



Texts in Context

Preaching from Jeremiah: Challenges and Opportunities

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If one starts reading Jeremiah from the beginning, the harsh message seems relentless. The reader wonders if there will ever be relief from the terrible doom that lurks in the future and preoccupies the mind of the prophet. God is angry, the people are terrible sinners, the leaders are unable or unwilling to put the welfare of the people ahead of their own personal gain, disaster is imminent. The preacher who is conditioned to look for supportive, positive, affirming words in Scripture will not easily be attracted to most of the book of Jeremiah. There is hope in the book, to be sure, but it is hope that emerges only after recognizing the terrible situation into which the nation has fallen. In our day (as in the lifetime of Jeremiah) we want to skip over the negative and go immediately to the words of hope.

Most of the time we do not want to bother people with the difficult texts. The lectionary, itself, helps us to stay away from them. There are more Old Testament readings from Jeremiah than from any other book except Isaiah (which is way ahead in first place), but most often they are from the part of Jeremiah where hope oracles congregate. People have a hard enough time, we think, believing in a good and merciful God without confusing them with the condemning tone of Jeremiah. Even the words of Jesus himself are sanitized to preserve the image of a loving per-

The book of Jeremiah offers the opportunity to preach on important pastoral and theological issues, including some of the most difficult ones: true and false prophecy, the character of God, suffering and judgment, the anger of God. But, beyond all this, the book also offers hope—the more profound because it has looked terror and despair in the face.

son who forgives anything and never says a harsh word to anyone. The trouble with such avoidance is that we suppress the need to talk about matters that really do bother people. Just because the hard questions are not raised in church does not mean that they are out of the minds of the people. Sometimes people actually read the Bible on their own and they may even come across strange biblical passages that they do not like or understand, but they are left alone in their puzzlement because no one ever addresses them.

The book of Jeremiah struggles with many questions about how God works within a turbulent world. Though Jeremiah (or most other biblical books, for that matter) may not give a definitive solution to our deepest concerns, it will provide words, images, language, and structure to talk about them. This article will give several examples of themes that are raised by Jeremiah and continue to be worthy of our attention. Here is a list of nine such issues of theological and pastoral importance. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. Surely the imaginative student of Jeremiah could find many more.

1. How does God reveal a word to humans?

Prophets claim to have a special communication with God. Somehow God has revealed a word to them and has persuaded them to step out and speak that word to others who are not in such direct contact with the divine. Some prophets describe experiences of inspiration that are embellished with supernatural elements. Ezekiel and Isaiah describe their call in terms of visual phenomena that other bystanders could not see—a flying contraption with a wheel within a wheel or seraphim with three pairs of wings. Other prophets, like Jeremiah and Amos, are more likely to receive a word from God by observing the ordinary (an almond branch, a boiling pot, a broken pot, soiled underwear, a potter at work at his wheel). God's activity is deduced from looking at the same thing that others see, but only the prophet has eyes to penetrate beyond the outward and obvious.

“God gave the prophet the imagination to see God where others were simply unable to perceive God at work”

Do the prophets see visions? Sometimes. Does God give signs? Sometimes. Does God speak in a clear voice? Maybe to some, but most of us have not had that experience. In our day, it would be convenient if God would use e-mail or at least leave messages on our telephone answering machine. It never seems to be that simple. Whatever mechanism was used, God somehow put ideas in the head of the prophet, provided insights and understanding, and gave the prophet the imagination to see God where others were simply unable to perceive God at work.

Many of us envy the prophets for their ability to be in direct contact with God (though we may not want to share the consequences of their willingness to accept God's mission). It would be so nice if God would be more direct with advice when we struggle with hard decisions. If only God would tell us what vocation to follow,

when to move and when to stay, what man or woman to marry, how to make sense out of disaster in our lives, how to find hope in a world that is in such turmoil. Two reminders from Jeremiah when perplexed with indecision and longing for a word from God—first, look for a godly and wise person who may guide you in thinking about God’s will for your life; and, second, God may already be speaking to you if you will only heed the signs. Often, we stand in doubt looking for the spectacular and supernatural and miraculous, while God is waving in front of us the word we desire to hear. Oh, to be like Jeremiah who saw God in the ordinary.

2. How can we tell the true from the false prophet?

Nearly all the prophets had to deal with this issue. Others were competing with them for the attention of the people. They, too, claimed to have a word from God. Jeremiah had a confrontation with the prophet Hananiah (recorded in chapter 28) that finally ended in disaster for Hananiah (28:17). Often, it is the false prophet that has the more appealing message. He promises peace when there is no peace. He wants to skip over the matter of sin and its consequences, God’s anger with the people, suffering and death, and jump immediately to consolation, comfort, reassurance, and hope. Surely the true prophet, like Jeremiah, would prefer to speak a message like Hananiah. For one thing, people would be more likely to listen. It is not pleasant to criticize and antagonize people. Jeremiah suffered greatly as people responded negatively to what he said. Better to be deceived by the false prophet and postpone our time of pain. “Cheer us up with words of hope, whether they correspond to reality or not.”

This seems to be a time of heightened “spirituality,” whatever that means. There are innumerable false prophets and gurus out there ready to provide content to people’s search for meaning and spiritual depth. Organized religion is often regarded more as an obstacle to true spirituality than a place where it can be achieved. Churches that teach social responsibility, who talk of peace and try to tone down the demonizing of perceived enemies, who advocate for the poor and powerless are dwindling while churches concentrating mainly on personal fulfillment and well-being are prospering. Surely, the problem of false prophets is still with us. How do we detect them and distinguish between those sent from God and the others? How do we avoid being false prophets ourselves? Jeremiah shows us how difficult this question can be, especially in times of insecurity and fear. There is no easy way out of this dilemma. Jeremiah’s whole life is a witness to that. And, of course, Christians are driven to think of Jesus and the theology of the cross when dealing with this issue.

3. Intercessory prayer

Jeremiah, like other prophets, was sometimes caught in the middle between God and the people. Since he claimed special access to God, communication could go both ways through him—from God to the people and from the people to God. Since Jeremiah did not like the dreadful message God had assigned him to proclaim,

he sometimes took the side of the people to try to convince God to hold back the punishment. Others in Israel's past who had prayed for the people were Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Amos. Sometimes God heard and even "changed his mind."

What puzzles the reader of Jeremiah are passages where God tells Jeremiah to stop praying. It will not do any good. God will not listen (see 11:14; 14:11-12; 15:1). Why would a merciful, forgiving God refuse to hear the passionate pleas for the salvation of a doomed people? Is there a time when it is too late to pray for others? Must one first decide whether or not the prayer will work before sending it up to God? Are we not supposed to pray for anything with the confidence that God will respond favorably?

There are a couple of ways that we might look at this. Maybe it is Jeremiah himself who has given up on the possibility that the people will heed his warnings and repent. His personal laments seem to indicate that he did reach such a point (e.g., 17:14). Then he projects his own frustration and anger onto God. Or, it could be that God has also realized that it is now too late to prevent the demise of the nation. It is inevitable. Even a last-minute miraculous act of repentance cannot cancel forces that are already in motion. The Babylonians are coming no matter what the people do. They had their chance earlier but defiantly refused to change. Sins have consequences and they are imminent. So Judah must take its medicine, "hit the bottom," and only after that something new and better may arise from the ruins. Even God cannot (or will not) protect people from all the suffering they bring on themselves.

4. Acted-out parables

Jeremiah, like other prophets, sometimes acted out his message. The pattern was usually like this: God told him to do something (maybe rather bizarre and often without clarification of the purpose); later, God would speak a work of interpretation to explain what message the act was meant to convey. The act reinforced the message. Onlookers would wonder what the crazy prophet was up to now. Having grabbed their attention, the prophet could then give the meaning. One might draw an analogy between these acted-out parables and the visual objects sometimes used for children's sermons. The prophets were multimedia communicators.

Let us look briefly at three examples from Jeremiah. In 13:1-11, Jeremiah buys underwear ("a linen waistcloth"), never washes it, eventually buries it in the banks of the Euphrates, and much later returns to retrieve the soiled undergarment. All this was done at God's instruction. The point was that God used to be as close to the people as a man to his underwear, but the clothing has become so filthy that God does not even want to touch it anymore, let alone wear it. In 18:1-12, Jeremiah watches a potter discard a pot that is not taking shape properly and then uses the same clay to fashion a new pot. All of which shows that God can "change his mind" about whom God will destroy and whom God will save, determined largely by the behavior of the clay (the nation). In 36:6-15 Jeremiah buys the land of a relative to keep it in the family. With Babylonians lurking on the horizon, it hardly seems a good time to invest in property. This becomes an important promise of

hope after the destruction (“Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” 32:15b).

5. Marriage, sexual, and other familial metaphors

Jeremiah, like Hosea before him, uses marriage and sexual imagery to describe the close covenantal relationship with God. Life with God ought to be like that of the partners in a good marriage. When the metaphor is used to condemn God’s people, it is like the failure of marriage and the language of whoredom, infidelity, and divorce is used (especially early in the book; e.g., in chapters 2-3). God is the faithful husband in the relationship and we (the feminine side of the union) are the guilty ones. Sometimes God is also referred to as father (e.g., 3:4-5) and we become the disobedient children.

It is not surprising that prophets borrow the language of family and sexual intimacy to try to find words to speak about a relationship with God. Since we do not see God, we look to our human relationships to imagine the inexplicable. The family metaphors are important, maybe even necessary. But there are several cautions to keep in mind. Since our human experiences of intimacy are often flawed, we may project onto God ideas we do not intend, such as a patriarchal family structure, an abusive husband, a stern and unforgiving father. Since God generally takes the masculine role, the offender, the one who breaks the relationship, is nearly always presented as a feminine figure. Surely, many negative generalizations about women throughout the cen-

turies have referred to such passages for support. In the mind of the prophet, however, the role of the unfaithful wife is one that we all fulfill, whether male or female.

So, this way of picturing God can have value, but it can also lead to distortion of God's image or ammunition for those who would denigrate half of the human race.

6. Suffering and hope in Jeremiah

Jeremiah interprets the disaster, the chaos, the suffering, the loss of king and nation as God's punishment. Suffering can be explained. There is a reason. A believer can still maintain that God is good and just and in control, because bad things only happen to those who deserve them (or they are part of a larger societal system that deserves it). Jeremiah is in agreement with much of the Old Testament prior to the exile—God brings good to those who choose the right and suffering to those who do what is evil. Suffering is the result of sin, either one's own or the sins of others who have brought calamity even to those who seem to be innocent. Such views of the origin of suffering have value up to a point. They do not explain all suffering. And they do not work very well when applied to the fortunes or misfortunes of each individual life. Job, Ecclesiastes, and various lament psalms will challenge the simplicity of this view of suffering.

“When is it time to speak of hope without denying reality and pretending that circumstances are better than they really are?”

Though Jeremiah speaks most often of impending doom, he does sometimes promise a hopeful future. Those passages are clustered in chapters 29-33 (especially 30-31). When would Jeremiah have spoken of hope? Most believe that a word of hope was not really appropriate when his intention was to alert people to the immediate danger. He would not wish to ease the harsh message with words of assurance about good times beyond the destruction. After the fall of the nation, when false hope is no longer possible, when it seems that God has abandoned them forever, that is the time to speak a word of hope. When is it time to speak of hope without denying reality and pretending that circumstances are better than they really are? Perhaps more time is necessary, more self-reflection, more grief work, more lamenting before one can properly receive and believe a word of hope. Often, in our efforts to comfort and console, we try to rush hope, to ease the pain before it is possible for the sufferer to hear.

7. Jeremiah's laments (and ours)

Jeremiah is sometimes called the “crying prophet,” with some justification. He did not want to take on this job in the first place. There is no future for a prophet of doom in a society that refuses to hear such negative talk. He was alienated from his fellow citizens, from the religious and political leaders, and even his own family. He was often in and out of prison. God even told him he should never marry, as a living witness (a lifelong “acted-out parable”) of the futility of marrying

and bringing children into a world like his (16:1-4). He thinks God tricked him into accepting the role as prophet. No wonder he hates his job and his life. He often told God how he felt about it in a series of personal laments (scattered in chapters 11-20) that are unique among prophetic books.

Sometimes Jeremiah is disdained as a whiner, a complainer, who seems at times shaky in his faith. Since we Christians have become so conditioned to suppress any thoughts and feelings that we assume will be displeasing to God, we tend to be critical of Jeremiah for his disrespectful prayers. We have diminished the strong lament tradition of the Bible, the freedom to approach God with honesty and integrity. Jeremiah provides an opportunity to think about the truth that the only good prayer is an honest one. We hope we may not often be as miserable as Jeremiah, but if we have such moments, permission to lament is affirmed by even the great heroes of the faith like Jeremiah (and we could add Moses, David, Habakkuk, Jesus, and Paul, among others).

“Is everything that happens part of God’s plan simply because it happens?”

8. God’s control and human freedom

This is surely one of the thorniest of all theological questions. How can we assert that God acts to accomplish his will in the world when humans are free to do all sorts of things that are contrary to what God wants and wills? Is everything that happens part of God’s plan simply because it happens? Jeremiah talks as if God is responsible for moving nations around, for stirring up the Babylonians and sending them to punish Judah. Surely the Babylonians do not know that they are being used by God and, if they knew that God wanted them to invade, pillage, and destroy, they would be happy to oblige. That is what they do anyway, with or without God’s urging. When do evil nations act on their own and when are they being manipulated for God’s greater purposes?

Jeremiah leaves us with a tension here that cannot easily be resolved. Surely he believes that God is at work even in what is happening on the international scene. Babylon does not do what it does unless God is somehow giving permission. Elsewhere in the book Jeremiah insists that Babylon will have to be punished for what they did to Judah. Never mind that God called them to the task, they are still accountable for the evil they have perpetrated against God’s people (see the oracles against Babylon in chapters 50-51; note especially 51:24). God is in charge of the big picture, though individual acts of evil and cruelty may be the result of human sinfulness. The terrible deeds of individuals and nations may fit into God’s ultimate purpose, but they are still accountable for the hurts they have caused along the way. Maybe God could have chosen a different way to reach a positive end without so much pain and bloodshed. God finally has the last word, no matter what wrongdoings we commit against each other.

9. *The anger of God*

God appears to be angry in many of the passages from Jeremiah. The anger of God is a frightening thought. We do not like to be the target of anger even on the human level. At least if some other person is angry, we can try to avoid them, hide, move out of town, defend ourselves from violence, call the police, or take some other action. With God, there is no escaping. If God is angry, we are utterly and totally vulnerable. In recent years, there has been such a reaction against the image of an angry God that we tend to avoid these passages from the Bible and dismiss them as a primitive (perhaps a pre-Jesus, Old Testament) view. Even Jesus, who threw over the tables of the money-changers and cursed the fig tree, is not allowed to be angry.

Nevertheless, these texts are in the Bible and need to be examined. People read them and wonder about them. And often people have life experiences in which it seems that God has acted toward them in anger. Several things could be said: (a) Anger is the reverse side of love. A God who is deeply involved with people, who loves them, who cares what happens to them, cannot help but be angry when observing the terrible things that humans do to themselves and others. A God who never gets angry would be an indifferent God who is not bothered by terrible choices that people make. The angry God of Jeremiah is also the God who “weeps day and night for the slain of my poor people” (9:1). God is like a parent who is angry with a child for her behavior, but has not stopped loving that child. (b) Sometimes what is perceived as God’s anger may be a human projection of our own feelings onto God. Something awful has happened to us and we assume God is angry with us, whether or not that is actually the case. Or, we may be angry at a real or imagined enemy and then we assume that God agrees with us and is also angry at the same person or group of people or nation. Our enemies are not necessarily God’s enemies. (c) God’s anger is not the last word. It is not the deep truth about God. It comes for a moment and then recedes. As in many biblical texts (especially psalms), our hope is that God will not act while in a state of anger, but will hold back until the time of wrath has passed.

Jeremiah provides many texts that lead into a conversation about some profound pastoral and theological issues. Jeremiah’s struggle to be obedient to God, to speak the truth in tumultuous times, and to remain faithful to the end can be an example to us all as we contemplate those same concerns in our day. ⊕

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