

As the Narrative Lectionary quickly takes us through the Old Testament story this fall, it is important to recognize that we are covering a big span of years. It's kind of like jumping from Christopher Columbus one week, to the American Revolution the next, then the Civil War, then landing on the moon. Just to give you some handles to grab a hold of, the glory years of Kings David and Solomon are in the 900's B.C., Elijah and Elisha in the mid-800's, Micah and Isaiah in the late 700's, and today we come to Jeremiah whose ministry was around the year 600 B.C.

Last week we looked at Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem at the time that the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and was wiped off the map. The Southern Kingdom of Judah managed to preserve its existence by paying tribute to Assyria. This arrangement continued for about 100 years until a new empire, Babylon, overthrew the Assyrians and set its eyes on Judah. Under the leadership of the king with my favorite Biblical name, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 597 and made Judah a vassal state. Over the next decade, Judah made attempts at freeing itself from the Babylonian yoke, trying to get the other powerful empire in the region, Egypt, to help fight the Babylonians. Egypt made some promises of help, but didn't follow through with them. Nebuchadnezzar returned in 587 B.C. and this time made sure that there would be no more revolts in Judah. He destroyed the city, including the temple built by Solomon, he murdered the sons of King Zedekiah, then put out Zedekiah's eyes and took him and a large portion of the population of Jerusalem into exile hundreds of miles away in Babylon.

It is difficult to exaggerate the enormity of this crisis for the people of Judah. They were God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, the people to whom God had given the Law through Moses. Their faith was based on a 3-legged stool -- the Law, the temple in Jerusalem, and the dynasty of King David. Now there was no more king, there was no more temple, and many were even questioning if there was a God. The stool had no more legs.

These turbulent years were the context of Jeremiah's ministry. The book begins with Jeremiah's account of receiving a call from God to be a prophet. He was a young man at that time, perhaps in his late teens or early twenties. He protests to God that he is too young for the job. But the LORD says to him, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you." In his vision, Jeremiah then sees the LORD touch his mouth and say to him, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

And that's what Jeremiah did over the next forty years. His ministry was a difficult one. Like the prophets who preceded him, he spoke hard words to his contemporaries, accusing them of being unfaithful to the LORD God by worshiping other gods and ignoring God's demands for justice in their society. Jeremiah was seen as a troublemaker, a gadfly whose words stung his hearers. It is a general characteristic of human beings, including us, that we do not like to be told that some aspect of the way we are living our lives is displeasing to God. We do not like to be told that we are sinful. We do not like to be told that if we continue our present course of action we are going to experience pain and sorrow. The LORD God gave Jeremiah the task of doing exactly that to his own people, his own family and friends, people he loved and cared about. The LORD God told Jeremiah to tell the people that because they ignored and disobeyed the law, there would be consequences -- Judah would be conquered. With a message like that, you can understand why Jeremiah was not a popular man around Jerusalem.



Take a look at this famous painting by Rembrandt. The painting is entitled *Jeremiah Laments over Jerusalem*. To me, Rembrandt here portrays well the inner turmoil Jeremiah feels at confronting his people with their sin. Jeremiah has no joy in speaking this message. Speaking the truth to friends and neighbors about their sinfulness is difficult and unpopular. Jeremiah's words in chapter 8 could be a caption for this painting: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me."

I saw Rembrandt's original painting in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam 35 years ago and I bought this print for my dad, who was also a pastor, because I saw in this Jeremiah a glimpse of what many pastors experience when faced with the responsibility of speaking God's word to a community. In our Lutheran tradition, when a person is called by a congregation to serve as its pastor, he or she is called to preach God's word as both Law and Gospel. Lutherans pack those terms, law and gospel, with a lot of meaning. To preach the law means to make people aware of the ways in which they don't measure up to the expectations God has for his people -- not only in their personal lives but also in society. The prophet Amos, who lived 100 years earlier than Jeremiah, used the image of holding up a plumb line to see if the people were "plumb," living according to God's law. Preaching the law is holding up a plumb line and making people

aware in what ways they and their society do not measure up. Preaching the law is to confront people with their personal and corporate sin.

Just like Jeremiah, parish pastors don't receive any joy from preaching the law. It's much more satisfying to preach the gospel, and by "the gospel" I mean making people aware that, even though we are sinful, reconciliation with God is made possible through Jesus Christ. God's grace and forgiveness supersede our sinfulness. To preach the gospel is to assure people that God loves us not because of what we do or don't do, but because we are God's beloved creation.

Some people get the impression that the law is bad news and the gospel is good news, but that's not the case. Both law and gospel, when proclaimed together, are good news. We can illustrate this by talking about a family; parents and children. If parents speak to their children only in terms of law -- do this, don't do that; oh, you really messed up this time! -- and never speak a word of encouragement or forgiveness, the children will learn to fear and resent their parents. On the other hand, if parents speak to their children only in terms of gospel -- I love you unconditionally, I'll always forgive you -- and never speak a word about rules and consequences, the children will learn to not take their parents seriously. Parents express their love for their children best when there are both expectations **and** forgiveness, law **and** gospel. And so it is with God and God's people, whether it is communicated by Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem or by a parish pastor to his or her congregation.

For Jeremiah and Micah and Isaiah (who we read the past two Sundays), the key issue is that the people of Israel and Judah were worshipping other gods than the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were worshipping the Baals of the Canaanites or fashioning their own personal gods out of wood or stone. The prophets spoke sternly against this, for it was breaking the First Commandment -- *I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods.* We may think that we're off the hook here, that the message of the prophets doesn't really apply to us, because we know there is only one God and there's no such thing as Baal or Zeus or Apollo. But we're not off the hook. The message of the prophets is very relevant for us. In the *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther expands the image of what a god is by saying "a 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart." The gods who compete with the LORD God for our trust include technology, power, family, nation, and money and possessions.

Furthermore, Luther says that this First Commandment is the most important of the ten: "If the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own." With that understanding, we can say that by confronting the people with breaking the First Commandment, the prophets are in reality confronting them with their failure to keep all of the law.

What happens when the law is not kept? What happens is that there are consequences. Jeremiah understood that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was God's judgment on the people for failing to keep the law. That brings up the question, *Is God a punitive God?* That is, does God punish us for breaking his law by sending an illness or a natural disaster or a conquering army? There are passages in the Bible to which one could appeal to make that argument. But if we take scripture as a whole, it is clear that God does not deal with us on a tit-for-tat basis -- it is not the case that *this* sin results in *this* punishment. On the other hand, it is also clear that God gave us the law because God loves us and wants us to experience life in all its fullness. As a general rule, if we live according to the commandments, our lives will know joy, peace, and contentment. And as a general rule, if we ignore the commandments, our lives will know sorrow, pain, and regret.

God's words to Jeremiah in his call vision were: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." I like to paraphrase that as, "I appoint you to preach both Law and Gospel to your people."

The vast majority of Jeremiah is law, confronting people with their sin. But Jeremiah also fulfilled his calling to "build and to plant" -- to give a gospel word of hope to people who had lost everything, including their faith. We see that word of hope when Jeremiah buys a field in Anathoth (chapter 32) as he goes into exile, an action that lets his neighbors know he does not despair for the future. Perhaps the best-known passage in Jeremiah is from chapter 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... 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. 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 forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." The Christian community reads that promise of a new covenant and the forgiveness of sin and immediately thinks of the words of Jesus that we will hear during Holy Communion in a few minutes: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin."

Jeremiah preached both Law and Gospel to the people of Judah. His words continue to preach Law and Gospel to us today.