

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Relentless God”
Jeremiah 31:1-6
November 20, 2016

This fall we've been tracing the larger story of the Old Testament. And so we started off in Genesis with Adam and Eve, went on to Abraham and then to Joseph... which led us into Egypt, where the descendants of Abraham were enslaved.

So, then we had Moses, and the great Exodus. Moses leading the people to Mt. Sinai where they received the great Covenant written on the stone tablets. And certainly we could have spent all fall with just Moses and the Wilderness journey... but this story keeps moving forward. We're moving toward the coming of Christ at Christmas.

So before you knew it we were on to **Hannah's prayer** and the birth of **Samuel**, and then **King David** and the rise of the **Kingdom of Israel**, and things were looking good for God's people. God promised David that someone from David's line would sit on the throne forever.

But pretty soon, the Kingdom broke into two, with Israel on the North and Judah on the South. And we read Jonah's story. Jonah, who had to be reminded that the God of Abraham has always been for all people... and so he was called to go and preach to the enemies to the North of Israel, the Assyrians.

Last week we were with Isaiah, and his vision in the temple where his entire being is reoriented into a deeper life of God.

And today the time keeps moving forward. Because now we're in Jeremiah, and there is no more Northern Kingdom. It's been wiped out by Assyria. All that's left of the Ancient Kingdom that David once ruled over is Judah in the south.

But Judah has been holding its own. Assyria wasn't able to take it, too. Judah's had a few good years, but that's all about to come to an end.

This week is the last week we have in the time of the Kings... Next week, when we begin Advent, we'll be in exile... which is a pretty appropriate place to be during Advent....

in exile, longing for salvation,

hoping for something to be renewed, restored...

waiting for God to show up again.

That's what Advent is really about, and that's where we'll be starting next week.

So today, we're coming to the end of the Kingdom where David once reigned on the throne. We're in the last few years before Jerusalem is burnt to the ground, and the Kingdom that the people of God had been resting their hopes on... is no more.

Jeremiah... he's the lucky prophet that gets to tell the people... that this is all about to happen.

So you can imagine that he was real popular. Everybody just loved listening to him... They loved to have him follow them around just about as much as you'd like to have Eeyore following you around.

“Might as well give in,” Jeremiah would say. **“Babylon is going to destroy us anyway.”**

Yeah, a real killjoy.

Actually, the truth is, Jeremiah had a whole lot of tenacity. He didn't like his assignment any more than the people liked hearing it. But he did it anyway. And he kept at it, telling them what the Lord was saying... even when they didn't listen, and when they threatened his life, and when they threw him into a pit and when they locked him up to shut him out... Because that is the kind of thing that kept happening to Jeremiah... year after year.

And they did it for good reason, by the way. I mean, every time Jeremiah told the people to submit to Babylon, this outside power, it was an act of treason.

Every time he said that the King was going to end up dead on the streets, he was threatening the head of their state.

So, of course, they tried to shut him up... and they tried to prove otherwise.

But Jeremiah kept at it, because God kept at it.... Year after year, ***God keeps hounding the people, trying to get them to wake up and to listen, and to pay attention to what God is actually trying to tell them, rather than simply to hear what they want to hear.***

Of course, you and I... we wouldn't know anything about that, would we? I mean, I don't know about you, but I pretty much always hear what God is trying to say.

I never had any problems listening.

I mean, you might not agree with me, but that's because you're not listening to God. Me? I'm always listening.

And I never deceive myself into believing what I want to believe. Nope not me. I'm sure of it.

Just... just don't ask my wife about that one, OK?

Truth be told, that is one of the greatest struggles of our spiritual lives, isn't it?

This semester I've been studying the early Desert Monastics from the 3rd and 4th centuries. These are the early Christians called Abbots and Ammas, spiritual fathers and

spiritual mothers that went out into the desert to seek God in a deeper kind of way. And we still have a record of a number of short stories and sayings from that time. They are these little nuggets of wisdom.

And in one of them, Abba John the Little, said: **“We have abandoned a light burden, namely self-criticism, and taken up a heavy burden, namely self-justification.”**

In other words, our real spiritual work is to be self-critical, to be honest with ourselves. But we spend most of our energy trying to justify ourselves... to others around us... and we end up being pretty good at deluding even ourselves.

The truth is, none of us are very good at hearing what we don't want to hear.
We don't like to be corrected.
We certainly have a hard time believing we're the ones at fault, right?
We think *what we think* is right, and that *we* are right.

And one of the hardest things in the world... is to be open enough... and to be humble enough to hear otherwise.... especially when the truth being told to us is so contrary to how we see things.

And so, Abba John the Little said, **“We have abandoned a light burden, namely self-criticism, and taken up a heavy burden, namely self-justification.”**

It's true in our time just as it was true in the early days of the church, just as it was true in the ancient time of Jeremiah.

In fact, this is what's happening throughout the book of Jeremiah. It's what happens with these last few Kings in Judah. ***And their inability to hear something that is contrary to what they believe or want to be true, leads to their complete and utter destruction.***

There's this story in Chapter 36 where God tells Jeremiah to write down all that God has been telling him for decades... all the signs, all the warnings... write it all down.... everything God had him say during the previous King's life and everything God had told him to say during this King's life.

Maybe if they hear all of it, collected together, they will be able to recognize what God has been trying to say.

So, this is what Jeremiah does. He calls his scribe, Baruch, to come and write it all down as he dictates it. On and on they go, hours, days even. Finally, it's all written in one long scroll.

Then Jeremiah sends Baruch out to the temple to read it when the temple is full and crowded. So that's what he does. Baruch stands there and reads for "all who have ears to hear." On and on he goes, reading Jeremiah's warnings, the warnings he's been giving year after year.

Well, it certainly gets the attention of the people there. In fact, one of them was part of the King's inner cabinet, so the cabinet gathers (but without the King) and calls Baruch in and asks him to read it all to them.

They listen as Baruch goes on and on... **"The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and he told you this, and then he did this, remember? Then he told you that, remember?"**

Well, they do remember, and it caught their attention. The scriptures said **"They were alarmed"** and they realized that the King needs to hear this, too. But they also know that telling the King could be dangerous. The King's not going to like it.

So, they tell Baruch that he and Jeremiah better go hide while they go share this with the King "Let no one know where you are." They said.

So, while Baruch and Jeremiah go into hiding, the cabinet takes the scroll to the King and tells him all about it. "Read it to me," he says. So, they do.

Just picture that for a moment. It's wintertime. The King and all his advisors are gathered in the King's winter house. The scriptures say that there is even a little fire over in the corner to keep them warm.

[light a candle.]

And they gather around to listen... warning after warning... The word of the Lord came saying **"The Babylonians are coming... submit to them."** and as the scroll is read, the King goes over and tears what was just read off... and puts it in the fire.

Another part is read... **"Repent from what you've been doing."**
and once more the King rips off and burns.

"Submit to the yoke of Babylon, save us from the mass destruction that is coming." and again, it's torn and thrown into the fire.

His advisors plead with him to stop, but he won't. This keeps on until the whole thing is ripped up and burned.

And then the King calls for the arrest of Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch.
He will not have it.

Which makes me wonder... how often we do the same thing...

***How often are we simply unable to hear a word of truth when it comes to us...
so that instead of working its way into our lives...
it simply goes up in smoke?***

I mean, the King probably thought he was doing the right thing. After all, he was defending the throne of his forefathers, of King David. He was defending God's throne.

Only, God didn't want him to defend it.

God wanted him... to listen, to turn,
to submit to something outside of his power.

And that's exactly what is so hard for us to do, isn't it? ...not only to hear what we do not want to hear... ***but to submit to something beyond us?***

In fact, this may just be one of the greatest traps that the people of God, that you and I, get caught in. In fact, sometimes we are the worst at it.

It's ironic isn't it, that the King in Jerusalem has the words of God's prophet, and won't hear it? But it was just a few weeks ago when we read the story of Jonah, where that foreign "evil" King up in Nineveh heard the words of a prophet, and repented right away.

That should be telling for us. There is a deep danger here for the people of God. We think we know what God wants from us... because... well, we've read the bible, and we've been to Sunday School way more times than we can remember, and listened to more sermons than we can count.

We've got this faith of ours pretty well nailed down.

We've got this God of ours pretty well figured out.

No, we may not say that out loud, or even say it to ourselves, but the honest truth is, that's how we operate most of the time. *It's just so hard to see what we cannot see... or to hear what we are not already open to hearing.*

And it's especially hard to submit to a power outside ourselves, because that feels like a threat.

But that might just be... exactly what God is asking of you...

...to be open and humble enough

to hear what's hard for you to hear,

...to be open and humble enough

to see that you might just be wrong about a few things,

...to be open and humble enough to submit yourself to what God is asking of
you...

That may be letting something go that you need to let go.

That may be allowing something new into your life.

I don't know what difficult thing God is asking of you.

What I do know is that we're not very good at hearing God on our own, because I can fool myself pretty easily.

That's why we need each other. It's why staying rooted in a community of faith is so essential for our spiritual health and life. I need you to help me see what I don't want to see... and to help me to hear what I don't have ears to hear.

It's why Dayspring, we need Southern Union and Southern Union, you need Dayspring. Because I'm pretty sure there are a few words from the Lord that we are not going to hear without each other.

And even with one another, we're not always going to hear right.

That is, of course, what happens in Jeremiah's time. He continued to speak what needed to be spoken. In fact, after he found out that the king ripped up his scroll, he and his scribe wrote it all out again.

But they still didn't listen. The King didn't listen, and that's the tragedy of this story. Because when we don't listen,

when we ignore the pestering voice of God to us...
it will lead to a kind of death.

because God's words, as hard as they might be to hear, are always the words of life.

I'm reminded of that story in the Gospel of John, chapter 6, where Jesus was starting to get a large following, but then he started to teach some things that were really hard for the crowds to swallow. They didn't like what they were hearing, so a lot of them began to leave.

At that point, Jesus turned to his 12 disciples and asked point blank, **"Do you want to leave, too?"**

Peter looks at him. And I wonder if there was a pause, and Peter was trying to decide. And then he says those beautiful words of faith, **"To whom else shall we go? You have the words of life."**

Peter recognized that yes, God's word to us may be hard to hear, and it may ask some difficult things of us. God may ask us to simply trust and obey even when it doesn't make sense. But God's invitation, God's words... are always the words of life.

The King rejects God's word and eventually it leads to his death... and finally... the destruction of Jerusalem...

the very thing he thought he was protecting.

But thanks be to God, our rejection, and the death that it brings, is never the end of the story. And that's what our reading from Jeremiah was all about. Right in the

middle of this huge tragic book of warning... Jeremiah tells us about the bigger story going on.

“A day is coming, says the Lord, when I will write my words on your hearts.”
In other words, no King will be able to rip them up and throw them into the fire.
Nope, God will inscribe the words of life deep within us.

This is one of the most important passages in all the prophets... because it's helping us to see where this great story is going. The covenant that was once written on two stone tablets will be made alive in us. The word of God will be made alive among us.

“The Word... will become flesh,” so to speak.... because God won't leave us to our own destruction. Nope.

In the face of human rejection, God keeps hounding us.
In the face of our clogged up ears, God reaches in and transforms our hearts.
This is who God is.
This is what Christ does.

So, no matter what death has been sown into your life,
no matter how often you've forgotten or ignored God's word to you,
God has not forgotten you.
God is after you, relentlessly hounding you.
Because God is determined to write into your soul, the very words of life.

So open your heart, and allow God to enter. Amen.

Reflection:

*O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O Light that foll'west all my way,
I yield my flick'ring torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

~ George Matheson