

The Prophets of Old: *Jeremiah*



The scroll of the Prophet Jeremiah 31:31 "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt --- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

This is the third sermon in a four part series which I have been preaching this Advent entitled *The Prophets of Old*, whose images and ideas are so very much a part of this season of the Church. And so as noted last week, in the year 721 b.c.e., after a 3 month siege, the Assyrian army broke through the walls of the city of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, destroyed the city and carted off the aristocracy and nobles to far off lands never to be heard of again, the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel.

And only 124 years later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah faced a similar threat, this time by the great Babylonian Empire arising in the east. The words of the prophets Amos and Hosea were cherished by the Southern Kingdom after the fall of the north. And so in 598 b.c.e., Babylonian forces laid a siege against Jerusalem. And after only three short months, the king of Judah surrendered to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, who emptied the royal and temple treasuries, who then carted off back to Babylon the Jewish king and his queen mother and the leading figures of the Jewish society, including the temple priests and prophets, in what is now usually called 'The First Deportation.' Ezekiel, a prophet of the Temple in Jerusalem, was one of those deported. And the prophet Ezekiel spent the rest of his days prophesying to the Jews in captivity, trying to make sense of what had happened to them, and of how Jerusalem, the

great city of King David could fall, and what would happen to the people in the days ahead. He was the counterpart to Jeremiah who was among the many left behind in Jerusalem. Each of these two prophets called their respective audiences to repent and to change their ways, and foretold greater doom and destruction if they did not. However, the people would not believe the prophets. They could not believe that their beloved city of Jerusalem could ever completely fall to the Babylonians, or to any other nation --- not Jerusalem, not the great City of King David.

Jeremiah agonized over the people's incurable conceit. They were, he said, a "people with a stubborn and rebellious heart." And writing in some of the most beautifully lyrical passages in the Old Testament, Jeremiah passionately expressed his fears. With the urgent voice of a prophet, Jeremiah sounded the battle alarm, crying to the people to flee to the fortified cities for safety (4.5-8). He saw in his mind an army approaching in chariots like whirlwinds and cried out to Jerusalem to repent while there was still time (5.13-18). His heart beat wildly as he heard the enemy trumpet and saw disaster suddenly overwhelming the land (5.19-22). He heard Jerusalem's death cry, like the piercing shriek of a woman in labor (4.29-31). And finally at the end, he wept over Jerusalem; just as Jesus was to do later (8:18-9.3). Because of the beauty of these passages,

similar expressions of grief that fill the book of Lamentations have also traditionally been ascribed to Jeremiah.

Like the earlier prophets, Jeremiah often acted out his message. On one occasion, he bought a clay flask and publicly broke it into pieces in the marketplace to show how Jerusalem would be broken into fragments. On another occasion, Jeremiah put a wooden yoke on his neck to illustrate that sovereignty of the Babylonian king over Israel. But the temple prophet Hananiah took the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke into two, saying this was a symbol that God would break the yoke of the Babylonian king over Israel, and restore to their homeland those who had been deported. Jeremiah soon returned with a yoke of iron, a yoke that could not be broken by human effort, for it was, he said, God who ruled. When Jeremiah preached against the Temple, the priests there had Jeremiah seized, flogged, and put in stocks for the night. There were also several death threats against the prophet. Hunted as a public enemy at times and as a traitor to the king, Jeremiah may have gone into hiding for a period. Jeremiah also believed God had forbidden him to take a wife and to have children, or even to take part in social gatherings. His isolation was to be a sign of the impending catastrophe that would disrupt all family ties and silence the voice of mirth in the land. Thus the anguish of loneliness lay heavily upon his heart.

In 588 b.c.e. Nebuchadnezzar's forces returned to Jerusalem to quell a local rebellion of the Jews and once again lay siege to the city. This, alas, was a terrible siege, 18 months long. Bread was so scarce that the Jews according to their own Scriptures resorted to cannibalism (Lam. 4.10). Death stalked the streets and came in at the windows, said Jeremiah (9.21). He prophesied doom and destruction, which the king of Judah believed was weakening the hands of his soldiers and the will of his people (38.4-5). So Jeremiah was again arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison (37.11-5). Then he was moved to court of the royal guard, who demanded that Jeremiah be put to death. So they let Jeremiah down by ropes into a cistern and there he was left to die in the mire. Only the fall of the city rescued Jeremiah.

Yet even so in the midst of this terrible siege, Jeremiah did a remarkable thing. He bought a piece of land, a piece of land that the Babylonians were actually occupying at the time. While he was still in prison, Jeremiah carried out the transaction according to the proper legal form of the day and had the deeds put away into safekeeping. To Jeremiah, this purchase of land was a sign from God that the people of Israel would return one day to the Promised Land, that "houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in the land."

Israel, said Jeremiah, was like clay in the potter's hand. If the vessel was spoiled, the potter could rework the clay into

another vessel, as the potter saw fit. This is what God was going to do with the people of Israel. The defense of the city in the midst of this siege was noble, but futile in the end. In 597 b.c.e the city of David fell. The army was ordered to level her walls, to take them down stone by stone, and then to burn the city to the ground. Many leading citizens were slain. The remainder of the inhabitants, save those who fled Jerusalem and some of the poorest vinedressers and plowmen, were carried off captive to Babylon, in what is generally called "The Second Deportation." The Southern Kingdom of Judah as a state was no more. It had no government, no aristocracy, no civic landmarks. The Royal Palace built by King David was demolished. The Great Temple in Jerusalem built by King Solomon was destroyed. Only ruin and destruction remained. But alas, what was to become the children of the God of Yahweh?

Jeremiah had prophesied a new covenant (31.31-4). Apparently, the new covenant would not be written on tablets of stone as was the old covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai. And the new covenant does not involve the giving of a new law; or a new teaching handed down through the community. "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest says the Lord," For I will write the new covenant upon their hearts. The new covenant will rest upon divine

forgiveness. In the end, Jeremiah's anticipation of a new age assumed greater and greater significance in the years after the fall of Jerusalem, and eventually assumed a central place in the New Testament of early Christians (I Cor. 11.25; Lk. 22.20; Heb. 8.8-12). Indeed the New Testament took its very name from these prophecies of Jeremiah. Christians became the community of that new covenant.

Indeed Jeremiah's prophecies of a new covenant are specifically echoed in the words of Jesus at the Last Supper as he "took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to (his disciples), saying, 'Drink this, all of you; for this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (1 Cor. 11.25; Lk. 22.20; Mt. 26.26-8), echoing the words and the prophecies of Jeremiah. For Christians, Jeremiah's new covenant became sealed in Jesus' death. He was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and most especially, Isaiah, as we shall see next week. AMEN.