

“Hosanna! The ‘Disappointment’ of Salvation”

Reading: Jeremiah 12:1-6, 14-15; 20:7-13

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Imagine with me a person trapped in a burning building. Flames are all around them, the heat is scorching, the smoke is impenetrable and choking. Just as they are on the verge of being overcome by the smoke and flames, a firefighter smashes through the door using their fire axe and reaches out a rescuing hand. But imagine that the person in need of rescue does not take the firefighter's hand, and instead looks up and says, “Hey, wait a minute, you just smashed my door!” Or imagine a person who has been in a terrible car accident. They have a gash on their leg that is deep enough that they are in danger of bleeding to death. The paramedics pull them from the wreckage and start to stop the bleeding, but in order to properly staunch the bleeding they have to cut the person's pant leg off. And imagine that through the delirium of blood loss, the person says, “Cut it out! You're ruining my favorite pants!” The fact is that salvation requires perspective.

Salvation requires perspective, because sometimes we aren't saved in the ways we expect or would even ask for. Sometimes salvation surprises us and even demands things from us, because sometimes we're so deeply in need of being saved that we don't even know what we really need. Sometimes God has a plan for salvation that is far bigger than we know, and our eyes are too small to see how the salvation He has given us is really salvation. We are in the last week before Ash Wednesday, when we begin to journey together toward the cross and empty tomb of Good Friday and Easter, and in this season before Lent we are telling one another stories of salvation. We are reminding ourselves of what it looks like for God to save us, to remember what God is able to do, so that then we might place ourselves before Him, ready to be a part of His work of salvation. We want to cry out all the more strongly, “Hosanna! Lord, save us!” We want to have high hopes and deep faith in God's ability to save us from our troubles, and to save those around us from theirs.

Today we are looking briefly at kind of an unusual story of salvation. At some points in his life, the prophet Jeremiah might have disputed whether God really saved him or not. His was a messy, complex, unexpected sort of salvation, but we remember that salvation requires perspective, and we see that God rescued him nonetheless. Jeremiah's story is a long and complex one. In fact, his book is the longest book in the Bible, if you go by the number of words. It tells the story of an extremely complex and turbulent time for God's people politically and socially, and it ends tragically, and indeed it leads into the book of Lamentations. But for all the tragedy, it begins this way: “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’ ‘Alas, Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am too young.’ But the LORD said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am too young.” You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,’ declares the LORD.” And again at the end of the chapter, God promises Jeremiah, “I am with you and will rescue you.”

It's an interesting word, “rescue.” The Hebrew language has a variety of words we could translate as “save” or “rescue,” but this one used in chapter 1 has the connotation of being snatched or plucked out of danger. It's not just a vague, spiritual sort of salvation that happens when you die, it's that firefighter bursting through the door and dragging you out of a burning building. “I will rescue you,” God promised the young Jeremiah.

And there were certainly times when God did just that. Jeremiah lived a colorful life as one of the most prominent of God's prophets preaching in a critical time for God's people. The prophets were mediators of the covenant God had made with the Israelites: when the people were being faithful to God, the prophets encouraged them, and when the people were straying, God spoke messages of correction through the prophets. Part of the job, therefore, was to proclaim difficult messages of conviction and repentance to people who were defiant and rebellious, and Jeremiah regularly had to preach hard messages to people in power. Kings don't usually like to be scolded, but that's exactly what God told Jeremiah to do.

God's people had been breaking their covenant with God for generations, practically since the beginning, and God was now deciding to follow through with the consequences they had agreed upon. If they lived in relationship with God, God would bless them by giving them a land to live in, but if they broke their promises, God would remove them from the land. Jeremiah is preaching to the last generation before those consequences come into effect, so he has a hard job. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, are now advancing against Jerusalem and laying siege to it. Many so-called prophets are preaching that God will save them from destruction as He had done so many times before, but they're saying so only because it's the politically acceptable thing to say. When you're faced with a siege, you don't want prophets telling the people to surrender. But Jeremiah has the lonely task of preaching the true message of God, that the only way to survive the coming destruction is to repent and submit to God's punishment.

The result is that Jeremiah is regularly persecuted. He is directly challenging powerful people when their power is under threat, and like wounded animals, they sometimes lash out mercilessly. The kings don't want morale to suffer in their besieged land, so they want prophets that will promise that God will save everyone. The prophets who are preaching that message of "peace, peace! when there is no peace" don't want rival prophets contradicting them, especially if those rival prophets like Jeremiah have the actual word of the Lord. So not only are tensions high, Jeremiah is provoking them even higher. The result is that, for example, he is beaten by one of the temple authorities and put in stocks overnight, which was both physically painful and socially shameful. At another point he is accused of treason and thrown into prison for a long time. At another point he is thrown into a cistern by his enemies. At another point the king takes the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies, cuts it to ribbons, and burns it; not only was he showing contempt for the word of the Lord, he was destroying a valuable and labor-intensive scroll.

We remember Jeremiah as the "weeping prophet," because his story gives us an unusual amount of insight into Jeremiah's personal reaction to the mission God has given him. It's not very common for prophets to give us many details about their emotions or thoughts; they usually just report the message God gives them. But Jeremiah's book shares how he struggled with the burden of God's mission. We read parts of two such passages; we could have read more. In chapter 12, Jeremiah cries out and asks God why it is that innocent people are suffering while patently wicked people seem to go unpunished. It's an easy thing to imagine when a nation is in turmoil; the people who are most likely to go unscathed the longest are the ones who have the money and the power and the lack of scruples to take care of only themselves. God's response is disheartening in a way: "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?" He tells Jeremiah that yes, there will be justice, and yes, there is hope of compassion, but first of all, He

suggests that Jeremiah has greater struggles ahead of him. Jeremiah has raced with men in this analogy, but apparently the race against horses is yet to come. When you cry out to God for rescue, the last thing you want to hear is that there's more struggle coming.

In chapter 20, after the episode where Jeremiah is beaten and placed in stocks, in his anguish he cries out that God has deceived him. He recognizes that following this mission of proclamation has brought him nothing but insults and reproach, and he considers keeping his mouth shut. Can we blame him? "I am with you and will rescue you," God had promised. And yes, it's true that God did always pluck him out of prison and cisterns and stocks and danger, but if I were Jeremiah I'd rather have God stop letting people throw me in cisterns. In chapter 45, there's a conversation with Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, in which God says that yes, you have lived in sorrow and pain, but "should you then seek great things for yourself?...I will bring disaster on all people, declares the Lord, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life." I for one would hope for a little more than that in salvation.

The word of God finally comes to pass, and the city of Jerusalem eventually falls. Jeremiah finds himself left among the pitiable survivors, those who lived through the siege and starvation and bloodshed, but were not deemed important enough to be taken into exile. They're left to pick up whatever pieces they can find, and of course they start having their own squabbles. At one point someone has the idea to emigrate to Egypt and live among the Jews there; why try to eke out a living in a desolate land when you could build a safe home elsewhere? But in chapter 42, God tells them that no, they should stay in their homeland, and He will bless them there, but if they go to Egypt it will represent a rejection of God's plan for them and He will withhold His blessing. But the people again refuse to listen, and they head for Egypt, and they force Jeremiah to go with them.

And so here he is, an old man by this point, in who knows what condition after all he's suffered through, witness to untold horrors, taken against his will to a foreign land. God had promised him in the beginning that He would rescue Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been faithful all along, and now, at the end, has God rescued him? Where is salvation for Jeremiah? But we must remember that salvation requires perspective.

When we cry out, "Hosanna! Lord, save us!" it is a cry of helplessness. It is a humbling, an emptying of ourselves, an abandonment of our own motives and desires, and casting ourselves entirely upon the one whom we trust to rescue us. When the firefighter chops down the door to save us from the fire, woe to us if we complain about the broken door. When we cry out for salvation, we cannot say, "Save me, Lord, but do it my way." No, salvation requires perspective, that we would cast ourselves entirely on the Lord, holding nothing back, keeping nothing for ourselves, trusting that He will save us His way, and that will be best.

This is, after all, the meaning of faith. We have this misunderstanding in our culture, that faith is opposed to reason, and having faith means "just believing," especially when we believe without evidence. This is not faith. The faith we are called to is trust. It's not blind belief, it is trusting in the character and power of the one who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. We have faith that He will be faithful to us no matter what else happens, because of the evidence of what He has done in the past and because of the power He has displayed in raising Jesus from the dead. Salvation requires perspective, that this one, *this* God, can rescue us even when this rescue looks nothing like what I expected. He can save me, even though crucifixion comes before resurrection.

Sometimes we find ourselves looking back at the rubble of Jerusalem, living in a faraway land that we didn't want or expect to go to, and we remember the promises of God, and we wonder, like Jeremiah, if God has deceived us and we should stop up our mouths from proclaiming His praise. Sometimes salvation requires more change and more sacrifice than we ever expected. But salvation requires perspective. Even in the midst of Jeremiah's strongest sermon of destruction and condemnation, there was always that promise of restoration and redemption. It may not look like what we thought it would. Sometimes our rescue takes us unwillingly to Egypt. And that rescue may not, to our eyes, look as pleasing as the rescue we had envisioned, but our God is trustworthy, and He is at work, and He can do mighty things even through our times of exile.



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