

'JUST BECAUSE IT'S HARD...'

Jeremiah 14:7-22

Intro

As I have mentioned from this pulpit before, I lean upon the Revised Common Lectionary to help me select the scripture passages that we hear from on a week to week basis. This Lectionary provides a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and then a selection from one of the New Testament letters. The thought behind these offerings is that if you use them over the course of the three year cycle that they are set up in, a congregation will be able to hear all of the main points of faith.

That's the logic behind it.

However, this does not mean that it is not without its faults. For example, the Old Testament reading for this week is taken from the 14th chapter of Jeremiah...but it omits verses 11 through 18. That stood out to me like a sore thumb. So I read the whole passage (including the omitted verses) and I sat back in my chair and thought, 'well, I know why those verses were excluded: they're tough to hear.'

And that's exactly why we are going to be hearing from them this morning.

The Word of God was not written to make humanity feel good, or comfortable. It was written so that we might be ever reminded of who God is and how we are supposed to live with Him as we walk with one another.

So as you hear these words, do not fear: instead hear them, as we talked about last week in a reading from II Timothy, as words 'inspired by God...useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' The scripture reads this way.

Jeremiah 14:7-22

⁷ Although our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name's sake; our apostasies indeed are many, and we have sinned against you. ⁸ O hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night? ⁹ Why should you be like someone confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot give help? Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not forsake us!

¹⁰ Thus says the Lord concerning this people: Truly they have loved to wander, they have not restrained their feet; therefore the Lord does not accept them, now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.

¹¹ The Lord said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. ¹² Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt-offering and grain-offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them.

¹³ Then I said: 'Ah, Lord God! Here are the prophets saying to them, "You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place."' ¹⁴ And the Lord said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. ¹⁵ Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name though I did not send them, and who say, 'Sword and famine shall not come on this land': By sword and famine

those prophets shall be consumed. ¹⁶And the people to whom they prophesy shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword. There shall be no one to bury them—their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their wickedness upon them.

¹⁷You shall say to them this word: Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter—my people—is struck down with a crushing blow, with a very grievous wound. ¹⁸If I go out into the field, look—those killed by the sword! And if I enter the city, look—those sick with famine! For both prophet and priest ply their trade throughout the land, and have no knowledge.

¹⁹Have you completely rejected Judah? Does your heart loathe Zion? Why have you struck us down so that there is no healing for us? We look for peace, but find no good; for a time of healing, but there is terror instead. ²⁰We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord, the iniquity of our ancestors, for we have sinned against you. ²¹Do not spurn us, for your name's sake; do not dishonor your glorious throne; remember and do not break your covenant with us. ²²Can any idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this.

'Just Because it's Hard...'

So what do you think?

Here's the first thought that crossed my mind: don't mess with God. God knows when you're being real ...and he knows when you're faking it. And that is especially true when it comes to putting on religious airs either to cover your bases or to try and pull yourself out of some sort of a fire. And that is very much what is being spoken against here.

Think about it: in verse 14, we hear the voice of God declare in no uncertain terms, 'these prophets who say they are speaking on my behalf...aren't. They have (to use the description from one of last week's passages) itchy ears and they are making declarations that speak to their personal wants or desires.'

God knows that and calls them out as who they are: hypocrites.

But as we hear in the passage, the act of calling people out isn't just limited to the false prophets, for God lays the same label at the feet of all of those people who have listened to the false prophets and said, 'Yup! I'm following what they say!'

Why?

Because it's the responsibility of the people to know the Word of God and follow it, as opposed to following the people who are saying the things that sound best. And the reality is, that there is not a single one of us who does not fall into this categorization of saying one thing and doing another in one way or another. You may think that's an exaggeration, but scripture and experience point to the truth that it is anything but.

As I said in prior to the reading, this is a hard one to hear.

But again, what is scripture to be used as? As a tool for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

So let's use it that way.

Yes, we are able to hear the upset, disappointment, and even anger of God in His words through the prophet. But is that the end of the story?

Thankfully, and by the grace of God and God alone, we are able to respond with a resounding, 'NO.' The reality was that the disappointment and anger were not the end of the story for the people of Israel, for even though their country was conquered, and they were sent into exile, God still abided with them and worked through the ways of the world to ultimately bring them back to their homeland so that from the stump of Jesse and new shoot might emerge. We have ultimately come to know that shoot as the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

But if we do not allow these difficult verses to lean upon us, even a little bit, then we end up being no better than the false prophets or the people who listened to the false prophets: we are simply listening to that which we want to hear.

So what are we to learn from scripture? From this scripture?

Our God is a God of justice who longs for us to walk with Him and by extension (since we are His creation and made 'in His image'), with one another in relationship.

These are goals that humanity, that we, are going to fall short of.

But that doesn't mean that we don't keep pushing on toward the greater good, to the good that is of God.

Yes, we are able to understand that if it were not for the sacrifice of Jesus on a cross there would be no way that we would ever be able to be forgiven of the missteps that we have made, the steps that we should have taken but we didn't because we were afraid, or just didn't care, the hypocrisies that are a part of our lives.

The only way to realize that forgiveness? By humbling yourselves, by humbling ourselves so that we might be able to be right in the eyes of God.

But as we have talked about before, just because you are forgiven doesn't mean that the responsibilities of walking with God, with one another simply disappear. It's not a get out of jail card, go directly to 'GO' and collect \$200 sort of thing (I played a lot of Monopoly as a kid). It's not a game.

No, the expectations of God are still there: we still need to strive for the good that is of God. We must. It's the right thing to do; it's the God thing to do.

Why? Well, yes, there are eternal consequences but there is also living our current days in ways that we are able to understand and appreciate the blessing of God as well.

Have you ever known someone who has struggled with living that which would be considered by most people, a good and positive life? Maybe they lie, cheat, steal. The manifestations off of those baseline descriptions are endless.

What allows that person to have the greatest likelihood of turning the corner to become someone who not only acknowledges their fault, to someone who begins, again, even if it's just a little bit, to someone who moves in a new direction; a God-led direction?

Some would say will power or internal fortitude. Others might point to only having one direction once you hit rock bottom.

I again lean on the Word.

First and foremost, we need to develop and foster a personal relationship with God ('No one comes to the Father except through me'). This takes place through prayer, study, and service. But the reality is, that if that is done in the context of isolation, our ears will start an itching, and we'll end up wandering right back into the behaviors that left us in need of the forgiveness of God in the first place.

So how do we foster a longstanding relationship with God? By being in community with one another. Yes, there is an up and down reality to faith, but if it not bound together by those who are around you then you will end up faltering.

I mentioned this in Men's Group on Thursday morning: I struggle with that connection piece. Whether it be my own introverted nature or how I have bought into the individualism that our culture has created, the idea of saying, 'so, here's my stuff.' Around the horn, there was general acknowledgement that I was not alone in that feeling. And beyond that, I can't tell you the number of people whom I have heard some variation of, 'I didn't say anything because I didn't want to bother you or anyone else'; or, 'other people's problems are bigger than mine.'

But in order to allow Scripture to actually be instructive, we have to struggle against those inclinations and lean upon God by leaning upon one another.

Or will we instead walk away today resolved that who we are is not able to change, even just a little bit?

In June of 2004, Jen and I ventured up to Stowe, Vermont for our honeymoon. On a beautiful afternoon we ventured up the road between Stowe and Smuggler's Resort up and over Mt. Mansfield. I'm not sure how we found it, but toward the crest of the road, we parked the car and went for a hike even further up the mountain. We did no research on it, we just went for it: we were wearing summer type clothing but it certainly wasn't hiking gear.

After about 20 minutes we realized that this hike, well,...it was like climbing a ladder: straight up. But did we stop? Of course not! We we're young and we couldn't believe that it could just keep going straight up.

But it did, and we get trudging, me projectile sweating all the way. And then we finally got to the top. After venturing just a little further, we were able to settle in at one of those classic pristine mountain lakes. It was beautiful, and it was so worth it.

Then we had to slide back down the mountain.

Am I still thankful that we tackled that path that ended up being so hard? I am.

What about our faith? Are we willing to dig in and turn, even just a little bit, away from the sinfulness of the world, the hypocrisies we abide in, and toward the forgiveness and ultimate blessing that is recognized by walking with God by walking with one another? It's so worth it. It's so worth it.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious God the verses that we have heard this morning are difficult to hear, but leaning upon Your Word, we are not without hope. Lord, allow Your Spirit to move in and through us so that we are able to lean upon You by leaning upon those who walk with us in the faith. Lord, the only way that we maintain even the smallest of shifts is by trusting all that much more in You. Lead us Lord, to do that very thing. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.