

THEME: Jeremiah: Faith for Tough Times

"Never Too Far Gone—Return O Israel"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – Confirmation Weekend

May 4-5, 2013 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Jeremiah 3:12-13, 7:5-7 (This will be done via the Video Sermon Starter)

12 Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry forever. 13 Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favors among strangers under every green tree, and have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord.

5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

VIDEO Jeremiah Week 3 Scripture and Sermon Starter

SLIDE Never Too Far Gone – Return O Israel (Use Jeremiah background)

Today we come to part 3 in a four part sermon series on the prophet Jeremiah. This is the longest book in the Bible by word count and it is a tough book to read. If you sat down to read it without any background or understanding of what was happening in the days Jeremiah was living in, you would be very confused. It skips around chronologically and the themes seem dark and ominous. You wouldn't find it to be a book that easily speaks to you in many circumstances if you weren't familiar with the background. I do believe that once we begin to understand the history that surrounds the prophet Jeremiah and what was going on then the book comes to life. This is what we have tried to do over the past couple of weeks as we try to understand one of the most significant periods of biblical history, as well as what was taking place and hear the word of the Lord for the people of Jeremiah's day. Most importantly, we have tried to understand what that word means for us today.

As we begin will you take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You will find the Scripture that we heard today listed at the top and then a place for you to write things down below that. I pray every week that God speak to each person who would gather in this place for worship and use that space to write down whatever it is you feel like God might be speaking to you today. My hope is that you will hear something today and it will be something that you will want to remember in the days ahead. If you are watching at home or online you can download this resource off our website or just get out a piece of paper and a pen or pencil to write with.

Below that section today you're going to find a timeline that we are going to be looking at today. Each week we have tried to give you a different tool to help you better understand and grab hold of the history. We began by looking at some maps and then last week we looked at some genealogy. This week it will be a timeline that I hope will help fill in the picture of what was happening during the day of Jeremiah. We are going to look at the last eight years that the kingdom of Judah existed and we are going to hear Jeremiah's words to the people in those days.

You also will find the Meditation Moment for the week on this sheet of paper which have Scripture readings for each day from the prophet Jeremiah which tie into today's message. There are some great questions for you to reflect on and as you use this during the week I hope that God will continue to speak to you through these Scriptures and reflections.

Let's remember what we've learned so far. Jeremiah began preaching and sharing his prophetic words at the age of 16 years old, the age of many of our young people who are being confirmed this weekend. The year was 627 BC which was 600 years before the time of Christ. His message is primarily about something that will happen in 587 BC. Jeremiah goes to bed each night and has a recurring nightmare about the city in which he lives, the city of Jerusalem, being burned to the ground by the Babylonians. The Temple was destroyed and the people are killed. The city walls are torn down and the buildings are burned to the ground.

He can see this with his mind eye and during the course of his lifetime he has seen the people walk away from God and walk towards the idols and the gods and goddesses of the ancient near East. Jeremiah knows that if the people will return to God then God will protect them from the coming disaster. God will keep this terrible destruction from raining down upon them. But during the 40 years

that Jeremiah shared his prophetic words the people continue to walk away from God.

Jeremiah feels this message burning within his bones. He has to tell somebody and he is trying to convince the people. If only they will listen to him then the kingdom of Judah, the remnant of the kingdom of Israel, will be spared and the city of Jerusalem will not be destroyed. The Temple will still be standing and people will not be slaughtered if only they will listen. That is the urgency that you feel in this book as you read Jeremiah. You are supposed to feel the anguish of the prophet and his frustration of wanting to convince the people to return to God but they just won't listen. He is trying to paint a picture of what it will be like so maybe they will turn from following all of these destructive idols and return to God and then they will experience the prosperity of God.

The reality is that it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the Babylonians were going to come knocking on the door of the kingdom of Judah. It had happened already with the Assyrians and with the Egyptians. You didn't need prophetic insight to know that the Babylonians were coming because they were taking over the whole region, all you had to do was notice how people and kingdoms moved and try to control this region. Let me remind you on this map what has been happening during the time of Jeremiah and his ministry.

SLIDE Map of the Assyrian Empire in 650 BC (from last week)

The Assyrian Empire was in power in the ancient near East during this time and we learned that this region is the most valuable piece of real estate because it is what connects Europe and Asia to the continent of Africa and so all of the trade routes and economic activity connect in this place where Jerusalem sits on the map. The great empires were all interested in controlling the land of Judah which is the southern portion of the nation of Israel. Jeremiah didn't need to be a prophet to figure out that each Empire would want to control the trade routes.

VIDEO Changing Empires Map for Jeremiah (no audio - from last week)

Watch what happens on the video screen as we see 45 years of history and empires come and go in 30 seconds. Jeremiah is prophesying during a time of great upheaval between these vast empires. The Assyrians were in control until he was about 16 years old and then when he began to preach the Babylonians were revolting against the Assyrians and so Judah had 17 years of independence. At the end of those 17 years Egypt began to once more flex its muscle. The

Egyptians marched through the land of Judah and took control of Jerusalem, putting their own puppet King on the throne, and not stopping until they reached the modern-day country of Syria.

The Babylonians then defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish on the banks of the Euphrates River and then marched down through the countries of modern-day Syria and Lebanon, eventually conquering Jerusalem and then continuing all the way down to Egypt. Once again, it was pretty clear that once Babylon had defeated the Assyrians and the Egyptians that they were coming next for the city of Jerusalem and Judah.

SLIDE Map of Babylonian Empire 597 BC (picture from last week)

Jeremiah also knew that God had given his people this little stretch of land and that God would protect them. Even if the Babylonians controlled this piece of land, God promised to protect his people if they would turn to him and keep their relationship with him. But as we learned over the last few weeks, the people continued to turn away from God and worship the idols and the gods and goddesses of ancient near East in a way that led them to do strange sexual acts and destroying their own children. This is why Jeremiah preaches what he does for 40 years, "Turn back to God before the Babylonians come," but the people didn't believe it.

SLIDE The Last Seven Kings of Judah (picture from last week)

We learned last week that by looking at the genealogy of the Kings of Judah that Jeremiah prophesied during the last five Kings. He began his ministry during the great King Josiah and was part of the reforms to bring people back to God and take them away from where the two previous Kings, Manasseh and Ammon, had taken the people as they worshiped Asherah and Baal and Moloch. After Josiah was killed in the battle with the Egyptians, Jehoahaz was installed on the throne and he went back to the practices of Manasseh. His son Jehoiakim followed him and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord as well. His son Jehoiachin also turned away from God and the last King of Judah, Zedekiah did as well.

Most of the prophesying that Jeremiah did happened in the last 10 years which was during the reign of Zedekiah which is why he is mentioned 45 times in the book of Jeremiah. He is asking the people to turn away from the gods and goddesses that Zedekiah led them to worship and instead returned to the one true God. We learned about these gods last week.

SLIDE Baal (picture from last week)

This is the god Baal and he was the God of thunder and lightning and storms. His hand is raised to cast lightning bolts. According to the people of the ancient near East he would bring the storms and rain.

SLIDE Asherah (picture from last week)

This is his consort Asherah. She is always portrayed bare breasted as the goddess of fertility. If the people will pray to the goddess of fertility then they will have crops and animals that will be abundant. They will have much offspring and the women will have many children. If they pray and offer sacrifices to these two gods then they will receive the blessings of rain and crops and multiplying livestock and many children. This is what the people of the ancient near East believed and they would give their hearts and their lives, and even their children to the gods and goddesses of the ancient near East.

SLIDE Moloch (picture from last week)

God, through Jeremiah, keeps pleading with them, "Please, you are praying to God's that don't even exist. Some of you have been willing to burn your children on the altar of Moloch. Please turn back to me because if you trust in any of these God's when the Babylonians show up then you will have no protection because these gods don't exist. They will not save you and your only hope is if you will trust in the God who gave you life, who called you from slavery in Egypt and gave me this land. Please return and you will prosper."

VIDEO Jeremiah Timeline (no audio) Please Pause at each date in bold

If you look at the timeline on your Meditation Moments and on the video screen you will see this history play out of the last eight years of the kingdom of Judah. In **605 BC the Babylonians take control of the kingdom of Judah** and they demand the Jewish people now pay allegiance to Babylon. They demand an annual tax called attribute. It was a heavy tax and put a great burden on the people. That was the price of safety and continued freedom in the land. They would appoint your King and you could have one but you still had to pledge allegiance to Babylon as well as pay up.

In **598 BC Jehoiakim rebels** against the kingdom of Babylon. He says that Judah would no longer pledge allegiance to Babylon and they would no longer pay the tax or the attribute. Judah and several other smaller kingdoms join together

to fight the Babylonians, hoping the Egyptians would join them. The Egyptians didn't help them and instead the Babylonian army surrounds the city of Jerusalem and began to **lay siege to the city of Jerusalem**.

Jehoiakim dies in battle and **in 597 BC Jerusalem surrenders**. His son Jehoiachin takes over and admits defeat and tries to apologize to the Babylonians. The Babylonian army still marched into Jerusalem and took all of the treasures out of the Temple and carried them away. **Jehoiachin and 10,000 other citizens of Jerusalem, including his mother, were deported to Babylon**. They lived there in exile and were never heard from again.

Josiah's son **Zedekiah becomes King**. He rules as King and takes people farther away from God and he is told by the Babylonians that Judah must continue to pay tribute to Babylon. As long as they would pay their tribute they would be left alone.

In **588 BC Zedekiah rebelled and Babylon lays siege** to Jerusalem. Once more he hopes the Egyptians will help them but they never do. The Babylonian army marches in this time with a vengeance and they surround the city of Jerusalem for 18 months. The only thing that protects the people in Jerusalem are the wall surrounding the city and they tear down houses to reinforce the walls on the inside of the city. Eventually they run out of food in they begin to starve to death.

Finally, **in 587 BC Jerusalem is destroyed and the kingdom of Judah ceases to exist**. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar leads the army on July 18 587 BC to the center of Jerusalem while the city is destroyed and burned to the ground. The King and all the leaders of Jerusalem are carried away into exile in the second deportation and the kingdom of Judah is annihilated. For the next 50 years it will cease to exist which is why this is one of the most important dates in Old Testament history. Everything is leading up to this date or is written in response to what happened in 587 BC. This is why this date is important to know. For 40 years Jeremiah is prophesying about what is going to happen on July 18 587 BC and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

SLIDE 587 BC Timeline Picture

Hopefully this will help us even better begin to understand the words of Jeremiah and what they might mean for us today. One of the things that we might struggle with as we read Jeremiah is that we read a lot about the "vengeance of

God" or "God's wrath." That can be rather disturbing for us. We wonder why God is so angry. We wonder why God is portrayed as a violent God.

SLIDE How do we make sense of God as violent or vengeful? (with Jeremiah background)

On more than one occasion I have had members of our church tried to read the Bible from the very beginning of Genesis all the way until the end of Revelation. They end up being disturbed because they love reading about God in Jesus Christ and seeing God's heart revealed in the flesh. But much of what they read about God the Old Testament seemed to paint God is violent or angry and vengeful. They get repelled by that picture of God and they struggle to make sense of a God who is angry and violent in the Old Testament and seems to be filled with love and mercy in the New Testament.

The first thing I want to remind you is that there are many passages about God's love and mercy in the Old Testament. We also need to understand that when the prophets spoke they spoke in light of the language and images and metaphors they had at their disposal. Jeremiah knew that the destruction of Jerusalem was coming. He knew that people had turned away from God and he knew that God was their only salvation. He draws upon images that he is familiar with. We all speak about God in our own language and with metaphors that we understand, because all language about God is metaphorical.

This is why Jeremiah uses image like God as a, "jilted husband whose wife has had multiple affairs and now she is selling herself as a prostitute." God's heart is broken and he is angry as any husband would be in that situation. He talks about God as a, "father whose children have rebelled against them and turned away again and again." Once again God's heart is broken and God sets a firm boundary and says, "Enough!"

Also in Jeremiah's day gods were portrayed as warriors. They were fighters and there was justice and there came a point that when you stepped over a line there was judgment that would happen. That is how people understood God in that day and so when Jeremiah speaks about the Babylonians coming, in his mind it is clear that God has taken all that he is going to take. Now comes the time of judgment.

Most of us don't like to think of a God of justice because it makes us a bit uncomfortable. We want a God of mercy. We want a God who is going to forgive

and forgive. We don't want God to demand the punishment, even if we might deserve it—until somebody else has done something wrong to us! When someone else has done something wrong and it has hurt us then we want God to be just and to give them the punishment that they deserve. But when it comes to what we do wrong we want God's mercy. Isn't that true?

"Justice for others and mercy for us," is the battle cry of most humans.

The truth is that both sides are important ways of understanding God. Is it ever appropriate for God to get angry? Is it ever appropriate for you to get angry? I would suggest that there are some places in life where if you are not angry then there's something wrong with you. If your children are hurt by someone else and they are physically wounded then you should be angry, and you should try to make it right and be sure they are not hurt anymore.

If your spouse had been doing what Israel did to God, there comes a moment where any sane person will say, "I can't tolerate this anymore. I will not put up with a more. I will not stick around and be treated this way."

There are times when we have to tell our children that certain things are unacceptable. There are times when we have to put down consequences for things that our children do so they learn a valuable lesson now because those decisions and actions can lead to devastation the future. There are times when we had to say as parents, "You will be grounded for the rest of your life if you do this thing!" There are times when my children have done things which are dangerous and they could've hurt themselves. Even though I had warned them they still did these stupid things that I would never do! I find myself screaming at the top of my lungs, "What were you thinking! How many times have I told you not to do that? Don't you know you could have been killed doing that?"

Am I the only one who has done that? I did find myself taking them in my arms and apologizing for screaming, but not being sorry that I told them what I told them because this is serious business.

Do you think that people who lost loved ones or lost limbs in the Boston bombings have a right to be angry? If it turns out that there was neglect in taking care of the factory that exploded in Texas, do you think people who lost loved ones have a right to be angry? Do you think parents who have lost their children to gunmen in schools have a right to be angry? Do you think people who lost family members to drunk drivers have a right to be angry? Do you think people

who lose family members to an illness when they are young and have a right to be angry?

I think there is a place for God to be angry and I think there is a place for God to express wrath. We also have to understand that Jeremiah is drawing upon the metaphors about God that he has at his disposal which is why we need to understand the history and the background of Jeremiah and was happening to the nation of Israel during his day.

But here's what happened with Jesus.

SLIDE Jesus changed the metaphors for understanding God.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures and made them whole and gave us a clear picture of who God is and what God is about. Jesus doesn't take away the idea that there is judgment and wrath, it's just that Jesus takes it upon himself.

Jesus says to us through the cross that, "this is what God looks like. God suffers for you. There is a price to be paid for the things that human beings do to each other and that we experience as human beings in a broken and imperfect world, and I am going to take it upon myself. I am going to bear it for you."

Jesus changes how we see God, so we read Jeremiah even in the light of what we see God to be through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the clearest picture of God and we also understand that when Jeremiah is speaking he is using the metaphors of his day and he is speaking about something that is very real. Justice and judgment and divine wrath are real but they also show us the depths of the mercy of God and that is the key thing I want you to understand today.

When Jeremiah is talking about the wrath of God and the judgment of God and what is coming, why is he doing that 40, 30, 10, five, one year before happens? Do you know why he is saying this?

SLIDE Jeremiah wants people to repent and return to God

When Jeremiah is speaking about judgment he says in the next breath that God wants to forgive us. God wants us to come back to him. God wants to protect us and keep us, so understand that this is coming if you don't repent and return to God. Please turn back to God before it's too late! You been walking away from God. Now turn back to God. Jeremiah begs the people to return because he knows what is coming if they don't.

Every word of judgment in the book of Jeremiah is an invitation from God to the people to respond and return. We hear that in the Scriptures that we read today from Jeremiah 7: 5-7 (NRSV).

SLIDE *5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.*

I have been warning you that this is coming but if you turn back, I will forgive and I will dwell with you and you will be my people and I will be your God. In Jeremiah 25: 5-6 (NRSV) we hear these words.

SLIDE *“Turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and wicked doings, and you will remain upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever; 6 do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm.”*

Jeremiah 4:1-2 (NRSV)

SLIDE *If you return, O Israel, says the Lord, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, 2 and if you swear, “As the Lord lives!” in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by Judah, and by Judah they shall boast.*

In Jeremiah 3 he is speaking to the tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel which have already been destroyed by the Assyrians. He speaks to the remnants, those people who were stragglers and remained and were not carried off into slavery.

SLIDE *Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry forever. 3 Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the Lord your God.*

Some of you have read Jeremiah 6:16 before where God says these words.

SLIDE *16 Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for*

the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.

The ancient paths were walking in the ways of Moses some 600 years before the time of Jeremiah. God is reminding us through Jeremiah that there are two ways in life. One way leads in God's path and it is sometimes harder and more difficult, yet it is blessed and God walks with you and you will find life. There is another way that seems easier at first. Many people take this route and yet it leads to death and destruction and hurt and pain as those worthless idols turn out to be nothing. God encourages us through Jeremiah to choose the way that leads to life and that brings peace and rest for your soul.

Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. He said there are two roads in life and one of them is broad and wide and leads to destruction. There are many who find this way because it seems easy at first. But there is a narrow way and few find it, yet it leads to life.

Robert Frost spoke in a poem, ***"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."***

We understand that there are two paths and Jeremiah is calling the people to the ancient past that is less traveled but will lead to rest for your weary soul.

SLIDE "Return" = *teshuva* = *metanoia* = "repent"

This word that we find in Jeremiah 3, "return," is repeated many times throughout the prophet's words. It means "repent". The idea is that you are walking in a path and it doesn't take a prophet to figure out that this path will lead to pain and destruction, while this path leads to life. Returning or repenting is about turning around and going in a new direction.

Today let's think about the path that people take that lead away from God and lead to pain. You don't have to be a prophet to see those paths do you? For some it is the struggle with infidelity. When you struggle with this and you give in to that struggle there is a family which is destroyed and maybe even two. It doesn't take a prophet to announce that because that is just how it works.

One of the great struggles that we see today in our Congregational care ministries and throughout the world is Internet pornography. It is a path that might seem gratifying to begin with but what you find is that it starts wearing away at your soul. Some end up trying to act out the things that they see online

and for others it just separates them from God and from other people, usually the people they love the most. It makes us less than human, especially as our young people start to believe that what they see on the Internet is the way a relationship should work in real life. You don't have to be a prophet to see that where this leads, when you expose yourself to this every single day over the course of months and years, how destructive it will be to our relationships and to our soul.

Sometimes we take a path where we say to ourselves, "Nobody will notice if I take a little bit from my employer." Then we take a little bit more and a little more and in the end you end up in jail.

In our materialistic culture we convince ourselves that, "If I just have a little bit more than I will be happy." Then we spend a little bit more than we make and we spend the rest of our lives chasing after that elusive thing that will make us happy. We sacrifice all the things that really matter with the quest for just a little more and then one day we wake up and realize, "I can't take it with me. I have all that I ever wanted and I'm still not happy."

All of those paths that we pursue can lead to a place of pain and destruction or heart ache or just emptiness. Jeremiah is imploring us to choose the ancient paths. Choose to follow God and return to him and you will be saved and delivered from the destruction that will come if you continue down this path.

Jeremiah preaches this truth for 40 years and he is put in jail. He was beaten and thrown into a cistern and left to die. People are trying to kill them and so he has to go into hiding. He continues to preach this word that destruction is coming in so turn back to God and the people won't listen, not even the Kings. All the way until the end, even in June of 587 BC when the Babylonians are about to knock down the wall, and you find Jeremiah still saying, "You are not too far gone. Even now I implore you to return to God and God will deliver you. You're going to have the Babylonians as your neighbors and there is nothing you can do about that now. You will have to pay the tribute to the King of Babylon. But God can save the city is even now you will turn back to him."

If you have your Bible, turn to Jeremiah 38. It's maybe a month before the Babylonians entered the city and Zedekiah calls for Jeremiah. Jeremiah is under arrest and he goes before the King. Zedekiah the king is meeting with Jeremiah the prophet and you have this interesting exchange. Jeremiah then says these

words to the King in verse 17 (NLT).

SLIDE ***17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "This is what the Lord God of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the Babylonian officers, you and your family will live, and the city will not be burned down.***

After all of their idolatry and adultery and oppressing the poor and keeping slaves and mistreating people, God still says, "In year 39, month 11, I will still save you, if now you will turn to me. If you surrender the King of the Babylonians and you surrender to me as your God then you will not be killed and your family will not be killed. The city will not be burned so please go and surrender and save us all."

What do you think Zedekiah chooses to do? Does he surrender? No, he doesn't surrender. Why doesn't he surrender? The prophet is telling them, "Trust in God and surrender and you will be saved. You will not die in your city will be burned."

Why doesn't Zedekiah surrender?

On more than one occasion I've had people come into my office and say something like, "I have done this thing and I haven't told anyone about it ever and I need to tell someone." Then they proceed to tell me whatever it is that has been weighing down their hearts. For some it is been illegal dealings in their business and for others it is been an affair. Often times they know they are about to be caught and then they always end with the same phrase, "What you think I should do?"

There is really only one answer and that is to surrender. I don't see any other answer than that you should confess to the police or confess to your wife or your husband before they come for you. You confess to those who have hurt and you confess to God and you trust in him. Every other option will lead to a worse outcome than that one, and it least in that outcome you can feel the strength of God on your side knowing that you have surrendered to him. You most likely will go to jail and your spouse may leave you, but when you walk into jail God will walk by your side. When you walk through that divorce God will be with you even though it is painful.

You won't have to be afraid because God is the God of the second chance. God is the God of new beginnings and if only you will surrender then you will find

that there is hope for you.

Most of the time people look at me and say, "I just can't do that." They walk out the door of my office and they are discovered. They end up in jail or they lose their family. They often walk alone and in darkness because they were unwilling to surrender to God. They wanted to take their own path and it was a path that lead to destruction, even though they knew up front that God promises to forgive.

Why don't we surrender when we get stuck in a corner? Sometimes it is pride because we still hold out hope we won't get caught. Sometimes it is arrogance, thinking that we can cheat getting caught one more time. Sometimes it is fear. We all struggle with the things that we might confess to God, but we hold onto them because of pride or arrogance or fear, even though God promises a new beginning and a fresh start.

Here's what happens to Zedekiah. Within a few weeks the Babylonians breached the walls of the city of Jerusalem. They marched into this city and they first went to the Temple where the treasure was located. They took out all of the things of value that were meant to worship God and they carried away. They plundered the Royal Palace and during this time Zedekiah and his family slipped out the back gate of the city and they tried to make a run for Jericho. The King of Babylon noticed that he was missing in so he sent troops for him and they captured Zedekiah and his family.

They were brought to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and they were forced to watch as the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonians torched each building, one after the other and those that were made out of stone were knocked down. They then torched the Temple of God. Then they began to kill people. In Jeremiah 39:6 (NLT) we read what happens.

SLIDE *6 He made Zedekiah watch as they slaughtered his sons and all the nobles of Judah. Then they gouged out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him in bronze chains, and led him away to Babylon.*

Part of the message of Jeremiah is that sin has consequences. God will let you reject him and walk in whatever way you want to walk. God will let you walk in whatever direction you want for a very long time. God will not force you to walk in his path but gives you freedom. God is pleading with Zedekiah through Jeremiah up until the very end, "Please, just surrender. Please return." But God

would not make Zedekiah turn or surrender, and there was in the end terrifying and terrible consequences, not the hand of God but the hand of the king of Babylon Nebuchadnezzar.

We look at this 2600-year-old history and we wonder what it has to do with us today. The Babylonians don't exist so why do we care about any of this ancient history or the words of the prophet Jeremiah. The reason why this book is in our Bible is because the truths in it still speak to us today. They are timeless truths.

We struggle with not following the ancient path. We struggle with following idols in our lives. We end up chasing after things that will actually give us life. We find ourselves often unwilling to say to God, "Please forgive me." Sometimes we say, "Please forgive me," but then we go right back to doing what we were doing before. The Jews did this on several occasions. At one point Jeremiah told them that God was unhappy with them having slaves and so they let their slaves go free. But two days later they realized that they really liked having a slave and so they changed their minds and brought their slaves back. That's what repentance often looks like for us if we are honest.

SLIDE Jeremiah is a book about the mercy of God

The book of Jeremiah is a book about the character of God and the fact that there are consequences but there is always mercy when we return to God. Here is what I hope you will take away from this message. Even when Zedekiah turned away from God and did what was evil and put people to death even, year after year after year, God was still willing to take him back if he would only return.

Sometimes we think, "I've gone too far." I hear this from some people sometimes, "I am afraid of this thing in my past and I don't see how God can forgive me for that. Pastor, I am afraid that God will never forgive me for this thing." I have sat with people as they cried and shared with me their story. I have had people hesitate to take communion and you could see the tears in their eyes. Afterwards they would tell me, "The reason I was afraid to take communion is that I just can't believe that God would forgive me for this."

How far can you go before God chooses not to forgive you anymore? The answer is that there is nowhere and no place you can go that can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. How far can you go? There is no length that you can go that God will not take you back. There are consequences and there is a price to be paid because of some of our actions because that's the way the world

works, but when it comes to the eternal price, God has already paid that Jesus Christ.

God's mercy is relentless in pursuit of us. That's what 40 years of the prophet preaching is saying to us in the book of Jeremiah. God is relentless in pursuing us in hope that we will return to him.

When I think about this message I think about a man who has been part of this congregation throughout my time here. He is struggle with alcohol addiction and I often worried for his safety because he drank so much because I saw my stepfather drink himself to death. He began to put his life back together and he stopped drinking and then I would see him for a couple of weeks. I would see him in the community and would tell him that I missed him and ask if he was okay and he would say, "I fell off the wagon again. I don't feel like I can even come to church again because I'm not sure God will forgive me."

I would encourage them that when he falls off the wagon is the week that he most needs to be in church. Over time I've seen the Holy Spirit change this man and I see this amazing child of God and I see Christ shining through him as he left one path in his life and he now pursues another path which is the ancient path towards God. He said to me the other day that he recognized his problem was when he was falling off the wagon he would be embarrassed to come to church or to come to God but now he knows that there is only one thing that could fill that ache and longing inside and it's God and so when he struggles the most is when he most needs God.

God is the God of the second chance and the third chance. Many of you know that we have Celebrate Recovery here on Monday nights for those of us willing to admit our hurts, habits and hang-ups and that we need to surrender to God. Some are struggling with alcohol addiction and others with substance abuse and others with depression and loss. You are for many of them their church family. I don't get to be here often on Monday nights but when I am I love being able to visit with anyone who is willing to be here because they are walking signs of God's mercy. There is nowhere that you can go that is too far and that God won't reach out and continue to save and deliver you.

This is how God works. God is relentless in redeeming in transforming us.

Several years ago a young man began coming to our congregation and he asked to meet with me. He had just finished an active tour of duty in Afghanistan

and as we met asked this question: "Pastor Jeff, how does God look at me as someone who just served in Afghanistan? I had to kill people. Some of them were children who are taught to carry weapons. How does God look at me? Is there any hope for me?"

This young man had been carrying this guilt with him for years and it was paralyzing him and his ability to be in any kind of a relationship with anyone. The first thing that I told him is that I have never been in that kind of situation and so I don't know what he is feeling but I can imagine that it is very painful to carry that kind of guilt around and my heart aches for him.

I also acknowledged that God grieves when people are killed. Of course God doesn't want us killing each other. They were things that you saw and you experienced as a soldier that you knew inside were wrong and you have carried the guilt from that and that is understandable.

But remember more than anything else that the overarching message of the gospel is grace and mercy. God longs to forgive you. You have been carrying this burden for too long and you don't need to carry it anymore because Jesus carried it on the cross for you. Our task is to accept the mercy in the grace of God. God knows your name and he loves you and he is willing to even forgive the burden that this man carried all of these years.

I don't know about you but there are things in my life that I've done, especially when I was younger, that I am still embarrassed to say out loud. But the reality is that God knows them already. God is more willing to forgive than I am to confess my sin. That's the message I hear the book of Jeremiah.

"For all the ways that you have turned away from me my people; for all the ways you have oppressed and hurt my children; for all of the time that you have laid on the high hills with the gods and goddesses that don't even exist and are worthless; for all the ways you have killed my profits—I would still take you back if you would just return to me."

That's the message that I hope we hear today when we contemplate the judgment and the mercy passages in the book of Jeremiah.

Would you pray with me?

SLIDE Prayer

While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I would like for you

to think about that thing in your life which is kept hidden. Maybe it is something that you haven't even told your closest friends or your spouse. Nobody knows about this thing that you continue to carry. It is still back there in the back of your mind and you wonder, "Could God ever forgive that?"

The message of Jeremiah to you today is that God will forgive that. Why don't you begin by quietly under your breath saying something like this?

"God I need you and I need your mercy... Forgive me and heal me..."

Then would you take a moment to say to God something like...

"God you know about this thing. When Pastor Jeff was speaking, this was the thing I was thinking about. Please forgive me for this specific thing..."

Lord we thank you that you are a God of mercy and grace, that you are relentless in pursuit of your people, begging us, calling us, wooing us and inviting us to return and return to you—to walk in the ancient paths and to find rest for our souls. Lord, set us free from those things which entrap us and enslave us, those things we go back to which dehumanize us. Help us to be the people that you want us to be—to love you, to walk with you and to follow you all of our days. Set us free. Help us to know you're amazing grace. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

“Never Too Far Gone: Return O Israel”

Theme: Faith for Tough Times- The Message of the Prophet Jeremiah

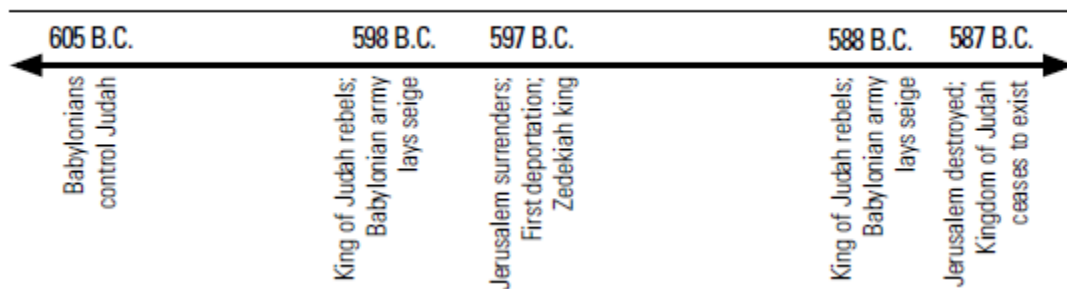
Scripture: Jeremiah 3:12-13, 7:5-7

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments

MONDAY, May 6 – Read Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1 – Neither Jeremiah nor God **wanted** to see Babylon crush Judah. Even the strongest words of judgment came from a heart that wept over Israel's stubborn refusal to repent.

- In Romans 9:2-3, Paul spoke like Jeremiah: "I have great sorrow... in my heart...I could wish that I myself were



cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people...the people of Israel." How did Jeremiah and Paul develop God's compassion toward those who opposed them, rather than scorn or hatred? How can you grow more like them?

- Gilead was famous for plants that were made into medicinal salves and balms (see Genesis 37:25). Hence Jeremiah's expression "balm in Gilead" (not "bomb" in Gilead, though people sometimes hear it that way!) In what ways has God's presence been a healing balm in your life? In what areas do you wish for God's healing touch?

TUESDAY, May 7 – Read Jeremiah 3:22-4:4 – Twice in these verses Jeremiah repeated God's call to his wayward people to, "Return." God was not calling them and does not call us to abstract ethics or a set of rigid rules to obey, "or else." God calls us to a relationship and a decision to walk daily with God. If Israel would return to their relationship with God, God promised to provide the spiritual healing they needed.

- What differences do you see between calling people to return to "correct doctrine" or "good actions" and the call God in fact sent through Jeremiah: "return to **me**" (4:1)? To what extent has God become a personal

presence in your life, rather than just an idea? What steps help open you to a more personal connection with God?

- Verses 23-25 record a kind of divine “wishful thinking,” the words God (and Jeremiah) wished Judah’s people would say to God. What things today are like the deceptive “idolatrous commotion on the hills” in Jeremiah’s time? When have you let something go in order to return to God? What did it take to show you that you needed to change course?

WEDNESDAY, May 7 – Read Jeremiah 26:1-13 – Jeremiah used a key idea twice in this Temple sermon: “The Lord will relent.” At another spot in the book (which, remember, is a collection, not in chronological order), we read God saying, “I have spoken and will not relent” (Jeremiah 4:28). But in the Temple, Jeremiah said, “If you change your behavior, God *will* relent and spare you from disaster.”

- In the book of Jonah, God sent the prophet Jonah to preach disaster. The hearers repented and God relented. That made Jonah furious: “Isn’t this what I said, LORD? ...I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God...who relents from sending disaster” (Jonah 4:2). Was Jeremiah right—could Israel have avoided exile by truly turning back to God? Or do you believe God is unable to shape how empires like Babylon act?
- At one time, God’s tabernacle was in Shiloh (see Joshua 18:1). By Jeremiah’s day, Shiloh lay in ruins (Jeremiah 7:12-15). God blessed the Methodist church in the past. Does that mean God must protect us today, whatever our spiritual condition?

THURSDAY, May 8 – Read Jeremiah 18:1-12 – Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house led him to teach the principle scholars call, “conditional prophecy.” Many in his day said, “God *can’t* allow us to face judgment—he promised to look after Israel.” To them, the message was, “If you leave God, God’s shelter may leave you.” But it also gave hope to those who felt, “It’s no use—we’re doomed.” To them, Jeremiah said, “Prophecy is not destiny, but warning. If you repent, God will forgive and protect.”

- Prophecy doesn’t bind either God or us. We can always choose to change course (for good or for ill), and God is free to respond to our choices. When have you chosen to go against what God asks of you? If it brought bad results what did you learn? Could you (or can you) see past your failure and ask God to help you live in God’s way?
- Sadly, verse 12 said Judah’s people responded to God’s call by saying, “It’s no use,” and continuing on their doomed course. Is there any part of your life that makes you feel as though, “it’s no use?” How can what Jeremiah taught about God give you hope?

FRIDAY, May 9 – Read Jeremiah 3:12-20 – Jeremiah mixed images of God as scorned husband and God as rejected parent. Commentator John Guest noted, “The divorce laws [of Jeremiah’s day] said there was no second chance. Yet God’s love transcends our frailties and offers us a new marriage with Him.” We can “see” Jeremiah pleading, “‘Return!’ [says God]. ‘How gladly I would treat you like my children.’”

- Jeremiah echoed God’s message to Moses: “The LORD...the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Exodus 34:6-7). How have you experienced God’s grace and compassion, God’s eagerness to forgive you and welcome you back when you miss the mark?
- Do you tend to think of God having feelings, or as dispassionate? Ephesians 4:30 urged Christians, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” Reflect on how your lack of trust or defiant acts might grieve God. How can you take steps to avoid bringing God grief?

SATURDAY, May 10 – Read Jeremiah 4:6-14 – God never gives up. It’s harder to see in the English Bible, but Jeremiah was a gifted Hebrew poet. He used a series of vivid poetic images in chapter 4 to warn Israel of the looming danger the nation faced. The Babylonian lion was out of his lair; his chariots were coming like a whirlwind. But those grim images were not a simple forecast; they were the backdrop for an appeal. The prophet/poet ended with “Wash the evil from your heart and be saved.”

- “Wash the evil from your heart” might sound as if we just need to think differently. The *UBS Translator’s Handbook on Jeremiah* notes that the Hebrew phrase is about how our inner thoughts shape our way of life: “Translators can say ‘clean all the evil from your lives’ or ‘make your hearts [or, lives] clean; remove all the evil.’” How are you, day by day, giving God access to your thoughts, so that through them God can be at work to reshape your way of life?

Family Activity: Jeremiah told people to turn to God and away from their sin. Ask each person in your family to individually pray (aloud or silently, whichever works better), “Lord, I am sorry for...” and confess his or her sins to God. Have each one write a word or draw a simple picture on paper representing something about his or her sin. Attach the papers to a shared wall. Stand together facing the papers and say, “God, we turn away from our sin, and we turn toward you.” Turn your bodies away from the wall and toward a symbol reminding you of God (cross, Bible, nature, etc.) End your time together by praying, “Thank you, God, for the promise of your forgiveness. Amen.”