

“Plain Talk from Jesus”
February 16, 2025
Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

To understand Jeremiah and the things he preaches, we need to understand something about the historical context in which he lived. Jeremiah was active during a period of extreme turmoil and division and anxiety in the life of Judah. Judah was the southern part of what we think of as Israel. After the death of Solomon, the nation of Israel split between north and south, essentially over a difference about succession. The northern kingdom believed kings should rise up through tribal alliances. They weren't chosen by the people or anything but they were determined through tribal struggle. Not too surprising, really, when we know that fully ten of the twelve tribes of Israel resided in that northern region. The southern region, known as Judah, believed kings should be determined by the line of David. They were a dynasty, so every king in the south was a descendent of David.

So, for several generations that's how the monarchy functioned. If you read First and Second Kings you'll see how the kings ruled and how succession occurred. That history is written mostly by people from the south, though, so of course the northern kings were all terrible and the southern ones were a mixed bag. But in the north everything came to an end in the 8th century BC when the nation of Assyria moved like a juggernaut from the north, swallowing up everything in its path. The northern kingdom was basically destroyed but the southern one survived as a sort of protectorate of Assyria.

Around the time of Jeremiah's life, nearly two hundred years later, Assyria was in decline and Babylon was on the rise. Babylon defeated Assyria and took over its territory. The division that developed in Judah was over where they should turn to ensure their survival. The leadership at the time was pro-Egypt; Jeremiah and the people around him were pro-Babylon. You might wonder why no one was pro-Israel? But Israel was not a strong enough nation to survive on its own. It had to rely on alliances with other countries in the face of these massive military powers. Babylon defeated Egypt. They didn't occupy it because they didn't have to. They occupied Judah as a buffer zone against Egyptian aggression.

The leadership of Judah, though, kept resisting Babylon. That's what prompts Jeremiah's words about curses and blessings. “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere mortals,” he says, meaning the Egyptians who have already shown themselves too weak to hold off Babylon. But he's not saying they should put their trust in Babylon to save them, but to put their trust in God to keep them whole by cooperating with Babylonian rule instead of resisting and risking more harm. “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.”

Jeremiah's words aren't just platitudes he's offering for general consumption. They're an indictment of the monarchy that is leading Judah to destruction by resisting Babylon and endangering everyone. And that's in fact what happened. Babylon invaded once and carried a bunch of people out and left a king on the throne. That king continued to resist Babylon, so they invaded again and destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, and brutally removed the king from the throne. He was replaced by a governor of Babylon's choosing. That governor was

assassinated, so Babylon invaded a third time and removed more people until there was no one of any significant power left to look after the population. It was a humiliating and devastating defeat.

That may all seem like very obscure, irrelevant history, but I think it's important to understand that the words of the prophets and other writers in scripture don't come from nowhere. They are in response to real circumstances that call upon leaders and people to make real choices about how they will address the challenges they face. And they can offer us wisdom for addressing the challenges we face.

Jeremiah's experience raises questions for us about how we deal with the political realities in our time. Where are our allegiances? What is central to our identity and what do we hang onto no matter how the world changes around us?

We don't share Jeremiah's worldview, of course. We aren't followers of Torah. We are followers of Jesus. So, when it comes to how we define what's most important for our identity in challenging times, we turn to Jesus' words. I titled this sermon "Plain Talk from Jesus" partly because of the setting of these words in Luke. Jesus is preaching on a "level place," it's his sermon on the plain as opposed to his sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel. But I also feel these words from Jesus are clear and forthright. He's speaking plainly about what's important, about what creates blessing and what creates woe.

To the people around him these words would have caught them off-guard. Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who are hungry; blessed are those who weep; blessed are those who are hated, excluded, defamed. He confers blessing on conditions everyone around him would find dishonorable or harsh. How is it possible that circumstances we all want to avoid can be a source of blessing?

Each of those conditions – poverty, hunger, sorrow, exclusion – all put us in a position where we can no longer rely solely on our own power for relief but must turn to the support of community. And when we turn to community for our help we put our trust in God. God is revealed through the community to bring hope and healing to those in trouble. Just like Jeremiah told the leaders of his day to put their trust in the Lord, even though that wouldn't eliminate the threat from Babylon, Jesus tells his listeners and followers to regard their hard circumstances as an invitation to put their trust in God. That's what makes them blessed.

The word "woe," on the other hand, isn't quite the same as "cursed" in my mind. Jesus isn't cursing those who are rich or full or happy. I think it's more an acknowledgement that those conditions deceive people into believing they have no need for God or community. And it's sad. It's easy to become cut off from God's presence when we have no troubles. And it can make it hard for us to relate to those who do. Jesus is calling those of us who have the food we need and the resources we need and are generally happy to become open to those who struggle. When we close ourselves off to the struggles of others, we become self-absorbed and enslaved to our egos.

But more than that, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that our good circumstances are a sign of God's favor and others' poor circumstances a sign of God's displeasure. There are

ways to use the Bible to reinforce that impression. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the great theologian and Christian mystic Howard Thurman relates a story about his grandmother who was born into slavery. Growing up his grandmother looked after him a lot and part of his job was to read to her from the Bible because she never learned to read or write. But she never allowed him to read from Paul's letters. She loved the psalms and Isaiah and the gospels, and he says, at times he could read First Corinthians 13, where Paul writes about love, nothing else from Paul. He writes:

“When I was older and half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. ‘During the days of slavery,’ she said, the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text, Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters... , as unto Christ. Then he would go on to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.”

Enslaved people in our country were prohibited from learning to read, even from learning to read the Bible. I think this passage from Luke is one of the reasons why. Jesus is encouraging those who are poor and struggling to have hope, to see in their struggle the possibility of drawing closer to God by relying on each other for care. That’s what makes them blessed.

And when we look to scripture for insight and guidance, it’s important that we be honest with ourselves and recognize it invites us to let go of reliance on ourselves and our own power and move closer to God. We don’t go to scripture simply to confirm our assumptions about ourselves and the world, but to have those assumptions challenged. That’s how we put down deep roots that can nourish us and sustain us in times of trouble and distress. When the world around us is beyond our control, it can be tempting to rely on ourselves and let go of our trust in God, but that only leads to sadness and despair. In these times of turmoil and division, we’re called to move closer to God by putting our trust in the Lord and clinging to the values of community and compassion Jesus teaches. That’s how we are blessed and bring blessing to the world.

Amen