

Shredding Truth

Scripture: Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34

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I read Jeremiah with a sense of urgency. Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah around 600BC. Judah was the Southern Kingdom after its split with Israel, and it had escaped the fate of its northern neighbor, which was brutally conquered by the Assyrians. But all was not well. The Babylonian empire was on the rise, and nearby Egypt was powerful as well. Israel and Judah existed at a crossroad in the Ancient Near East, so when large geopolitical forces decided to expand their borders, their paths would often take them through that region.

Jeremiah knew trouble was coming for Judah. God had told him as much. His prophesying had earned the ire of those in power in the past, but God's message to repent still needed to be delivered.

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34¹

Chapter 36

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. 3 It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters

¹ NRSV

that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

4 Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. 5 And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, "I am prevented from entering the house of the Lord; 6 so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in the Lord's house you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the people of Judah who come up from their towns. 7 It may be that their plea will come before the Lord, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people." 8 And Baruch son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord's house.

21 Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. 22 Now the king was sitting in his winter apartment (it was the ninth month), and there was a fire burning in the brazier [**brey-zher**] before him. 23 As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier [**brey-zher**], until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier [**brey-zher**].

27 Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 28 Take another scroll and

write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which King Jehoiakim of Judah has burned.

Chapter 31

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

I have a confession to make: Up until a couple years ago, I really didn't like reading the Old Testament very much. My thinking was: *I'm a Christian. I follow Jesus. How better to be a Christian than to read the gospel and its teachings? The Old Testament is there mainly to provide background for the New Testament, and for the faith of Jesus, who himself was a Jew. What is there to learn from the strict laws and the inefficient meanderings of the Israelites in the desert and the difficult stories (like the one about Jephthah's daughter, for instance)? And from the smiting. There's sooooo much smiting in the Old Testament.*²

² See Acts 5 for some New Testament smiting

And then I went to seminary, and I began to learn more about the context in which the folks we read about in the Hebrew scriptures lived. It was not an easy existence. Slavery was common. Women were property. The brutality of war was . . . exceedingly cruel.

The Assyrians did not just conquer Israel. They *destroyed* the land. They terrorized the people. They elevated brutality to an art form, even documenting their practices³ for doing so. Some of that documentation survives, and I don't recommend reading it to the faint of heart.

The Judeans lived under that specter, that at any time a regional superpower could decide it was worth the effort to conquer their land and people. Thus, it made sense for them to turn to a God who made a covenant with their people and led them to the land they inhabited. But it seems everyday life or the surrounding culture or a leadership with other interests stood in the way of that.

Enter Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch. God had a word for Jeremiah, and he wanted it written down. This was significant. Recorded words carried extra weight in that time, as writing required significant effort and lent a sense of permanence to the text.

Once it was written down, God's word needed to be shared with the people. It wasn't safe for Jeremiah himself to deliver the messages in the scroll—he was already in trouble with the authorities—so Baruch took it to the temple on a busy day. His reading had a significant impact on those who heard. Word got back to King Jehoiakim, and he

³ To other history buffs (who aren't already familiar with it) I'd recommend Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* podcast. He did a series on the Assyrians called "Judgment at Nineveh" - <https://www.dancarlin.com/product/hardcore-history-17-judgment-at-nineveh/>.

had Jehudi go and retrieve the scroll. Jehudi then read it to the king and his officials.

Faced with the truth in Jeremiah's prophecy from God, perhaps thinking that by doing so he would make the prophecy "go away," Jehoiakim chose to shred and burn the scroll.

I've learned that we have more in common with our spiritual ancestors in the Hebrew Bible than I realized a few years ago. We, too, live under a specter. Multiple specters, in fact. The most immediate is COVID-19, which has drastically changed our lives and claimed over 1.3M others. It's led to financial and relational hardships for many. It's led to the loss of loved ones. There is reason to hope, though. We know we can take measures to protect our lives and the lives of those around us. We've heard recent good news about vaccines and treatments. There will be an other side to this disruption for those who survive, and while we might be changed as a result, things will be better than they are now.

In thinking about what we can learn from Jeremiah, though—or more in particular, from Jehoiakim—my thoughts are drawn to more long-lasting or existential threats. Which come to mind for you? I think of poverty, racial injustice, the prison-industrial complex, wage inequalities, the drug epidemic, white supremacy, domestic abuse, human trafficking, politicians and corporations that see us as nothing more than economic cogs, and the slowly but inevitably unfolding climate catastrophe.

When faced with such concerns, the lazier side of me wants to sit back as a political spectator and criticize elected officials for ignoring the readily-apparent prophecies before them. Can't they see that by bending to the will of their wealthier

constituents and lobbying groups they are working counter to the common good? Do they think that by shredding and burning the truth that they can change our fate?

If the conquering of Judah by the Babylonians was inevitable, why the prophecy? The people had turned away from God. Why the call to repent? Why get Jeremiah in trouble with the king? Why make Baruch do all of that writing?

Sometimes God's wisdom is beyond our understanding. The scroll of Jeremiah did not cease to be any more than did the Ten Commandments after the first set of tablets was destroyed. Our heavenly king's response to the worldly king's destruction of the first scroll was to have Jeremiah and Baruch produce another scroll.

A generation earlier, Hilkiah the priest, who might have been Jeremiah's father, found scrolls with scriptures from Deuteronomy in the temple.⁴ He presented them to King Josiah, Jehoiakim's father, who in response tore not the scrolls, but his own clothes. He realized that his people had not been following the word of God. He repented, shared the word with his people, and made a covenant with the LORD. By doing so he found favor with God.

Speaking of covenants, after chapter 36 the Narrative Lectionary had us jump back in Jeremiah to chapter 31. There we find the only mention in the Hebrew scriptures of a "new covenant." Perhaps addressing the fragility of scripture made apparent in chapter 36, or its ability to be temporarily out of sight as it was prior to Hilkiah's discovery, God speaks about the word being written upon our hearts. Regardless of what happened or where they were, God's story and guidance would be

⁴ 2 Kings 23

with them. For our spiritual ancestors, most of whom couldn't read, who lived in a time without books, and whose kingdoms could (and would) be destroyed, this must have provided great comfort.

We are fortunate. Unlike the Judeans of the Ancient Near East, most of us can read, or are in the process of learning. Many people have multiple Bibles in their home, and can readily access scripture on their computers or tablets or phones. We live in proximity to places of worship where (under normal circumstances) we can study God's word together, or congregate online to do so.

But distractions surround us, too. Our abundance means that there are *many* other things to read and watch and talk about, to influence our thinking and lifestyle. We're bombarded with advertisements that tell us if we just buy this widget it will fill the widget-shaped hole in our life (or garage) that is preventing us from being happy. We're reminded that we deserve a break but can't escape the demands of work which manage to extend beyond their boundaries to infringe on family and leisure time but which have to be addressed so we can afford to take a vacation . . . someday. Oh, and by the way, half of America disagrees with each of us on any given topic and therefore should be demonized (or so we're led to believe).

It's understandable that crucial issues like poverty and racial justice and wage inequalities and white nationalism and climate catastrophe might not always be at the center of our attention. But when they are—when the clouds of our busyness part and we are presented with the truths surrounding those issues and the role we ourselves play within them—how do we respond? Do we run those truths through the shredder, hoping they'll go away? Or do we recognize, repent, and respond? Do we turn our backs on those who would suffer due to our inaction, or do we see ourselves as who we are in Christ, and the wonderful potential the Holy Spirit can unleash in us?

Jehoiakim was a significant power in Jeremiah's time. But his actions to deny the truth amount to only a five-verse delay in the creation of another scroll, one that was even more powerful than the first. Jehoiakim himself, despite his theatrics, is often mixed up with his son Jehoiachin, and is of consequence mainly to historians, scholars, and Presbyterian seminarians who are studying for the Biblical Content exam.

The prophecy of Jeremiah, on the other hand—despite its physical fragility when it was first written down—it lives on. You can read the very words that were in that scroll: They're part of the book of Jeremiah. You can read them in a language that didn't even exist when Baruch first wrote them down. You can read them on the computer you carry in your pocket. And we can use those words—as well as those written on our hearts—to face the specters in our own lives. Such is the everlasting power of the God we worship on this Christ the King Sunday.

Amen.

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