

Like a Hammer: *Jeremiah 23:23-29*

Norwalk Christian Church, August 19, 2019, Proper 15, Year C

It's been a busy summer. After our renovation finished in May, things haven't stopped! From our Chamber Ribbon Cutting, to church camp, youth mission trip, fourth of July, General Assembly, RAGBRAI, family vacation, and now the incredible Iowa State Fair--it's been busy!

Before all of this, Marti and I decided we would be preaching this summer from the lectionary. Our church tradition uses the Revised Common Lectionary, a collection of texts that gives us a set of at least four scriptures each Sunday to choose from: one from the Old Testament, a Psalm, one from the Gospels, and one from the rest of the New Testament. We decided to follow the lectionary, and hear what word God might speak this summer.

But, as I said, it has been busy. And--I'll be honest--I really hadn't read today's scripture closely until I had already committed to preaching on it. I guess that's my round-about-way for offering an excuse for today's scripture. I didn't choose it. This text, well, this text sort of chose us.

Because, if it weren't for the lectionary, I would NEVER preach Jeremiah 23! It's confusing, unfamiliar, and, well, a bit judgy. But that's sort of the point of the lectionary, it pushes us to these unfamiliar corners of our tradition, in hopes that maybe, even here, on the outskirts of our faith, we might find a word from the Lord.

A word from the Lord...that's really what this text is all about. Who speaks a true word of the Lord and who does not? This word comes to us from the middle of the book of Jeremiah, one of scripture's longest prophetic books. And just to be clear, prophesy, for Ancient Jews, wasn't so much about predicting the future. God's prophets didn't say "this is going to happen" because they had some special time-traveling insight. Prophets were preachers, who said "this is going to happen" because they looked around and saw how the people were living, saw the compromises religious and national leaders were making, and knew, inevitably, where that road will lead.

That's why when you read the prophets--Jeremiah included--you have, over and over again, words from the Lord, decrying immorality and, in particular, injustice to the poor and marginalized in the community. Words of judgment spoken against a community that cared more about keeping the feasts and doing religious observances than they did about paying fair wages, caring for orphans and widows, and providing for the foreigner--the migrant among them.

Most of our Old Testament prophets did their work around a major turning point in Israel's history--the Babylonian Exile. Israel would be invaded by Babylon, and many

were forced to leave their homes and live as slaves and exiles in Babylon. The temple would be destroyed. Homes and towns decimated. It was a dark time for the Hebrew people.

And the prophets in Scripture usually fall into three categories: those who prophesied before the exile, warning about the storm clouds that were gathering. Those who prophesied during the exile, giving clarity to what had happened and a word of hope for future restoration. And those who prophesied after the exile, leading the people to rebuild and rediscover again what it meant to be the people of God.

Jeremiah, though, was unique. He was a bridge prophet. He prophesied before, during, and after the exile. He saw it all. And his calling was a lonely one. He was not to marry. He had no kids. He had no friends. He was persecuted by his own family locked up in stocks, thrown in a hole, and still he went around telling everyone about how they had abandoned God.

He was known as the “weeping prophet”, and that’s not a name we need explain. There’s another book of scripture he wrote--Lamentations. An entire book of sad poetry, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which he saw first hand.

But it didn’t have to be so dark for Jeremiah. See, he wasn’t the only prophet in town. There were others. They had family, friends, wealth, and fame. Yet he was the only one who suffered. He was the only one thrown into the pit.

The other prophets, too, were prophets of God--or so they claimed. “Thus says the Lord,” they would say, with pride. But their message was very different from Jeremiah’s.

“Old Jeremiah--he’s delusional. Talking about pending doom. No, no. All is well. God wants you to be happy. God wants you to live your best life. God wants you to be wealthy, to multiply, to use people and the land how you want. God wants you to enjoy yourself. The poor can care for themselves. The migrants--they should’ve stayed in their own land. God has a dream for your life--and it’s not exile, it’s blessing!”

That’s where our text comes in. God is not far off, it begins, but God is nearby. Which, usually, is said as a word of hope. But here, it’s a warning. God is right here. God hears it all. And God is listening to all who speak in God’s name.

Those prophets who say, “I have dreamed! I have dreamed!” God hears. God sees. You may be able to fool the masses, but you can’t fool God. God knows they speak lies.

They speak in God’s name, but their words are not from God. God compares them to their ancestors who worshipped the false god Baal. In other words, to claim to be speaking a word from God that is a lie is equivalent to worshipping a false god.

It's a difficult time to speak a true word from God. But God tells Jeremiah to continue to speak. Speak God's word faithfully. For God's word is like fire! God's word is like a hammer!

Now, remember--I did not chose this text! This text chose us this morning. Maybe it's the word we need to hear.

I'll be honest, it's easy for us, as preachers, to tell you what we think you want to hear. To be soothsayers, speak of good things, of dreams and hope and love and prosperity. Speak a safe word, so that we can keep our jobs. Don't rock the boat!

But our word from the Lord today challenges us. It pushes us, beyond the easy words of God to the harder words. It challenges us to both speak and listen carefully. It doesn't mean we should not speak of hope, give encouragement and help. But God's word also has an edge to it. It's a hammer. It's fire. It challenges us, and calls us to examine our way of life.

If we are to take this word of the Lord seriously, it suggests that not every one who claims to be speaking for the Lord are, in fact, doing so. But how do you know?

A while back, I had the chance to join some colleagues to teach a class for the Ray Society at Drake, a continuing education program for senior adults. Our topic was the history of racism in our church traditions, and I spoke about our tradition, the Stone-Campbell Movement and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Our tradition was born on the American Frontier, in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, and we came of age right as things were leading towards the Civil War. Which is to say, our founders and the earliest preachers and leaders in our movement could not avoid the issue of slavery. We were a church that lived on both sides, the north and the south, and all along the dividing line. It was a contentious time.

And there were some in our movement who advocated for abolition. And some who advocated for a kinder, more gentler slavery. There were others who believed scripture condoned slavery, and gave scriptural sanction to the horrible evil.

Both Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, our movement's founders, owned slaves which they later freed. But there was one sobering truth I learned during my preparation for this class. No matter what side of this issue our church leaders were on--anti or pro-slavery--everyone thought that the white man was better than the black one. Everyone believed that whites were superior because God created them that way.

And they said it in pulpits and wrote it in journals. This was a word from God, they believed. They may have been against slavery for a variety of reasons, religious, moral, and economic--but they were all white supremacists.

This was hard for me to swallow. But it reminded me how easily it is to be deceived. It's easy to look back and see how others messed up--it's harder to see it in ourselves, harder to see how easy it is to think we are speaking and listening to the word of the Lord, when the opposite may be true.

Which brings us back to our question from earlier--how do you know? How can you tell, is this dream, this word from the Lord, or is it a false prophet?

I dare not give you a definitive answer, and perhaps fall into the same trap our scripture warns against.

But I think--I think--the cipher, the code, the clue for knowing what is of God and is not of God is that word of the Lord the ancient Hebrews called the Shema, which was later repeated by Jesus as the first and second greatest commandments: "Hear O Israel, it says, the Lord your God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Perhaps that is the only word of the Lord we really need to hear. After all, Jesus said, "It sums up the entire law and prophets." Any word that does not live up to that standard--that does not call us to love God more and love our neighbor more--may be nothing more than lies.

Regardless of if our word is near to God's or not, God is near to us. God is listening. And scripture tells us, God is speaking--even now.

At times, it may be a word that soothes us. That bring hope in the midst of exile and direction when it's time to rebuild our lives. But sometimes, sometimes that word may be more like a hammer, a hammer that breaks through hard hearts and cracks injustice to pieces. And sometimes that word of the Lord might be like a fire, burning away oppression and indifference, and burning out love for God and all that God has created.

Whatever word God needs to speak to us, may we always be eager to hear, so that we may be as close to God's word as God is to us.

Amen.