

June 21, 2020
A Strange Word
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Jeremiah 20:7-13

⁷ *O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.*

⁸ *For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.
⁹ If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

¹⁰ *For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"
All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.
"Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him."*

¹¹ *But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.*

¹² *O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.*

¹³ *Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.*

In chapter twenty, verses 7-13, we hear Jeremiah praying. He's just come off two really hard days of preaching. He's both furious with God and completely in love with God. All at the same time, he wants nothing more to do with God and he's grateful God will never leave him.

That is kind of the whole deal, isn't it – our life in God? We can't stand it and we can't get out of it? We'd leave in a heartbeat, if we had anywhere else to go? Like a strong marriage. Like daughters with their mothers. Like preachers and the Word. "I love you. I hate you. I love you. Leave me alone. Thank you for always being here."

I want to pray first, then look at those two tough days of preaching; then Jeremiah's prayer; then reflect on at least some of what it means.

We mean to love you without hesitation, O God. But honestly, sometimes you give us too little to go on. Or what you do give seems crazy. And, of course, we can be so weak and cowardly sometimes. Thank you for not getting too fed up with us. Thanks for so many chances to try and try again. Amen.

Jeremiah loved God. Jeremiah loved his country. And Jeremiah loved his religion. When he could see the three diverging, he chose to love God with all his heart and all his soul and all his mind and all his strength. Supposedly his country and his religion also loved God most. They had the same history Jeremiah had. The same commandments and the same covenant. Had they chosen to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, Jeremiah likely wouldn't have been a prophet, as God wouldn't have needed any. But they didn't, so he was – a prophet, one of those voices crying in the wilderness. In the end, it cost him everything: his country, his religion, his friends. His life.

You can read the larger story of Jeremiah on your own time. I'll tell you just this one, from chapters 19 and 20, as context for his prayer. It was the middle of the 5th century BCE. Assyria was declining and Babylon was rising, making incursion into the Middle East. Egypt was in the mix, promising protection against the two larger empires. Little countries like Israel and Judah were entertaining offers, playing empire against empire.

Yahweh had forbidden foreign alliances. And one shape these alliances took was that Jewish kings married foreign wives and built altars to their gods, then worshipped at them – also strictly forbidden by Yahweh. Jeremiah drummed on these issues – as did other prophets, major and minor, through the decades – along with others, like how they treated the poor and hoarded national wealth unto themselves, all the while continuing to call themselves God's people when they ought to have known better.

How many preachers had gone before to remind them (and us), only two things qualify people to call ourselves "God's people": *Obey the commandments and keep the covenants*. In his practice of the same, Jeremiah came to believe God would act through Babylon to correct Israel. The day before Jeremiah prayed this prayer, he went to a market and bought a clay jar, maybe one sort-of like this, and then he rounded up a few priests from the Temple and a few local officials and had them follow him to a valley outside the city gate of Jerusalem, an ancient place called Topheth, where once upon a time, supposedly, the Canaanites would have child sacrifices. But at the time Jeremiah preached, it was a garbage dump. A burning garbage dump.

And there he held the jar. Preached another version of his usual sermon about how defiled and faithless they and the nation were and that there was coming a measure of suffering and destruction they could not imagine. Siege and starvation, slaughter and deportation. It's as graphic as British crime TV.

He goes on for a bit, and then he smashes the pot to the ground like this and he says, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a

potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. In Topheth they shall bury until there is no more room to bury. Thus will I do to this place and to its inhabitants; and the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Topheth—all the houses upon whose roofs offerings have been made to the whole host of heaven, and libations have been poured out to other gods.”

It was all very dramatic, as you can imagine. And then he goes back inside the city and into the Temple where people have apparently already heard about the whole thing, because he announces to them, “Yep, I said that and I meant it,” and as he's winding up for a second wind, a senior priest named Pashhur comes up and punches him in the mouth and has him put into stocks for the rest of the day and night.

Is this a great story or what? I love the Bible so much. It doesn't actually say he punched him in the mouth. I made that part up – but it doesn't say where he punched him and that does make sense, given that he wanted to shut him up. Anyway, he failed to shut him up because as soon as morning comes, Pashhur lets him out of the stocks, and through his split lip and broken teeth comes a new sermon for a new day. Except, it was pretty much the same one he'd been preaching from the beginning, which was: Your name is no longer Pashhur (or Judah, or Judaism, or Temple) but rather *Terror All Around*.

As Walter Brueggemann says it, “You have mouthed peace and embraced terror!” *Now you shall watch as your city is crushed, your temple is razed, your wealth is looted and your people are deported. You yourself will be deported and buried in Babylon.*

For whatever reason, Jeremiah isn't rearrested then and there. Maybe he went home. What I know is that preachers who preach to nice people go home exhausted as ditch diggers. I can't imagine how the ones who get punched in the mouth and locked up even find their way home. Good for Jeremiah for not taking it out on his dog. He takes it out on God. Not that the English Bible is that helpful. “*You have deceived me. I am deceived*” is at least ten degrees too weak a translation. Some will use “abused”: *You have abused me. I am abused*. “Assaulted” would not be too strong. Jeremiah has clearly been assaulted, after all, by one who claims to speak for God. Think of all the uses for that verse, rightly translated, these days!

The second half is translated some better. *You overpowered me and I am overpowered*. Personally, I see no reason to let God off the hook if Jeremiah doesn't. He's the one with the stuffing knocked out of him for being faithful. He gives God credit, why shouldn't he give God the blame? If God demands the truth, surely God can hear it. *I did what you said and got my face bashed in. Thanks for that, God. Seems fair to me. And you know what I really hate, God? I hate how if I preach what you tell me, I get my face bashed in. If I don't preach it, I get a burning in my gut that hurts just as bad and I end up saying the very things that get my face bashed in. My mother called this hell if I do and hell if I don't.*

And then Jeremiah goes down the most terrible preacher rabbit hole of all, the *what I think other people are thinking about my preaching* rabbit hole. This is a very dark place, friends. It's the place where preachers believe that their friends or their listeners believe the real problem is the preacher themselves. They call *me* "terror all around." Not the Temple; not Judah; not the faithless, disobedient people of God; not Babylon. Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the problem. If he would just be quiet, everything would be just fine.

And not that preachers can't be the problem. Of course, they can. We can. We can be irrelevant. Because irrelevancy is exactly what some folks most appreciate about their preachers. But we can also be afraid and weak and cowardly, and we can listen to our own worst selves – the disobedience and the infidelity in our own hearts and minds always whispering to us. Jeremiah turns it off. Maybe he ate lunch. Maybe he took a nap. Maybe he just took a breath. Whatever he did, he got enough perspective and light to start again and call up a new name for God: *The God of Angel Armies* or, as the NRSV chooses, *Dreaded Warrior*.

Dreaded Warrior sounds like a video game my nephews would play. Except this Dreaded Warrior runs a backwater country in the middle of nowhere, about to get creamed by one of three empires at her borders. Do you know the movie *True Grit*? The remake with Jeff Bridges and Matt Damon is far and away better than the John Wayne one. Near the end, Rooster Cogburn single-handedly prepares to gunfight the entire Ned Pepper gang. He yells across the valley, "I mean to kill you or see you hanged in Fort Smith." To which Ned Pepper responds, "I'd call that bold talk for a one-eyed fat man."

God is the one-eyed fat man in this illustration. The outnumbered, outgunned God of this tiny nation about to be crushed beneath *all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood*, as Isaiah, one of Jeremiah's fellow prophets, described it. A tiny nation with just one God. JUST ONE!

Calling all these tiny little prophets to preach their silly little sermons, with their silly little props, to convince a surrounded, terrified people that they don't need any military protection; that simple obedience and fidelity is the only protection they require. Obedience and fidelity to the one God who – Who, mind you! – doesn't protect his own prophets from getting punched in the mouth.

Of course, God is not only the one-eyed fat man in the movie illustration. God doesn't have to be just one character, ever. He is also the Texas Ranger on the ridge no one knew was there, with the Sharps Carbine Rifle, a rifle capable of things no one knew a rifle could do. Through all of this, the one-eyed fat man prevailed. As did the Dreaded Warrior, or so the biblical story goes. All Jeremiah preached did come to pass. Invasion. Slaughter. Siege. Devastation. Occupation. Solomon's Temple razed to the ground, its wealth looted and carried off. Deportation and exile – exile that lasted more than seventy years.

When Babylon was defeated and Persia came to power, a remnant of Jews went home. Israel was rebuilt and fully believed herself to have prevailed. Which is a funny word to attach to a people who was forever after a remnant of who she had been, who never again had her own homeland. And yet, what has the world's definition of "prevailed" ever had to do with faith and fidelity? With keeping the covenant and obeying the commandments? Isn't that what always gets God's people sideways with God – our appetite for this world's version of *safe*? I bet I say the words *safe* or *safety* ten times a day in the context of church these days. *Staying safe. Keeping people safe.* What does that mean? How shall we know if we are accomplishing it?

Jeremiah never spoke of safety. He spoke of faith. When I was a student, I'd hear missionaries say, "*The safest place in all the world to be is in the center of God's will.*" Twenty-year-old me had no idea what that meant. Fifty-six-year-old me suspects it's probably true. Jeremiah loved God more than he loved his country or his religion. He lived as obediently and faithfully as he knew how. You know what happened to him in the end? He was deported to Egypt by other Jews who worried about him offending the Babylonians. Tradition says he died there when some fellow Jews stoned him to death, because they were sick of his constant preaching about their wicked ways.

He was as faithful as he knew how to be and still didn't escape a single consequence of the infidelity of his people. That stinks, doesn't it? It also foreshadows a Savior who came and suffered the sins of his beloved people, so that we might inherit grace upon grace. And maybe, just maybe, along with that grace the courage to be just a bit more patient, and decent, and kind, and humble toward the people around us still coming to the faith we already know.

There is a good word in all this, friends. The word of the Lord is a strange word in this world, calling humanity to a kind of courage that seems more crazy than brave. And yet the word stands, without apology, for those willing to believe that God never, ever, ever means to leave us on our own with it. Would you pray with me?