

June 3, 2012
Communion

Jeremiah 31:31-36
Luke 22:19-20
I Corinthians 11:23-25

JESUS & JEREMIAH

I have been suggesting that we may understand Jesus better, see the depth of His purposes more clearly, if we connect Him to the heritage and history out of which He came. Far from reducing classic Christian conclusions about Jesus' identity, this highlights them. Far from watering down the uniqueness of Jesus and the startling new perspective He brought to the world, this heightens it.

If people read only the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, they see the vast spectrum of God's work and purpose among us in terms of a three-year time span. (Even though the Gospels themselves keep connecting Jesus to His heritage, it is possible to skip over that, or at least to pay small attention to it.) Seeing Jesus appear on earth out of nowhere may seem to some people to honor Him more. The more new and different He is, the greater He is – or at least that's the assumption. But for others, this perspective only makes Jesus seem less connected to us or to anything going on in our world. Three years can be the turning point of all history, but taken out of the context of history, it seems to have no past or future – an accident or an aberration – and thus more easily neglected or set aside.

The truth is that Jesus did not come out of nowhere. Getting into the Old Testament is not always easy, but when people get there for long enough to see what is going on, it becomes increasingly clear that we cannot ignore Jesus without ignoring two thousand years of incredible leaders and amazing events that inexorably lead up to His life on earth. This raises the possibility that God really is the Creator and has a Plan, and that some things really are part of our destiny. I'm not saying this will "prove" anything to a person determined or predisposed not to see it. But once seen, everything shifts gears. The drama is about a God who really cares for us, and who always has and always will – enough even to finally reveal himself in Jesus Christ. And the drama is also about us – about all humankind. And yes, it is about the God who, in Christ Jesus, loves, redeems, and saves his children.

Anyway, we are looking at the heroes and role models who helped to shape Jesus' whole life: His way of thinking, His values and methods and goals, and even His final purpose. Today we turn to Jeremiah. How

can I tell you briefly about the bond between Jesus and Jeremiah? It is soon obvious that Jesus had studied and could quote any of the prophets. But what about Jeremiah in particular?

What I am about to say is foolish, and you should not take it very seriously. We all have our own unfounded, unprovable biases. But sometimes we cannot shake them, or do not really want to. It is my own personal hunch that Jeremiah was Jesus' number-one human mentor. There is no reason to rank Jesus' heroes in order of importance, and in fact, that is the part I am admitting is foolish. But I don't really much care about that. If I were going to be in a debate on the subject and wanted to pick the most defensible position, I would probably pick Moses. If I were interested in hitting the heartstrings or pleasing the most discerning women, I would probably pick Second Isaiah. If you don't have an opinion, I hope it's not because you don't care. In any case, I think Jesus loved Jeremiah. If John the Baptist was the forerunner in Jesus' own time, nevertheless Jeremiah was His spiritual "older brother." Please, I do not mean to minimize the impact of Isaiah or Moses or Abraham or the others. I just want to add the enormous influence of Jeremiah. He is right on the Ascendant.

What did Jesus learn from Jeremiah? It would take hours to discuss it well. But here are a few of the items:

How to pray.

How to hope.

How to stand alone, when that is necessary.

How to believe in God when everything is going wrong.

How to care about people who are trying to hurt
and kill you.

How to fail in the world yet still go on working for the
Kingdom of Heaven – and never quit.

How to face disaster without going negative.

How to be faithful to God and not to humans.

A lot of people don't know these things, or at least not very deeply. Jeremiah learned them in the crucible for forty years. Jesus had only three, but He had learned them profoundly from somewhere. I realize that our world does not think these are very interesting or important things to learn. We think math, physics, political science, and a whole

host of other topics are far more relevant. On the other hand, you could not be Jesus if you did not learn these things from someone. You have to learn them from *somewhere*. I am convinced that Jesus learned them from, trained in them with, and kept going back for refresher courses to ... Jeremiah.

A little context – much too little: During Isaiah’s life and ministry, as we mentioned last week, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. The Southern Kingdom of Judah narrowly escaped, and Jerusalem, the last bastion, was itself spared by a miracle. The Southern Kingdom began to recover in the lull that followed – as Assyria went into decline and was subsequently conquered by the Babylonian Empire (Nebuchadnezzar). Naturally, most Judeans did not see their own time in terms of a lull between Assyria and Babylon. They interpreted their deliverance as the special promise and favor of God, and took it as a guarantee that they would prosper from now on and that God would bring back the Golden Age of King David. The destiny of the Chosen People was back on track, they said. That was what the priests said. That was what the popular prophets said. And then, as now, there were far more popular prophets than there were genuine prophets. In any case, that was what the king and most of the people believed at the time ... except for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, which matters to me because it places him in the line of famous priests back through Abiathar (David’s priest), the great grandson of Phinehas, son of Eli, the old priest who raised Samuel. Anathoth, Jeremiah’s home town, was two and a half miles northeast of Jerusalem, an hour’s walk. Jeremiah came from a prominent, well-to-do, highly respected priestly family. He was a fine young man, well-educated, and engaged to a lovely young woman, his career already established and assured. And then the prayers came. If we pay any attention to our heritage and tradition, we know that prayer is about the most dangerous thing a human being can do.

Because of his prayers, Jeremiah felt compelled, often against his will, to announce the coming destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Though this was in line with the life and prophetic ministry of First Isaiah a hundred years earlier, the people only remembered Isaiah’s reassurance that in that current situation, Jerusalem would be spared. So they mocked Jeremiah for not being like the great prophet Isaiah (terrible irony). Jeremiah was young at the time. They insisted he didn’t know what he was talking about. They accused him of being unpatriotic, of having no love for his country, of being a troublemaker, of being a traitor.

Jeremiah's fiancée broke off their engagement – or, more likely, her family did. Jeremiah's own family turned against him. The entire priestly establishment rejected and dishonored him. The king and his court grew angrier and angrier. Remember that what I am saying in a few minutes, Jeremiah was living through for over forty years.

The accusations were terribly untrue, on top of which Jeremiah was an exceedingly sensitive and caring person who loved his country and his tradition with passion and devotion. It cut him to the heart that people so misunderstood and maligned him. But who was really to blame? Who started all the trouble? Jeremiah became furious with God – accused God of every kind of deceit, malice, lying, and trickery. Jeremiah begged to be released from his vocation; begged God to stop talking to him; swore he would never preach another sermon as long as he lived; cursed the day on which he was born. In anguish and loneliness, Jeremiah poured out the anguish of his spiritual struggles on paper. We therefore know more about Jeremiah's inner life than that of any other prophet. Here is but one small sample:

O LORD, You have deceived me, and I was fool enough to listen to You. You are stronger than I am, and You have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" Your Word has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. Yet I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! "Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him."

But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, You who try the righteous, You who see the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You have I committed my cause. [Jeremiah tries to crawl out of his dark mood.] Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers. [But his pretended praise and gratitude cannot stand in the face of the realities surrounding him. So he continues:] Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad. Let that man be like

the cities which the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb for ever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and to spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:7-18)

Isn't prayer wonderful? Lots of people know that obedience to the Holy Spirit can get people's lives back on track. What some do not go on to mention is that sometimes the Holy Spirit has agenda that outranks all our own plans and purposes. In any case, they hated Jeremiah, and they beat him, put him in the stocks, threw him in a cistern to die, threw him into jail, sentenced him to death – and the rest of the time they mocked and derided him, calling him a coward and a liar and a traitor and a false priest. He never married, never had a family. Toward the end of his life, Jeremiah watched his message coming true before his eyes. No man ever longed to be wrong more than Jeremiah did, but he was not. Babylon marched over Judah in a series of disasters – killing thousands, carrying thousands more into slavery, destroying Jerusalem, tearing down the walls, utterly destroying the temple Solomon had built. The Kingdom of David was no more. Most of the survivors were slaves once again in a foreign land. To this day, it is referred to as “The Babylonian Captivity.” When Jonah was swallowed by the great fish, this is what was being referred to – Babylon swallowing up Judah. (*Jonah* means “dove” in Hebrew – the symbol of Judaism.)

One small incident: We mentioned that the prophets acted out their message. One day Jeremiah came walking into Jerusalem with an old wooden yoke across his shoulders. He did this to symbolize that the yoke of Babylon would fall upon Jerusalem and its people. Hananiah, a leader of what Jeremiah called the false prophets, gathered a crowd and derided Jeremiah in the usual manner. Then he grabbed the yoke from Jeremiah's shoulders and broke it on the ground, saying, “Thus will God break the yoke of all oppressors from off the shoulders of Judah.” The crowd loved it. Jeremiah did not say a word.

The next day, Jeremiah came plodding back into Jerusalem, this time carrying an iron yoke across his shoulders. He still did not say an audible word. But silently he was shouting: “Okay, smart-ass, break this one!” Then he did speak. He told Hananiah that for speaking in God's name, without bothering to get God's clearance or permission, Hananiah would die within the year. Would you like to know what happened? Guess! (If you want a clue, try the 28th chapter of the book of Jeremiah.)

With time so short today, and being able to read only one passage from Jeremiah's prayer diary, I hope I have not left you with a misimpression. What I want you to see is Jeremiah's utter honesty with God. He held nothing back. But for all Jeremiah's anguish and complaining, God and Jeremiah were very close. God was, after all, his only friend. (Some think Baruch may have been also.) And Jeremiah, despite his threats, anguish, and despair – despite all the pain and disaster – was God's man all day every day for more than forty years.

By the way, as Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were being carted off to slavery in Babylon, everyone's optimism turned to despair. And then there was only one voice of hope in all the land. That's right: Jeremiah's. Only Jeremiah seemed to know that the story was not over. Picking up from his forerunner, Isaiah, he declared, "A remnant shall remain." Jeremiah was saying to the exiles: Get faithful. Get back to God. Never give up hope. A new day will come. A better plan and a better WAY than any of us have ever seen or imagined are still our destiny.

Beyond all other things, Jesus learned two things from Jeremiah: a life of prayer, and the coming of a New Covenant. Let's get to the heart of Jeremiah's purpose and message: "*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*" (Jeremiah 31:31)

Every major prophet after Jeremiah recognized this statement as the authentic Word and Promise of God. They picked it up, embellished it, and proclaimed it as the purpose of Yahweh. It was what God was working toward – what God would do in the future: a New Covenant, a new arrangement with God, a new design, and a new kind of Holy Nation. That was what was coming; it was what God was about. Each prophet in his own way and time struggled with the current events and trends going on around him. Each one tried to awaken the nation to its peril and to its purpose. Each one contributed to the survival of the Jewish people, and to the survival of the concepts that are Judaism. Indeed, it is hard to believe that Judaism *could* have survived, even though we have the story and know that it did. Nevertheless, the prophets did their work, prayed their prayers, and spoke the things they saw and were told – even when, from human understanding, there was no more hope and nothing left to build the dreams on.

And always one theme emerged above the rest, and above even the most critical and crucial issues of their own day: a New Covenant, a new kind of Kingdom, a new kind of Leader ... was coming. It was nevertheless

startling, even blasphemous, to claim a New Covenant *not like the Old Covenant!* Who gave Jeremiah the right to announce that Torah – the Law of Moses – would or could be superceded? There was only one possible source for such a message. Even so, it is little wonder that Jeremiah was sentenced to death. But at this point, the nation was in such turmoil that they couldn't seem to get around to carrying out the sentence.

There were six hundred years between Jeremiah and Jesus. For six hundred years, the New Covenant was talked about, proclaimed, dreamed about, and prayed for. The times felt desperate, and destruction seemed near and inevitable over and over again. But in Jesus' own day, the Jews were under the yoke of Rome. Is it hard to imagine Jesus as a young man, out under the sky: praying, pondering the meaning of life, wondering about the events of His own day, thinking about the heroes of the past – and wondering what happened to God's promises?

“The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah.” A New Covenant with Israel? Israel had been destroyed a hundred years before Jeremiah, back in the time of Isaiah. Why was Jeremiah still dreaming of the Northern Kingdom, when only a fragment of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) still remained? Why did Jesus so often befriend and lift up the Samaritans – the hated remnants of Israel (the Northern Kingdom)? He knew from the great prophet that God still held them in the plan, no matter how the world saw them.

Yet six hundred years had passed since Jeremiah's thunder had been silenced. Where was the God of Jeremiah? Where was the God of *any* of it? If there was a God, what was he waiting for? “Oh, but Jesus could never have had any doubts ...” Haven't you heard people say that? How incredibly shallow. Nobody could have had the kind of faith Jesus had *unless* they had faced their doubts clear to the depths, and seen through and beyond them. Never run away from your doubts; it only makes them stronger in the secret places. But do not forget to doubt your doubts.

So Jesus spent hours, as a young man, pondering and wondering: Was it possible Jeremiah had been wrong? Was it instead really all over? When would the story be picked up again, if ever? How would it happen? It had to happen in ways different from the ways that had already been tried, for those ways had all failed. And then one day, Jesus asked the questions once too often. “Oh no ... wait a minute, Lord! I was just musing and wondering ...” But it was too late. The heavens opened – the plan and purpose was made clear. The dove descended. There is one thing

far scarier than being really confused: being flooded with light and purpose and sent into the fray, with a new name you did not even know was your own.

A few incredible years later, there was no question about it. God was fulfilling the words of Jeremiah (that God had, of course, inspired). The theme was lifted up so clearly and so forcefully that no follower of Jesus could possibly miss it, wonder what Jesus was doing, or mistake what His church must be about. *You* are called to remember it every time you take communion. You take it into your personal destiny and incorporate it into your spiritual pilgrimage every time you eat the bread and drink from the cup. It is the highest sacrament of Christendom.

“In the same way Jesus took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in my blood.’” (This from Luke 22:20.) There can be no mistaking it. Jesus is calling forth the prophecy of Jeremiah.

“In the same way, he took the cup after supper and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death, until he come again.’” (This from I Corinthians 11:25.)

The New Covenant (the New Testament) is what Jesus had come for. His ministry had called it forth and called it to life, and His crucifixion and resurrection had sealed it as an open invitation forever – an invitation to enter into the New Covenant with God.

That is a great place for the sermon to end. But as you know, I am not a preacher. I am a teacher. Teachers often go on to point out things wondrous and significant, after preachers would stop.

What is “new” about the New Covenant? And is there other evidence that Jesus was following the description of Jeremiah as He gathered followers, shaped concepts, and patterned the life of the church? Yes, Jesus was consciously, intentionally, purposefully living out the prophecies – bringing the past promises to fruition, and carrying forward the declared purpose of God.

First of all, the New Covenant is *“not like the covenant I made with their forefathers.”* (Hebrews 8:9) Many Christians jump to the conclusion that the Old Covenant was hard, rigid, and inhuman, while the New

Covenant is soft, pleasant, and appealing. Are they really trying to understand? That is neither true nor helpful. Why go along with Satan's agenda? There should be no difference between Judaism and Christianity. Separation is sin! Jesus certainly never intended the split. Paul clearly hated the rift.

Moses came off the mountain with some very stringent concepts and rules about how Israel should behave as the servant people of God. Jesus goes beyond the Old Covenant, making it an *internal* way of seeing life and living it. Jesus' code, if anything, is more demanding than Moses' was. But they do not fight each other. One seems to be based on concept and precept. The other is based on relationship and personal allegiance. You cannot follow Jesus' WAY, or Jeremiah's prophecy, unless the Holy Spirit is with you – talking inside your head. Jesus also makes it clear that the New Covenant is not a political nation, but a spiritual fellowship that is to spread through all the world. The New Covenant does not promise political or material prosperity or success. It does, however, promise persecution, as the new ideas and WAY of Life challenge the structures of the world. At any rate, it is to be a movement and a Kingdom *not of this world*. Many blessings are promised to those who enter the New Covenant relationship, but they are blessings of the inner life, of the spirit, and of another, higher realm.

The New Covenant is not based on obedience to written rules, but on obedience to a living Holy Spirit who communicates from within. Jeremiah had said, *"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."* It will not be an outer code; it will be an inner relationship with God. This was Jeremiah, six hundred years before Jesus, describing a day when we would all receive the Holy Spirit, and this would be the core and center of our living. Certainly it is the core and center of Jesus' life and ministry, with the culmination in Pentecost – the power that brings the church into being. But two thousand years after Jesus, most of Christendom hasn't seemed to grasp it yet. We still want to put our emphasis on ecclesiastical structures, creeds, denominational success, theological constructs, or feeding programs – help people, act like we love them, give them anything ... except Jesus and His Holy Spirit.

Some of you chide and tease me, saying, "All you ever tell us is to go pray." Well, I don't tell you to pray the way most people pray, but you're right! I think the real answer is in our personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – *if* we truly turn our will and our life over, and truly seek to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. Of course, until we taste the wonder of the Holy Spirit's presence, that

sounds simplistic and puerile. We would rather find our solutions almost anywhere else. That, in itself, reveals our separation, our lack of trust, our alienation from God – our SIN.

Some people actually *try* to misunderstand. They like to pretend that I have said there is no value in the world – that we should not try to make money, get educated, or be deeply involved in the institutions or structures of this world. They like to suggest that I don't really want to try to help other people, get messed up in politics, or become involved in social issues. Only, what I *really* tell you is that none of it will matter – none of it will come to anything you really care about – UNLESS: unless you get involved because the Holy Spirit is guiding you, sending you, and going with you.

I do know, by the way, how to make this church a lot more program-oriented – a lot more exciting to many of the people in our time and culture. I know that parades and bandwagons draw people, seem exciting, and even bring in a lot of money. And plenty of churches are proving it. I even suspect, after all these years, that if I put my mind to it, I could probably play the role of a saintly guru and persuade enough folk to come help for the good of the cause, and we could really make this place hum.

But I do not want you for me – or for this church. You are for the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. I do not want to see the look in your eye when we meet five hundred years from now and we both know we were just playing stupid games when we *could* have been devoting our energies and our lives to the Lord of Love and Light. Jesus brings us a New Covenant: the presence of His Holy Spirit to be with us and to guide us. It is the pearl of great price. It is worth any sacrifice. If any success comes our way in this world, that is always fun, but it doesn't mean anything. What matters is each one of us dying to our old ways and values – and coming into New Life in Christ Jesus.

Jeremiah lived one of the bleakest, loneliest lives imaginable – from a human perspective. But he was a man of such deep and profound prayer that he saw what God's next step was going to be. And in that hope, he ran straight and true for forty years, though everything he loved and cared about crumbled around him. Yet his life was witness enough and his message was clear enough that it was still waiting for Jesus to pick up, those many years later – a blueprint that led from carpenter to the Christ of God.