Proper 7 • Jeremiah 20:7–13 • June 22, 2014

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And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.

Much has evidently changed. In five short chapters we have moved from the repeated refrain “it is good,” a refrain culminating in the Creator who steps back and declares it is “very good,” to regret over creating man and being grieved to the point of destroying not just man but much of the wider creation he delighted in. The problem may have begun with one man, but its effects have spread to the point where God decides to blot out not only man but “animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens” as well.

This impulse to undo his creation is not limited to the flood. While God promises not to destroy the world in flood again, he does bring destruction upon man and creation due to his anger over their sin. Consider Sodom and Gomorrah where God razes not only the city but “what grew on the ground as well,” or his repeated threats to destroy his own people (Exodus 32, Numbers 16), to say nothing of the repeated depictions of the “Day of the Lord” throughout the writings of the prophets.

The key to a sermon following this theme is an exploration of how God is able to declare once again that his creation is good. On Trinity Sunday, a poignant text to help with this would be one usually reserved for the cold of winter, that text of the baptism of Jesus. As the Father’s Son—he who was there at the beginning and through whom all things were made—stands in a river being baptized, the heavens are torn open, the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, and the Father declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” (Mt 3:17). It is through this man, the new Adam, that God steps back and declares of his creation “it is very good.”

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Conflicting Messages

On this day the church in worship ponders God’s “unfailing love” (gradual) and “never-failing providence” (collect). The church prays to God to put away from her all hurtful things and provide for her all things profitable. As in the prophetic words of Jeremiah, in Matthew 10 our Lord’s words ring true that the Lord’s faithful will face persecution from authorities and betrayal from family for his sake and the gospel. Matthew 10:22 reads, “All men will hate you on account of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Altogether, the thought of the day calls for confidence in the word amid the conflicts endured by God’s people.

Notes on the Text

Jeremiah, like other prophets, was directed to employ symbolic acts to accent the message God has for the people. Our text follows the account of the prophet smashing...
a clay jar (19:1–12) symbolizing the way God will smash the nation of Israel for their apostasy: for their turning the land God gave them into “a place of foreign gods” and pagan sacrifice (19:4). Seven chapters later, the prophet walks with a yoke of crossbars strapped around his neck. This act was symbolic of Israel’s political submission to the Babylonians. God’s own people will be in exile, inevitably. God will let the Babylonians dominate Israel, and bring Israel under its yoke (27:11). In his fury and wrath, God will turn his own people over to foreigners. God himself will do this with outstretched hand and strong arm (21:5), the very arm and hand that rescued them from their oppressors in Egypt (Ex 6:6). God rescues. God punishes. God binds his people. God delivers.

Through his pronouncements, Jeremiah is striking at the foundation of the authorities and powers in Israel (20:1–6). The false prophets and officers of God’s people were misleading and misleading them away from God’s plan for them. Jeremiah is delivering a scathing attack on these authorities. In fact the prophet renamed the chief officer, “terror from every side,” a play on words. This leader actually is a terror to him and to all who follow him as their leader.

The prophetic function normally is twofold. It is one of foretelling and forth telling. Prophetic utterances have their implications for the present, imminently as they are spoken as well as for the future. Sadly, these words are not heeded when they are spoken to the intended audience. They must be spoken, nevertheless. Jeremiah decries this predicament that he is in (v. 9). God’s words are in his heart as it were, “a burning fire shut up in his bones,” and he could hold it in no longer. God’s words, especially the words God put in the prophet’s heart, breaks his heart as it were.

Proclaiming the prophetic word leads to isolation of the prophet. Throughout this periscope, Jeremiah laments his experience as he summarizes them especially in verse 10. His own friends are waiting for him to slip. He hears the whisper from many, “There is terror on every side.” His enemies might take revenge on him and overpower him. They think they will prevail and overthrow his case against him.

The prophetic word is indeed a word of deliverance. This word is Yahweh’s word that bestows on his people his unfailing love, and never-failing providence. In the end, the righteous people of God will be delivered from the enemies and the oppressors. God will rescue his people from the wicked. Surely, he will test his righteous (v. 12), and he will deliver his people from the evildoers (v. 13). The final victory is the Lord’s. He sees the heart and mind of his people (v. 12) and his deliverance is cause for them to sing his praises.

These themes echo throughout the New Testament. The reading from Romans (6:13–22) is but one example that brings these lessons to bear on the individual on a personal level.

The Lord’s own life and ministry on earth is the supreme example of this, and that is precisely to where these lessons point. The appointed gospel lesson calls attention to its implications for the Christian community as much as it anchors its life on earth in the name and for the sake of her Savior and Lord.

The incarnate Word, the very Son of God, faced resistance and opposition, especially from his own people as he walked the face of this earth, proclaiming the rule and
reign of God (e. g., Jn 1:11). St. Paul’s missionary life paralleled that of his Lord’s. Acts 13 is but one account of the rejection of Paul’s preaching by his own people the Jews, and Acts 14 depicts the confusion and the misunderstanding that came about him and his proclamation among the Gentiles in the towns of Iconium and Lystra.

The preacher has so much here to draw from, to develop his own proclamation of the crucified Christ to his audience that lives today in the milieu of pluralism and inclusivism.

On May 13, 1940, Winston Churchill addressed the British parliament as he was about to become prime minister. Hitler’s troops had already invaded Poland, and they had just begun their Blitzkrieg advance into France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. War was crashing upon the world as Churchill stepped into leadership. And unlike so many politicians, Churchill did not promise a bright, optimistic future; he held out no hope of speedy victory or early peace. Instead, he electrified the parliament and unified his country with famous but difficult words: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” No politician today would campaign on a slogan like that.

The prophet Jeremiah delivered a message that was similarly difficult: God’s righteous judgment was manifesting itself in the rising power of Judah’s enemy, Babylon. The victory of Babylon was inescapable; captivity and long exile loomed. These were not only geopolitical realities, but as Jeremiah proclaimed, Yahweh himself was at work to judge his people and call them to repentance.

This pericope speaks to the difference between false and true prophets, but the narrative is a little hard to understand without the surrounding context. It must be clear that the confrontation between false and true prophets, between human lies and God’s truth, is never a merely theoretical exercise. In chapter 27, Yahweh instructs Jeremiah to make and wear a yoke as an object lesson that God is giving Nebuchadnezzar the power to dominate all peoples. The accompanying message made it clear that Babylon would conquer, that such conquest was God’s will, and that any would-be prophet who predicted otherwise was simply lying (cf. 27:14–15).

Then, in the opening verses of chapter 28 (vv. 1–4, just before the assigned reading), Jeremiah is confronted by Hananiah with precisely such a “prophecy” of false comfort. Hananiah directly contradicts Jeremiah’s prophecy: the temple vessels will be returned, and the captive leaders of Judah will be released. In other words, according to Hananiah, God will break the king of Babylon’s yoke of power. In the verses immediately following our text (vv. 10–11), Hananiah enacts his message with an object lesson of his own. He breaks the yoke that Jeremiah was wearing.

Jeremiah’s message was completely different: Yahweh was on Babylon’s side, using Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of wrath and judgment. So the stage is set in