

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word *was* God...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:1, 14)

It is fitting that we begin a series on the book of Jeremiah during Advent.
Because Jeremiah is pre-eminently a theologian of the *word*.

“The *words* of Jeremiah...to whom the *word* of the LORD came...”

Andrew Shead suggests that “We might describe [the book of Jeremiah]
as the story of what happened when the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah.” (p38)

The word of the LORD is not just an idea that Jeremiah discusses.
The word of the LORD is the primary actor in the book of Jeremiah.
The phrases “the Word of the LORD came to me” –
and “the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD” –
are each used more than a dozen times.
Jeremiah says “thus says the LORD” 155 times –
which is more than the rest of the OT combined! (Shead, 45)
And he uses the phrase “declares the LORD” 167 times –
which also is more than the rest of the OT combined! (Shead, 46)

What this means is that the book of Jeremiah
averages at least 6 references to the Word of the LORD in every chapter!

The opening line of the book connects “the words of Jeremiah”
with “the word of the LORD.”

If you want to know God, listen to the *words* of Jeremiah
as they communicate to us the *word* of the LORD that came to him.

Indeed, Walter Brueggemann is so bold as to say that Jeremiah
“does not require ‘interpretation’ or ‘application’
so that it can be brought near our experience and circumstance.
Rather, the text is so powerful and compelling,
so passionate and uncompromising in its anguish and hope,
that it requires we submit our experience to it
and thereby reenter our experience on new terms,
namely the terms of the text.
The text does not need to be *applied* to our situation.
Rather, our situation needs to be *submitted* to the text for a fresh discernment.
It is our situation, not the text, that requires a new interpretation.
In every generation, this text subverts all our old readings of reality

and forces us to a new, dangerous, obedient reading.
If such a subversive reading of reality appears to us unreal, too dangerous, and too costly,
we must recognize that for most in the 7th and 6th centuries
it was rejected for exactly the same reasons.” (Brueggeman, 18)

So who was this Jeremiah?
the one to whom the Word of the LORD came?

Introduction: “Jeremiah...to Whom the Word of the LORD Came...” (v1-3)

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin,

Verse 1 tells us that he was the son of Hilkiyah,
one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.
Anathoth is only a couple of miles from Jerusalem.
It was the city of David’s high priest Abiathar.
But Abiathar was of the line of Eli –
and after the days of David, the house of Eli was replaced with Zadok.

So Jeremiah would have been quite familiar with the inner workings of the temple,
but Jeremiah was *not* in the inner circle.

And verses 2-3 tell us *when* the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:

² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Josiah began to rule in 640 BC,
which means that the 13th year was 627 BC.
The captivity happened in 587 BC –
so the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah for 40 years –
from 627 to 587 BC.

This morning we reflected on Isaiah 7 –
when Ahaz, 100 years before, was contemplating what to do
in the face of a local threat from Samaria and Damascus –
the Israelites and the Syrians.
Ahaz rejected the counsel of Isaiah and turned for help to the Assyrians.

The Assyrians and the Babylonians were the two main powers of the Ancient Near East.
The Assyrian empire was centered at Nineveh
(across the river from the modern city of Mosul – in northern Iraq).
The Babylonian empire was centered at Babylon
(near modern Baghdad – in southern Iraq).

In Isaiah's day (100 years before Jeremiah)
the Assyrians were the dominant power –
but the Babylonians were stirring again.

Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, believed the LORD's promises
and he renounced the treaty with Assyria – and worshiped the LORD only.
He and the people of Judah paid a terrible price!
Yes, it's true that Jerusalem survived the siege of Sennacherib,
but at what cost?
“Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire...
And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard.” (Isaiah 1:7, 8)

Sennacherib boasted that he destroyed 46 walled cities in Judah.
Jerusalem alone survived.

Is it any wonder that Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, turned away from his father's faith?
Faith in Yahweh and his prophets can get you killed –
and your people destroyed.

If I am going to be a faithful king to those under my charge,
then I must protect them.

And so Manasseh's name is found on a treaty tablet in Assyria from 672 BC,
stating that he will worship the Assyrian god Asshur as his own god.

The whole of Judah's history can be seen in the light of the practical politics of the day.
If Jerusalem is going to remain an independent city,
then the son of David will need the patronage of one of the great powers.

The experience of Samaria and Damascus in the 8th century made it clear:
“Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated.”
The tiny kingdoms of Palestine could not possibly resist
the empires of Assyria or Babylon.

And so, when you look at the books of the kings and the prophets
you can easily see how party politics in Jerusalem was the order of the day.

There was the pro-Babylonian party – and the pro-Assyrian party.
Once the Assyrians are squashed, the pro-Assyrian party
tends to align with Egypt against Babylon.

I'm sure that both sides (for the most part) still believed in Yahweh.
But they were political realists.

In their view, it's just not realistic to expect that Yahweh will protect us.
And, quite frankly, if maintaining and expanding Jerusalem's political influence

is your standard for success,
then there is reason to doubt that Yahweh will succeed against the Babylonians.
Remember Hezekiah?

Manasseh's supporters would have told the story of Hezekiah over and over again!

When you trust in Yahweh to save you from the empires of this age –

first, you get squashed,
dozens of cities get destroyed,
thousands of people are killed,
and many thousands more are deported.

Sure, maybe Yahweh shows up at the end to 'save the day,'
but if your idea of "salvation" is that you first have to be beaten up
and brought to the very brink of death and destruction –
that's not a very appealing view of salvation!!

When Jesus said "if any man would come after me,
let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me,"
he was just saying what Isaiah and Jeremiah had said before him.

The cross does not follow the standards of *realpolitik* –
and the outward glory of the nations is not the way of the kingdom of God!

Jeremiah will show us that the cross was *always* God's standard.

It's not that Israel failed to be a glorious kingdom,
so God chose the cross as a second option!
Rather, Israel failed to bear the cross.

Isaiah had said that Israel was called to be the *suffering* servant.
There is no way to glory that does not first lead through suffering and death.

So the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the thirteenth year of Josiah
until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah –
until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

And as we go through the book of Jeremiah, it will become clear
that the word of the LORD is relentlessly driving us *to* the exile.

It will take us 52 chapters to get to the exile –
but if you think that it will be a long journey for you,
just imagine what it was like for Jeremiah!
He knew for 40 years that the end was coming.
He knew for 40 years that there was no escape.
You will only have to endure 40 *sermons* –
40 weeks in which we will see how Jeremiah's *words*
reflect both judgment and *hope*.
Because even though Jeremiah never offers hope that the exile can be avoided,
he *does* offer hope!

You *may* have a future!

But only if you renounce the future that *you* wanted and expected.

Jeremiah 29:11 – “I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD,
plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

Are you willing to surrender the future that you wanted and expected?

Are you willing to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

1. The Word of the LORD Came to Me (v4-10)

a. “Before I Formed You in the Womb I Knew You” – The Consecration of the Prophet (v4-5)

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah is a *gift* to the nations.

God says in verse 5,

“before you were born I consecrated you;

I gave you a prophet to the nations.”

“Appointed” is a very good translation.

But the verb is the verb “to give.”

It’s the same verb used to refer to the appointment of the Levites in Numbers 8.

“They are appointed (or given)” to the LORD for service in the sanctuary.

Likewise, Jeremiah is appointed (or given) to the nations as a prophet.

Paul will use similar language to refer to how Christ ascended on high
and gave gifts to men –

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,
until we all attain to the unity of the faith
and of the knowledge of the Son of God...” (Eph 4:11-13)

Indeed, Paul uses similar language of himself in Galatians 1:15 –

“But when he who had set me apart before I was born,
and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me...”

Such are God’s purposes – and his sovereignty over history –

and such is our confidence –

because if God has known us from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1),
then surely, he will accomplish his purpose for us!

b. “I Am with You to Deliver You” – The Confidence of the Prophet (v6-8)

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”

Have you ever noticed that Jeremiah's response sounds a lot like the response of Moses?
Moses had said that he did not know how to speak!
And the LORD did not appreciate that response.

But this is important!
Moses was plainly trying to get out of doing what God said.
("Please send someone else!" Exodus 4:13)
Jeremiah was simply young and scared.

And so:
⁷ *But the LORD said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.*

Deuteronomy 18:18 had said of the prophet like Moses,
"I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

Jeremiah is called to be such a prophet.
And with the call also comes the assurance:

⁸ *Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD."*

When the king declares that you are a traitor,
when the priests declare that you are a heretic,
when the princes throw you in a pit,
what is there to be afraid of?

I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.

And in confirmation of this:

c. "I Have Set You Over Nations and Kingdoms" – The Task of the Prophet (v9-10)
⁹ *Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth.*

As the LORD had done to Isaiah in Isaiah 6,
so now he does to Jeremiah.

Not only does God speak to his servant –
he also puts out his hand and touches his servant.

In your baptism, God has placed his hand on your head and claimed you as his own.

*And the LORD said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.*

Deuteronomy 18:18 said,
“I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”

The call of Jeremiah clearly presents the prophet as a prophet like Moses.

But Jeremiah is not just a prophet for Israel:

¹⁰ *See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”*

The six verbs of verse 10 will reappear over and over again throughout the book.
“to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

In chapter 12, in chapter 18, in chapter 24, in chapter 31, in chapter 42, and in chapter 45 –
and more subtly many other times as well!

In Jeremiah 31:27-28, at the heart of the book, we hear,
“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah
with the seed of man and the seed of beast.
And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down,
to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm,
so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD.”

And then, in Jeremiah 31:31, the LORD adds,
“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah”
[and he goes on to make clear that this will be a *better* covenant
than the covenant at Sinai.]

Jeremiah *will* pluck up and break down – destroy and overthrow –
but Jeremiah will also build and plant.
God is at work to “*create a new alternative community*” (Brueggeman, 17) –
but in order to do that,
God must first tear down the old patterns of thought and practice.

Indeed, you find the breaking down of the old,
and the building and planting of the new
in the *text* of Jeremiah itself!

First, in the words of Walter Bruggemann:
“The governing paradigm for the tradition of Jeremiah is *Israel’s covenant with Yahweh,*
rooted in the memories and mandates of the Sinai tradition.”

That covenant taught that the sovereign God of Israel required obedience to covenant stipulations about social practice and power. Disobedience to those covenant stipulations would result in heavy sanctions (curses) that would be experienced as death or displacement.... The book of Jeremiah thus mediates the reality of imperial politics through the theological claims of covenant.” (Brueggemann, 3)

But Jeremiah had to get at that covenant theology by attacking a sort of Davidic exceptionalism. The Jerusalem establishment claimed that “the God of Israel had made irrevocable promises to the temple and the monarchy, had taken up permanent residence in Jerusalem, and was for all time a patron and guarantor of the Jerusalem establishment.” Jeremiah rejects this. There is no immunity for the house of David!

But Jeremiah’s message is not merely one of covenant lawsuit – curses and disaster. “In spite of Israel’s obduracy and recalcitrance (as Brueggemann puts it), Yahweh nonetheless wills a continuing relation with Israel. This will is rooted in nothing other than God’s inexplicable yearning, which is articulated in Jeremiah as God’s pathos, presented in turn through the pathos of the poet.... The juxtaposition of covenant claim and pathos makes clear that God is, in the life of Judah, more complex, free, and less controllable than a simple scheme of retribution would suggest.... The theological richness of Yahweh’s character evokes and requires a subtle rhetoric that is full of ambiguity, passion, and incongruity.” (5)

Jeremiah will tear down the royal-priestly ideology of Davidic exceptionalism.

Too often American Christians have tried to craft a story of American exceptionalism – that the United States is God’s chosen nation.

Jeremiah is God’s prophet to the nations – to the Goyim (the Gentiles!). And he warns us that as God does to his own nation, so he will do to us. There is no way to glory – except by way of the cross.

2. The Wordplay of the LORD Came to Me (v11-19)

a. The LORD Is Watching Over His Word (v11-12)

¹¹ *And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond^[a] branch.”* ¹² *Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”*

Those who love wordplays will enjoy verses 11-19.

We start with a pun in verses 11 and 12.

The Hebrew word for almond is *shaqed*.

The Hebrew word for watching is *shoqed*.

The LORD is watching –
he is watching over his word *to do it*.

Indeed, in Jeremiah 31:28, the LORD says,
“it shall come to pass that as I have *watched over them* to pluck up and break down,
to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm,
so I will *watch over them* to build and to plant, declares the LORD.”

The LORD is watching over his word –
both in judgment, as God brings the curses of the covenant upon Israel and Judah,
and in mercy, as God establishes a *new covenant* in order to *bless* Israel and Judah.

God is watching carefully – to make sure that his word comes to pass.
In chapter 5, Jeremiah will speak of a leopard *watching* carefully
waiting for someone to come out of the city so that he can devour them.
And later, in chapter 44, God will say that he is watching over those who flee to Egypt
“for evil and not for good.”
The word of the LORD – both in blessing and in cursing –
will come to pass –
because the LORD himself is watching to make sure.

We don't like thinking about the bad stuff.
We don't like to admit that God himself is the one who brings disaster –
but that is why we hear verses 13-16:

b. The LORD Is Bringing Evil from the North (v13-16)

¹³ *The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.”* ¹⁴ *Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the north disaster^[b] shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land.*

The word “disaster” is simply the Hebrew word for “evil.”
It means “bad things”!
A thing can be evil without being *sinful*.
God is not sinning against Judah by bringing evil upon Jerusalem.
Rather, he is bringing *justice* – vengeance upon their sin.

Justice may well entail *catastrophic evil* (I think that it is safe to say
that the annihilation of the city of Sodom by fire from heaven
was an unmitigated disaster!).

We'll come back to this – because the theme of disaster from the north
runs through the book of Jeremiah in three distinct phases.

First, in chapters 3, 4, 6, 10, and 13,
disaster (or evil) repeatedly comes from the north *against Jerusalem*.

Then, four times, in 16:15, 23:8, 25:9, and 31:8, Jeremiah says
that God will restore the people of Israel
from the north country where he had driven them.

And then nine times in chapters 46-52,
God speaks of how disaster from the north will come against Judah's enemies –
even Babylon.

It's especially interesting that there is no overlap in this!
Even though the book of Jeremiah has quite a bit of back and forth –
the theme of the “north” shows the overall shape of the book:

First, there will be disaster from the north upon Jerusalem.
Second, God will restore his people from the north country.
Third, God will bring disaster from the north on his enemies.

Here in chapter 1, we are focused upon Jerusalem:

¹⁵ For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶ And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.

Verse 16 declares the reason for God's judgment against Jerusalem:

“I will declare my judgments against them,
for all their evil in forsaking me.
They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.”

Jeremiah will speak of many other sins of Israel and Judah.

But every other sin is rooted in a lack of love for God.

“Forsaking the LORD” is the starting point for every other sin.

If you always remember and love the LORD your God,
then you would not turn away from him and forsake him!

Instead of worshiping and serving the Creator,
they worship the works of their own hands.

Their confidence is in their own ability to manipulate the system –
to “get things done” –
and so they do not trust the LORD.

We are so much like our fathers!

We think that *we know* what it would look like for God to bless us!

God's blessing would mean that my situation in life got easier:
that my job situation improves,

that my uncle doesn't die,
that my friends understand me.
And what is more, we think that *we know* how to secure these blessings!
If you take these steps –
make sure that you “get in good” with these people –
follow this diet,
do all the “right things”...

That's *precisely* what the Jerusalem establishment is doing!
The pro-Assyrian party (later known as the pro-Egyptian party,
after Assyria was wiped out!)
thinks that an alliance with Egypt will save us.
After all, Josiah was pro-Babylonian –
and he was killed in battle against the Egyptians –
demonstrating that God disapproved of Josiah's pro-Babylonian policy!

Right?

We're pretty good at covering our self-serving agendas
with a veneer of religiosity.

The only hope for maintaining an independent Jerusalem is to ally with Egypt.
And since God wants an independent Jerusalem, we must ally with Egypt!

“They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.”

Stop!

Listen to what God says:
“I am watching over my word to perform it.”

And finally, the LORD calls Jeremiah to action:

c. “I Am with You” – The Invincible Prophet (v17-19)

¹⁷ *But you, dress yourself for work; ^[e] arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. ¹⁸ And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹ They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”*

Jeremiah is called to bear this “unbearable word” to a hostile and pugnacious people.

If they were an unresponsive audience, that would be discouraging,
but the LORD says that they *will* respond.
They will respond by fighting against you.

But the LORD is watching over his word to perform it.

And the sign that God promises is that “they shall not prevail against you.”
The gates of hell will not prevail against Christ's church.

“I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls.”

Jeremiah will be the invincible prophet.

But notice *how* this works.

They shall not prevail against you –

“for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

God does not promise *anything* other than his presence.

As we go through the book of Jeremiah, we will often see the prophet at the peril of his life.

God’s protection often must have seemed flimsy and insubstantial.

Seriously?

I’m going to survive this?

But if all that you have is the presence of God,
you have enough.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,

how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32)

And if God is with us –

then how can we be dismayed by anything?

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word *was* God...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:1, 14)