

Jeremiah 36:1-8 Enduring word of God (Common English Bible)

36 In the fourth year of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²Take a scroll and write in it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah, and all the nations from the time of Josiah until today. ³Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I intend to bring upon them, they will turn from their evil ways, and I will forgive their wrongdoing and sins. ⁴So Jeremiah sent for Baruch, Neriah's son. As Jeremiah dictated all the words that the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them in the scroll. ⁵Then Jeremiah told Baruch, "I'm confined here and can't go to the LORD's temple. ⁶So you go to the temple on the next day of fasting, and read the LORD's words from the scroll that I have dictated to you. Read them so that all the people in the temple can hear them, as well as all the Judeans who have come from their towns. ⁷If they turn from their evil ways, perhaps the LORD will hear their prayers. The LORD has threatened them with fierce anger." ⁸Baruch, Neriah's son, did everything the prophet Jeremiah instructed him: he read all the LORD's words from the scroll in the temple.

Jeremiah 36:21-23 ²¹The king sent Jehudi to take the scroll, and he retrieved it from the room of Elishama the scribe. Then Jehudi read it to the king and all his royal officials who were standing next to the king. ²²Now it was the ninth month, and the king was staying in the winterized part of the palace with the firepot burning near him. ²³And whenever Jehudi read three or four columns of the scroll, the king would cut them off with a scribe's knife and throw them into the firepot until the whole scroll was burned up.

Jeremiah 36:27-31 ²⁷The LORD's word came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll containing the words written by Baruch at Jeremiah's dictation: ²⁸Get another scroll and write in it all the words that were in the first scroll that Judah's King Jehoiakim burned. ²⁹Then say to Judah's King Jehoiakim: The LORD proclaims: You burned that scroll because it declared that the king of Babylon will come and destroy this land and eliminate every sign of life from it. ³⁰Therefore, this is what the LORD proclaims about Judah's King Jehoiakim: He won't have any heirs to occupy the throne of David, and his dead body will be cast out and exposed to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. ³¹I will punish him and his family and his attendants for their wrongdoing. I will bring upon them, as well as the residents of Jerusalem and the people of Judah, every disaster I pronounced against them. But they wouldn't listen.

For the Word of God in Scripture, For the Word of God among us, For the Word of God within us... Thanks be to God!

After the sermon series on Revelation, in Jeremiah I keep hearing the phrase, *"Listen to what the Spirit is saying ..."* to prophet and scribe, townspeople, temple worshippers, King's officials, and the King himself, over and over again. It's a hard-hitting message about judgment and hope. I start with the big picture and then to the details.

First, a bit of context from two renowned theologians and authors. The late Prof. Walter Brueggeman wrote a book, *"The Prophetic Imagination,"* which he describes as *"the capacity to host a world that is other than the one in front of us. It's about promise and covenant, will and intentionality; to dwell in and bear witness to. He says it invites us into a zone of perception that contradicts the rest of our life. It's when the real world has been exposed."* Welcome to Jeremiah.

Of this book the late Rev. Eugene Peterson writes: *"What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? Sometimes the reversal of what we expect from God comes to us as individuals, other times as entire communities. When it happens, does catastrophe work to reform our lives to conform to who God actually is ... not the way we imagined or wished (God) to be?"* This feels like our life assignment.

Next, if we scan the book of Jeremiah, we find it oddly organized. The NIV Study Bible is helpful when it points out that we tend to take things in sequence; the past, the present, and the future. But the ancients believed that the past, present, and future proceed as one. The past impacts the present. But the future also impacts the present, via the prophetic writings.

Here's how it plays out in today's text. In the chronological study Bible, we have chapter 36, verses 1-10. God directs Jeremiah to create the scroll. Jeremiah sends for Baruch, who writes as Jeremiah dictates. But, if we want to know what the scroll actually says, we must jump back to chapter **25**. There we learn that the scroll contains all that God has spoken in the four years since the death of good king Josiah. Four years' worth of God's pronouncements about Israel under Josiah's son, an evil king. It's about destruction, and hope: turn from your evil ways and even now God will not bring disaster upon you. With this message comes the warning of 70 years of captivity in Babylon if Israel does not repent. Even then, Nebuchadnezzar's army is near the city.

Next, chronologically, we finish chapter 36. Then comes chapter **45**, a five-verse message from God for Baruch: *The LORD proclaims: "I'm breaking down everything I have built up. I'm digging up that which I have planted—the entire land."* Hence, Baruch is both scribe and prophet.

Jeremiah 45 is followed by chapter **15**, including a lament by the prophet: *“Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!”* To which the Lord replies, *“Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose...”*

Now for the text itself. Josiah was a godly king who tore down all idols and restored obedience to God’s law. His son, Jehoiakim, undoes all that his father had restored.

You may recall Jeremiah’s sermon in chapter 7, delivered from the temple courtyard balcony. But when it’s time to reveal this scroll’s message, Jeremiah the “troublemaker” is barred from the temple grounds. So, Baruch goes to the temple and climbs to that upper courtyard near the gate. He reads the scroll to all temple worshippers and passers-by. Every word.

Verses 9-20 and are not listed in today’s schedule. But they reveal a lot. All the people in Jerusalem are observing a fast for the Lord. As Baruch reads the scroll, Miciah, a grandson of the King’s scribe, listens to what is said. He goes to the King’s officials. When they hear about the scroll, they send Jehudi, another grandson to fetch Baruch.

A second time he reads the scroll. The words alarm the officials and they know the King must be informed. But first, they ask Baruch, *“How did you write all these words? Did they come from Jeremiah?”* Baruch replies, ‘Yes,’ and the officials urge scribe and prophet to go into hiding immediately. Baruch leaves the scroll behind.

The officials report to the King. This time it is Jehudi who reads the scroll out loud. As he does so, the King slices and burns pieces of the scroll to symbolically cancel the “magic power” of the prophetic work. But remember that, by now, everyone has heard the message.

The Word of the Lord then comes to Jeremiah in hiding; the King has burned the scroll. Make another copy. Then, declare to the King that the Lord will bring “every disaster” upon king and country. Prof. Steed Davidson observes, *“The scroll is re-written and the word resurfaces. It serves as a memory aid to a future generation who will feel in their bodies the histories of their ancestors.”* More to come on this.

Here’s another dimension. Catholic and Orthodox Christian Bibles include a section called the Apocrypha. It is made up of 15 books, including the book of Baruch, “written in exile in Babylon, in the fifth year on the seventh day of the month.” The scribe reads it aloud to everyone in captivity-rich and powerful, elders and all the people. They wept, fasted and prayed before the Lord. They sent a copy of the scroll to priests in Jerusalem, asking them to pray on the exile’s behalf and read aloud the scroll in the Lord’s house.

Perhaps repentance has begun. The book includes prayers for deliverance, and hope for restoration. Baruch writes at length about wisdom. The closing chapter includes prophetic words of encouragement; “... *Look toward the east, O Jerusalem ... Look, your children are coming, whom you sent away...*”

I encounter this chapter in a month when three people special to me have died. I went to a memorial service for one of them, a gifted and caring woman who welcomed me to the staff of East Woods Church back in 2009. Carol was a school psychologist. She used to tell children that there are two rules for life: work hard and be kind. This gifted pianist launched the Lewis River Dixieland Band, and the Blessing of the Animals at East Woods. She dubbed me lead singer for the annual rendition of *All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir*. Her daily meditations included Psalm 23 and Micah 6: *what does the Lord require of you...* It was said of Carol that she always left behind “the residue and aroma of Christ.” Can we make that our mission? It fits into every faithful life. That it is essential is beyond question.

I think about those faithful as they were on that forced march to Babylon. Did they lead prayers along the way? Did they model a faithful life in captivity? Did they leave a positive imprint on their peers, their children and grandchildren? Did they take seriously the words of God, via Baruch, the prophet and fellow exile?

70 years in captivity is three generations. None of those taken from Jerusalem will return. Their children will mostly live and die in Babylon. So it was necessary to plant seeds of faith for a third generation to live godly, upright lives and yearn for Jerusalem, while surrounded by pagans living the good life in a sophisticated city, until captivity ends.

Centuries after Babylon, in his letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “**1***First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be offered for everyone—for kings and all those in authority—so that we may lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity.*” (2:1-3). Paul’s words mirror those found in the book of Baruch.

The thing is, such prayers are not a transfer of responsibility; rather they are the key that can unlock the door to tranquil, quiet, dignified and godly lives. We yearn for help and restoration, to align once again with God. *Listen to what the Spirit is saying.*

Just last week, Pope Leo encouraged young people to strive for excellence. “Aspire to great things, to holiness, wherever you are,” the pope declared. “Do not settle for less. You will then see the light of the Gospel growing every day, in you and around you.” Leo also challenged youth to be like Daniel, to “spread your enthusiasm and the witness of your faith.” May scripture

serve as the “memory aid” *to every generation, to feel in their bodies the histories of their ancestors.*

And what of the exile situations of our time... What of all we lost to Covid? The way AI is threatening our private lives and job security? The needs that confront us daily? The surrounding loneliness and anxiety and divisiveness? Will we stand upon the words of Jeremiah and Baruch and Paul? And Pope Leo? To do so is an extension of our Gospel message, that says, *“The Father has given me works to do so that I might complete them.”* To help fulfill that work is our calling.

Two weeks ago, we began the service with these words: “... We come to hear your voice calling us to be and do what you have called us to be and do...” Today’s liturgy thanks God for what is good and cries out for what is wrong. We plea for help and restoration, with aching hearts and glad souls.

May we *listen to what the Spirit is saying.* May God’s messages resonate in us, now and to the third generation. For as Ann LaMott reminds us, *Grace Bats Last.*