Jeremiah's countrymen have seen the destruction of the northern kingdom. They are seeing Babylon already beginning to march and conquer. They know that Jeremiah is the Lord's prophet. But they don't get it. They won't get it. The only wisdom they have is the wisdom to do evil. Show them the good they must do and they look back with blank and hateful eyes.

De-Creation (vss 23-28)

(23) I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. (24) I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. (25) I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.

If the phrase “without form and void” sounds familiar, it is because it is:

Genesis 1:1-2 ESV In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (2) The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the

face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

God's judgments upon the wicked involve what we can call “de-creation.” A return of one degree or another to the formlessness and void of pre-creation.

Think, for example, of this:

Genesis 6:17 ESV For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.

You also see it here:

John 1:4-5 ESV In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (5) The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Watch for this theme. It is all through the Bible. And mark this down – anyone who refuses to come to Christ in faith, who refuses to turn from sin, can be sure that they will experience this de-creation. They will become more beastly as the image of God is withdrawn from them. The darkness of the devil will envelope their minds

more and more. And the ultimate de-creation is...hell. An absence of God and all the goodness of His creation.

In contrast, what happens when a person comes to Christ and is born again? “Let their be life and light!” We are given eyes to see and ears to hear and minds to understand God’s truth. The new birth is literally a new act of creation. We are made new creations.

It is not surprising then that man in his sin is capable of such beastliness and death and destruction and evil. God steps back and hands him over to the darkness.

Now, let’s go back up to the first 4 verses of this chapter:

Break Up Your Fallow Ground

Jeremiah 4:1-4 ESV “If you return, O Israel, declares the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, (2) and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.” (3) For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow

ground, and sow not among thorns. (4) Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

When a farmer is going to grow a crop on a piece of land, he must first cultivate it. This area in which we live required the early settlers to clear the land of huge trees and brush – and that meant digging out monster stumps as well. Otherwise no crop would grow, obviously. Or if, to think of another example, you were to buy a farm that had been let go for years and years, it would do you no good to sow seed in the fields. Why? Because they had been left to grow wild. Here in our area that means they would be covered in many cases with Himalaya and evergreen blackberry vines. Some major deep ripping up and burning would need to happen.

Here, Jeremiah mentions fallow ground. That is ground that is left to sit idle without cultivation between crops. As it sits, it goes to weed and if you are going to sow it again and get a crop you are going to have to take your tractor and plow and discs and harrows and

break it up. That is what imagery Jeremiah is using here.

The hearts of his countrymen were fallow. They had not given a good crop for a long time. They were overgrown with thorns and weeds. If they were going to give the good yield of righteousness that the Lord required, they were going to have to break up that fallow ground or the seed of His Word would never come to fruition.

Now, how do you break up the fallow ground of a sinful heart? You use the tool called *repentance*. We just saw it described:

Jeremiah 3:24-25 ESV “But from our youth the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers labored, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. (25) Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonor cover us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.”

Without real repentance and faith in the Lord’s Word, a person is simply going to be scattering seed like this:

Matthew 13:22 ESV As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

“Sow not among the thorns.”

Now, Jeremiah gives us a second image of all this too:

Jeremiah 4:4 ESV Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

Years ago when I was in Bible college, I remember asking the professor what was the purpose of circumcision and why God selected that practice as a mark of His covenant. It surprised me that he didn’t know. I didn’t either for a long time.

But really the answer is pretty plain in several places in the Bible, and this is one of those places. *Circumcision is a physical picture of the cutting away the*

flesh of man's sinful nature. It is, as we see here, an image of the cutting away of the foreskin of our hearts. Specifically and more plainly then, it is a picture of the necessity of being born again. Of being given a new heart. This is one of those OT verses that made Nicodemus accountable for knowing about the new birth:

John 3:10 ESV Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

What the Lord is telling these people through Jeremiah is *you must be born again*. You must have new hearts. And that should have driven them to see that this is something they could never do themselves.

As long as a person rejects Christ, they can be ever so religious, but all of their so-called good deeds will be nothing more than throwing seed onto fallow, thorn-infested ground. They will never ever produce a good crop pleasing to the Lord. *You must be born again*.

Jeremiah's countrymen were accountable to know this. The fact is that they really were no better than the pagan nations around them:

Jeremiah 9:26 ESV Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart."

And God had been telling them about this new birth requirement ever since the earliest days:

Deuteronomy 10:16 ESV Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Deuteronomy 30:6 ESV And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

The theme of course continues right on into and through the New Testament:

Romans 2:28-29 ESV For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. (29) But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the

letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Colossians 2:11 ESV In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

Therefore, it is a very good thing for everyone today – even for those who claim to be Christians – to ask themselves – *what kind of field am I sowing to?* What is my heart like – what is its true condition? Is it a new creation, a good field cultivated by the Lord that brings forth the good fruit He looks for? Or is it still weed and thorn infested that makes all my “good deeds” yield nothing at all in His sight?

*Break up your fallow ground,
And sow not among the thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord;
remove the foreskin of your hearts.*