

“Ten Days Later”

Reading: Lamentations 1:1-8; Jeremiah 42:1-16, 43:1-4

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Greek mythology tells us the story of Cassandra, a woman who was given the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo, but when she later rejected him, was also given the curse that no one would believe her prophecies. The Greeks did love their irony in their stories. What made her fate especially terrible is that she lived in the city of Troy during the Trojan War, so she foretold everything that was about to happen, including the famous plot by the Greeks to hide inside a giant wooden horse and destroy the city from within. She tried desperately to warn her people of their coming doom, and one story even tells of how she took it upon herself to try to destroy the wooden horse when no one believed her – but, of course, no one believed her, so they stopped her and sealed their own fate. It would be particularly awful to know for certain that there was so much death and suffering coming for your people, and to tell them everything, to have them persistently refuse to believe you, and finally to watch it all take place exactly as you had foreseen.

That's not quite how it happened with Jeremiah, the biblical prophet we've been reading about in recent weeks. It's not too far from his life, though. He wasn't cursed by some ironic fate from a spiteful and vengeful god. Jeremiah's deep sorrow came from a much more human source: people rejected him because they didn't want to face the consequences of their choices. God spoke through Jeremiah to warn the people of the fact that their continual breaking of their covenant relationship with Him was finally going to bring about their end, and they chose instead to listen to the false prophets around them who reassured them that everything would be fine. They did that right up to the end, and even beyond.

Today we come to the end of Jeremiah's story, though his story has a couple of endings, or maybe an end and an epilogue or two. Instead of Troy, his city was Jerusalem, and instead of a war over love and the abduction of the beautiful Helen that brought down Troy, Jeremiah watched as Jerusalem fell to much less noble motives. The people had walked away from God, they rejected His warnings, and in a turbulent world of ambitious empires they chose to trust in their own strength and the strength of their ever-shifting political alliances rather than listening to the God who had saved them many times in the past. So when the armies of Babylon demolished the rest of their nation and camped at the doorstep of their capital, there was nothing Jeremiah could do but watch and keep trying, desperately, to call people to repentance.

But the lies of the world were louder in most people's ears. We've talked about a few of them in recent weeks. Jeremiah first had to confront the lie in his own life that God is surprised by what happens in our lives, and God told him from an early age that God had called Jeremiah from before he was even born. Jeremiah had to confront the lie of his culture that they could rely on the work of their own hands and their own ingenuity rather than God: they could build cisterns that wouldn't leak, rather than rely on God as the untamed spring of living water. But Jeremiah told them, no, those cisterns are bound to leak; you're not smarter or stronger than God. And last week, he confronted the dual lies that either there is fate (and so I'm not responsible for my choices and can't change what's happening) or God is absent and I'm on my own, so there's no accountability for my choices and I ought to be the master of my own fate. Many of these lies have to do with the goodness or the power of God: is He really worth giving our lives to? Again and again, our world tells us lies that appeal to

personal convenience, that try to shortcut the slow working of God's grace, that trick our eyes into seeing only the surface of what's being presented to them rather than the deeper reality of faith.

Like Cassandra, Jeremiah did not go through a life of sorrow to finally be rewarded with a comfortable retirement. He watched his warnings come to pass, and he watched as his kin rejected, for the most part, his warnings and walked straight into their doom. Jerusalem finally fell in 586 B.C. The walls crumbled, the temple that had been a wonder of the world for hundreds of years was demolished, thousands of people were slaughtered, the leaders (including the king) were marched hundreds of miles through the desert in humiliation to a life of exile, and a destitute remnant was left to live in a desolated land. The book of Lamentations gives us Jeremiah's description of what he saw; it's a lament over the smoking and bloody ruin of his homeland.

That would be a logical end to Jeremiah's story, even if it's not a happy one. But the stories of our lives rarely end in storybook fashion. Jeremiah was given the choice between staying with the remnant in his ruined homeland or going into exile and being honored by the king of Babylon in recognition of his work as a prophet, but Jeremiah chose the hardscrabble life of the remnant over the comfort of exile. The Babylonians installed a puppet governor over their newly-conquered land, and the governor was friendly to Jeremiah and it seemed at first as though, with plenty of hard work, things could go forward after the catastrophe. But then some radicals assassinated the governor, and the slow beginnings of restoration were cast into doubt. What would the Babylonians do when they found out their governor had been killed?

So the remaining leaders put the question to Jeremiah: what do we do now? Do we stay here and see what our Babylonian overlords are going to do, or do we flee toward Egypt, in the opposite direction from Babylon, where some of our people have already established a community in exile? What happens next is I think fascinating: according to our reading for today, "ten days later the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah." That's a long time to wait when you're keeping an eye on the horizon for Babylonian retribution. The word Jeremiah gives them is that they should stay, that they should not go to Egypt. If they stay, God will be with them, but if they go to Egypt – which God had always warned His people not to do – they will surely die there. Where Jeremiah had prayed for ten days to hear from the Lord, the response of the people is immediate: as soon as Jeremiah finished speaking, they accuse him of lying and conspiring against them. Jeremiah was willing to wait to hear what God was really saying; the people had already made up their minds and just wanted divine confirmation.

It's a new formulation of the same old basic lie: is God good enough and strong enough that we can trust Him? In this case, the question is whether we are defined by our circumstances or by God. As Jeremiah looks around at the smoking ruin of his homeland and watches as the line of exiles marches into the far distance, is that it? Is this now his identity, the defining characteristic that drives his life? And later, after the assassination, as they wait and wonder about the repercussions, is it their fear and uncertainty that defines them and guides their actions? Will they trust that, or is God good enough and strong enough that when He tells them something different, they will believe Him?

Are we defined by our circumstances? The world tells us time and time again, shouts it from the rooftops and whispers it in our ears, that we are. Is a family in poverty, living on welfare and getting by on the charity of others, defined by that poverty? Is that all that matters about who they are? Is the sufferer defined by their suffering, and that dark valley of despair is all they can hope to

know? Is a person who has made a terrible choice in their life doomed to know nothing but the consequences of that choice? Is there hope beyond the ruins of Jerusalem? Can God save us from the fear of retribution by the enemy, or should we run to some other stronghold? The pyramids of Egypt had stood for thousands of years even in Jeremiah's time, and he had just watched as the Lord's temple burned. Maybe his circumstances had finally proven greater than God could handle. Who am I in the muddle of life? Am I defined by the muddle, or something greater, and can I hope that that something greater is God?

We have the notion that true faith can begin when the circumstances are right, and I confess I am the worst of sinners in this regard. I'm not defined by my relationship with God; I'll get my relationship with God in order once I'm less busy. So, in other words, I'm really defined by my busyness first. I'll get my relationship with God right when I get my life in order first; if I go to church now the building will collapse on me. I'm too overwhelmed by the crises in my life to focus on God right now. In other words, my circumstances define me. But if we're waiting to the muddle to clear up and the circumstances of life to be perfect before we can truly get serious about a life of faith, I promise you that time will never come. The circumstances will always define you if you let them.

Jeremiah stood in the ruin of Jerusalem, lamenting its destruction and the suffering around him, and he channeled that lament into the beautiful book we call Lamentations. If you listen to his words, your heart will break. Few if any of us can imagine such circumstances. But then, in chapter 3, at the center of the book, the tone changes. He suddenly shifts from describing what he sees and telling the story of what happened, and he begins to describe what God has done in staccato statements. God has besieged me, God has walled me in, God shuts out my prayer, God barred my way. He's being honest, and there's nothing irreverent about that. But then, right in the middle, it changes: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." And the rest of the chapter is singing of God's great goodness even in the times of tragedy.

Later, after the assassination, Jeremiah and the people again have a choice: will their circumstances define them, or will God? Jeremiah waits ten days to make sure he's rightly hearing from God, but the people give an immediate response. Jeremiah is centered on God; the people are focused on their circumstances. Jeremiah knew that the world would always remain a muddle. There would always be a mess somewhere or another. But Jeremiah also knew that God remained sure, that God could work in spite of the mess and even sometimes right in the middle of the mess. In the middle of his lament, Jeremiah says, "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord." Let's take time to find God in the midst of the ruin, even if it takes ten days. Let's move forward based on God's faithfulness, rather than rushing to a decision because the circumstances seem too big for God to handle. Remember those leaky cisterns we talked about a couple weeks ago? Being desperate for water doesn't make them any less leaky; God is the sure spring of living water.

When Jesus described the work of the kingdom of God in the world, He deliberately turned our expectations inside out. People were looking for God to do something dramatic, something definitive, something powerful that was undoubtedly the beginning of the moment when God would set all things right. All those wrongs from the past, all that suffering, all that injustice that everyone had been struggling to understand all their lives – God was going to bring true justice and lasting peace. But let's see it clearly *now*, rather than having to wait ten days. Some people expected it to come through the

arrival of a hero anointed by God, someone like King David of old who would be a righteous warrior to beat the bad guys and rule as king over the good guys. Some people expected it to come as a burst of fire from heaven, as the Lord of the heavenly hosts led His angels down to wage holy war on the demonic and corrupt forces of the world. But when Jesus described the coming of the kingdom of God, He talked about things like yeast – slow, unseen leaven that raises a loaf of bread. Or it's like a mustard seed – small, unassuming, unexciting, but potent nonetheless. Or it's like a pearl discovered by accident, something you never expected but are willing to sell everything to possess. Or it's like seed scattered in a field – it grows and produces a harvest because of so many forces beyond your control, forces that you often cannot even see.

He uses many other parables to describe what the work of God is like in our world, but He shocks us as much as He shocked His original audience by how unseen God's work often is (like the growth of a seed), how slowly God seems to work (like yeast), how surprising and unexpected it is when we finally see what God has been doing all along (like finding a hidden treasure). There are many exceptions, of course, but God's preference seems to be to work subtly, quietly, and slowly. Our preference would be to see God work immediately, dramatically, and decisively. But if you look to the faithfulness of God rather than getting distracted by your circumstances, you'll see that God is already at work right in the middle of the mess, working quietly, slowly, unexpectedly, and often not in the way we might want, but powerfully and better than we could hope.

Don't get distracted by the lie that your circumstances define you. God is bigger and more powerful. And more importantly, God is faithful, and He is good. Don't believe the lie that your tragedy has the last word in your life. Don't believe the lie that your mistakes or your traumas define you. Don't believe the lie that the impatience and the judgments of other people determine who you are. "Let us examine our ways and test them." God's compassions never fail; they are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.



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