

Proper 23, Jeremiah 19:1, 4-7
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
October 12, 2025

Merciful Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, and that we may always seek and follow you. Amen

I am going to deviate just a bit from my normal approach to preaching today. I usually focus on the gospel reading for the day. But today, the scripture that spoke the loudest to me of the four that included in our lectionary is the Old Testament text. I promise to link my focus to the theme of the gospel text by the end of the sermon so bear with me. Maybe it is because Jeremiah is such a persistently convincing prophet or maybe it is because of his name.

If you are politically minded, and a lot of people are right now in our society, you might recall Jeremiah as in Jeremiah Wright, the pastor who was one of President Barack Obama's trusted advisors and supporters. If you are like me, a person who came of age in the 1970's, you might immediately recall Jeremiah as in the bullfrog who was featured in the band Three Dog Night's song Joy to the World. As I recall, the first words of that song are Jeremiah was a bullfrog, he was a good friend of mine. I never understood a single word he said... Which brings us to the prophet Jeremiah. People understood every single word he said but they did not like any of the words he said.

In Hebrew, the name Jeremiah means God (or Yahweh as the Hebrews called him) will uplift. Jeremiah the prophet embodied the belief that Yahweh intended to exalt and uplift the people of Israel to his own peril. That is to say, no one liked Jeremiah. Like all the prophets who said out loud what people needed to hear and not what they likely wanted to hear, he was shunned. He was lonely and he let people know that he was not happy about it. He knew he did not have good things to say but he needed to

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say them. He needed to warn the people of Israel, God's chosen people, that they were sadly losing sight of their covenant and relationship with God. For thirty years, Jeremiah had seen that the Israelites' collectively disregarded their commitment to God. As a people they were failing to be thankful for the liberty and prosperity that God had freely given them. Jeremiah saw that the Hebrew people had grown complacent in their security and comfort. They gave their kings the credit when they prospered and blamed their kings when they didn't. More and more they were failing to be dutiful in their worship. They had become lazy about teaching the faith to their children.

They seemed to have forgotten that God was involved in all of the things that happened to them. Jeremiah had been warning them as loudly and as often as he could for thirty years, and they despised him for it. He told them that Jerusalem would fall and that they would be taken captive. Remember how no one understood a single word Jeremiah the bullfrog said in that song? Well the Israelites **refused** to *hear or believe* a single word the prophet Jeremiah said. They dismissed his warnings and went on with their lives as if he'd never said a word.

Do you notice the parallels between the way the Israelites were living and the way people are living in 2025? In the western world, that is in Europe and the United States in particular, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people who claim to have no particular faith at all. Some say they are spiritual but not religious but it is a fact that church attendance and membership has declined drastically in the western world. People these days tend to give credit or place blame on our political leaders for things that help or harm us. They do not seem to take into consideration what God may

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be doing in any given circumstance. That is what Jeremiah saw happening to the Israelites. Also people today, far and wide, seem not to be concerned about leading or teaching their children to know, let alone love, God. The children, in many cases, are not even being given the chance to know how much God loves each of them.

The prophet Jeremiah worried about those very things for the Israelites in his day. As it happened, sure enough, as Jeremiah had prophesied, King Nebuchadnezzar swooped in while no one was ready to resist him. His armies took all the healthy, socially and politically connected people away from their homes in Israel into captivity in Babylon. They left Jeremiah behind in Israel. There are many scholarly theories as to why Jeremiah was left behind. Was it God's providence or protection that had kept him safe? No one knows. But he was left behind and ended up continuing to prophesy from Israel while ministering to the poor and the powerless who remained where he was.

The prophet Jeremiah worried about all of the Israelites being held in captivity in Babylon. He wanted them to continue their faith, to hang on to the promises that God had made with them. Jeremiah knew that God wanted that, too, so he sent a letter to the elders, the priests and the prophets held in captivity along with the rest of them. In that letter, Jeremiah spoke words of encouragement to them. He began the letter with words that held considerable weight in the Hebrew world. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel." In other words, 'These are the words that the Lord your God wants you to hear. I speak with His authority.' "Thus says the Lord," was a phrase that was used to get people's attention - like when they say, "Attention!" or "Now Hear This!" in the modern US military. Or when the general public today hears that annoying sound

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like a loud static or screech on the television or radio to warn us of impending doom. We instantly perk up to find out what's happening.

So when Jeremiah's letter said "Thus says the Lord," the hearts and the minds of the exiles perked up. God's message to them was one they had not expected to hear. Jeremiah told them God said, 'Let go of fighting against captivity. Stop spending all your energy on being sad that you're in this against your will. Don't let despair and fear overwhelm you. Instead, embrace your life.' God said to the Israelites, "Build houses where you are, plant gardens, eat the produce of the land." In other words, God wanted them to participate fully in the life that existed right around them; wanted them to fully enjoy the gift of life that He had given them. He was saying to them, "Let go of fear and anxiety! Trust me! I've got this because I love you."

I wonder, are any of us in captivity right now? Have any of us been overtaken by despair, fear and anxiety? Or can we trust that God has got this? Are we able to see that God may be working in surprising ways in our world, even through people that we might have considered as enemies? The Israelite captives in Babylon were liberated from their captivity in God's time, after thirty or forty years, by a perceived enemy who was King of Persia named Cyrus.

In Luke's parable of The Good Samaritan we are told that Samaritans were enemies of the Israelites. That did not stop the Samaritan from saving the injured Jewish man carrying him to where he could get care and his wounds could heal. The same God who spoke to the Israelites through Jeremiah worked through that Samaritan to deliver his compassion and mercy to that injured man. The same God cleansed the

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disease of the Samaritan leper in Luke's gospel through Jesus, His Son. Out of the ten lepers who pleaded to Jesus for mercy and healing, he was only the one who returned to express his gratitude. Only the one who was perceived as an enemy of the Israelites expressed praise and gratitude that God had restored him to wholeness. The others seem to have taken that gift for granted; they seem not to have noticed that God was a part of their healing. As far as we know, they went back to their families and resumed life as usual.

Do you wonder what the Israelites did when they were finally allowed to return to Jerusalem? Did they return to a life of comfort and complacency? Did they forget who ultimately brought them home? They did not forget. Like the Samaritan leper they turned to God, they praised and they thanked God. They joined together under Nehemiah and they rebuilt the temple. There they worshipped and they praised the God who had fulfilled His promise to them. They did not care anymore how He had done it or who He had worked through to accomplish their restoration. They gave their hearts and souls and strength to worshipping and praising God. Our God.

The lesson for us is that God is working in our world. It is so very important for us to step back from our busy routines from time to time and to realize and appreciate the blessings he has bestowed on us. God wants us to live lives of abundance, to care deeply for each other, even our enemies, and to love Him with all our strength, all our hearts and all our minds. Because that is the way He loves us, now and forever wherever we may be.