

A Proper 7

❖ Jeremiah 20:7-13

A prophet's job is to speak the truth, especially when that truth is hard to swallow, and especially when people don't want to hear it. By this point, Jeremiah has been preaching for almost 40 years, and he knows that in a few short months, in the year 587 BC, Judah will be destroyed and Jerusalem will be sacked. He is not happy about the fact that his unwelcome news has for decades fallen on deaf ears.

❖ Psalm 8

❖ Romans 6:1b-11

Here is something to keep in mind as you hear this lesson from St. Paul. Greek was not Paul's first language, and his command of it was halting at best. Sometimes, his explanations drag on and on because he didn't know how to say something precisely in the first place. This may be one of those times.

❖ Matthew 10:24-39

Conflict and division on the journey.



In our version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, there are 16 books of and by prophets. Four of them -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel -- we call major prophets, mostly because those books are significantly longer than the other 12, so-called minor prophets.

In most cases we get a little biographical information about the prophet, where he was from, perhaps a reference to who his father and grandfather were, and maybe a line or two about the circumstances by which God called them to speak out about what was going on in the world.

And then we move on to the messages themselves: God doesn't like unfaithfulness in any form and wants to see it rooted out.

If you have heard lessons from the prophets before, you know that this can take many forms. Sometimes God lets our unfaithfulness lead to its own unfortunate conclusion; sometimes God gives a nudge to someone else, like the Assyrians or the Babylonians, to teach us the right lesson.

But in the case of Jeremiah we get not only the words God tells him to say, **but how it feels to be the one chosen to deliver them.**

And the picture Jeremiah paints is not pretty.

This is the fifth time in his book he has stopped to describe the burden he carries. They are, as a group, called the "confessions of Jeremiah."

There is a pretty clear reason why a bitter complaint used to be called a "**jeremiad**" – and in the days of 144 character tweets I'm surprised that people haven't figured that they can save a letter with that old word.

We like to believe that God has given us free will, and that we can choose to do right as well as do wrong.

But in today's lesson, Jeremiah seems to complain that he has had very little say in his calling.

He feels "**enticed**" beyond his ability to be in control himself (and if this were an exclusively adult audience I would tell you what sort of abuse and misconduct he is *really* talking about) and says that he has been overcome by the will and power of God.

He knows that what he is saying is causing people to plot against him, to wish his utter destruction – and it can't feel good to have people wandering around threatening his life.

For most of his career as a prophet, Jeremiah is not a happy camper, and he is not afraid to let people know about it.

Now I happen to find these outbursts from Jeremiah to be comforting.

I don't have the eloquent wisdom or the poetic skill of an Isaiah, nor do I have the focus and concentration to delve deeply into the visions that Ezekiel saw, or the foresight and courage that we find in Daniel.

But I can sure complain like Jeremiah did, and if God could use him then there is a place for me in God's kingdom, both here on earth and someday in heaven.

Jeremiah is a regular guy, with no formal training and no extraordinary talents. In fact, he didn't even write, but arranged for a secretary to wander around with him to record his prophecies, a man by the name of Baruch.

Reading Jeremiah, we get to see both the work of the prophet and also what it is like to live in the community he served, and to see how they responded.

The same can be said of the Gospel of Matthew.

When we read it, we don't just get an account of what Jesus said and did, but a pretty clear reflection of the community in which Matthew lived and served.

And like the experience of Jeremiah, this was more than occasionally a difficult setting to address.

We know from reading the Acts of the Apostles and from the epistles that **early Christians did not always get along with each other**. We also know that what was once a movement of faithful Jews quickly became alienated from its mother faith.

In Matthew's gospel, we see evidence of that division.

His story of Jesus is not a feel good, pie in the sky, all shall be well again, tall tale, but a narrative deeply rooted in and influenced by arguments among family members and friends, and disunity in a

community that was once able to live and work together in *Shalom*, in peace.

Matthew remembers and writes down what Jesus says about coming with a sword which will divide family members from each other **because he knows people in his own community who could not agree on who Jesus was or what it all meant.**

Matthew remembers what it was like when people hurled awful names at each other, comparing their opponents to devils and demons. Eugene Peterson translates one of the epithets as **“dungface.”** You can imagine what the 21st century equivalent of that might be.

And like the pain that Jeremiah must have felt as people left his words unheard, the experience of this division, this animosity, for Matthew was deeply distressing.

And so, when Jesus rallies his disciples for the mission they are to engage, **the word about what they are to expect is not always encouraging,** but demands faithful endurance.

I feel something like that pain when I hear about the divisions that have evolved in our political system.

It is almost as if Matthew is composing his Gospel, not to explain the life of Jesus to those who already believe, but **to convince those doubters** in his community to turn their hearts and see the truth, that Jesus is indeed the messiah that they have been expecting all these centuries.

On Sunday mornings, we will be reading from Matthew’s Gospel for the next 22 weeks.

Listen to how many times Matthew will quote from the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the one who was sent by God to save us during those lessons. You will hear the phrase, **“According to the prophet”** or **“According to the scriptures,”** many times.

The emotional distress of his situation drove him to those holy writings in order to make his case. **I can hardly imagine how much time he spent reading his Bible looking for the evidence he wanted to present.**

That is the sort of effort that is inspired by a thirst for healing, for unity, and for peace that I think we need to recapture today.

So, every time in church this summer and you hear Matthew quote a prophet like Jeremiah, think about the divisions in his community that broke his heart.

But also think of how tirelessly he worked to heal them.

And then do what he says. Matthew's advice is pretty good, as it turns out!

Αμεν.