

Strangers In A Strange Land: Worship In Exile | March 24, 2019

A sermon in two parts on Jeremiah 2:1-7

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Part I

Our passage today from Jeremiah is a hard text. It deeply challenged its hearers when first proclaimed, and offers a similar challenge to us today. It is my prayer that the Spirit will soften our hearts and give us ears to hear the Word of the Lord. Let us turn together to Jeremiah 2:

The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

“This is what the LORD says:

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.”

As a freshman in college, I enrolled in a Janterm class called Christian Spirituality. For a month, the students and professor lived, studied, played and worked together at Tall Timber Ranch in Washington’s Cascade Mountains, one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever spent a chunk of time. But it wasn’t just the natural beauty that made this experience special. As the other students and I studied in the classroom about the history of Christian spirituality, we also practiced those same spiritual disciplines and rhythms that we were learning about. There is something unique and special about spending a month with 20 other students making, eating, and cleaning up meals; practicing the daily prayer offices of matins and vespers; singing, reading, and studying together; skiing and snowshoeing together; and practicing silence, fasting and solitude. It one of the most unique spiritual experiences I’ve ever had, and it laid a foundation for a life of discipleship that continues to this day. That January, my passion for God felt like it was bursting at the seams of my body. It was like my love for God had been set ablaze by a fresh wind of the Spirit.

At the end of the month I drove down from the mountains, back to every day college life in Spokane, Washington. But slowly over the spring of my freshman year, my zealously waned. My devotion to God faded to an ember compared to the wildfire that had been blazing just a few months earlier.

I’m sure some of you, having returned from your own camp, retreat or mission trips, know the gradual let-down I’m talking about. And maybe it’s easy for you, like it is for me, to read your own experience of fading passion into this passage from Jeremiah. The prophet says to the people, *gone are the days of your pure, zealous devotion to the Lord*. Maybe today, you feel like that too, dry and dusty as a disciple. Jeremiah says that God’s people have strayed away from the Lord. Maybe today you feel far from God, like you’re wandering alone in the wilderness, longing for the passionate days of your early discipleship.

It’s easy, isn’t it, to associate our love and devotion to God with how we feel toward God. It’s easy to believe that our worship of God hinges on the zealously of our experience or the strength of our emotions. But when Jeremiah references the devotion and pure love of God’s people, and how that love waned later in Israel’s life, he’s not talking about an experience like a fired-up camp high that fades after coming down from the mountain. Let’s take a look at Jeremiah 2:4-7.

“What fault have you and your ancestors found in me,” God asks His people,

“that you all have strayed so far from me?

You have followed worthless idols.

⁶You haven’t asked, ‘Where is the LORD,

who brought us up out of Egypt

and led us through the barren wilderness,

a land of drought and utter darkness?

I brought you into a fertile land

But you came and defiled my land.

What this text reveals is that the love and devotion mentioned earlier has a specific context. In talking about Israel's love for God, Jeremiah is talking about Israel's worship. We see this in the indictment of God's people in verse 5 for straying from God by following "worthless idols." Israel's love for God has grown cold, but it's not because they've lost that loving feeling. They have wrapped their arms around the false gods of Canaan. At different points in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet describes Israel's love as an adulterous relationship; Yikes!

And here's the kicker: it's not that God's people abandoned God all together. We see in other parts of Jeremiah, and all throughout the Old Testament prophets, that the people of Israel were actually still trying to worship God. They were making sacrifices and offerings, and following the purity codes as God told them. But in the midst of their efforts to worship God in the way they'd been instructed, they allowed other things to creep into the central place of importance that only God is supposed to occupy.

Why does this matter? It matters because this is precisely the pattern of our own idolatry. This is also *our sin* when it comes to worship. Even in the midst of our best intentions, even in our desire to love and worship God above all else, we, also, allow things of lesser importance and value to occupy God's throne. Let me walk you through one of my own journeys with this.

I grew up in a fairly traditional Presbyterian church that had some similarities to our own 8:45 service here at First Pres. In high school, I got involved in a student-led Christian ministry where I learned to play guitar to help lead music during our weekly gatherings. Through my involvement as a music leader, I was exposed to a new experience of congregational singing that stirred my passion for God. The music was expressive and heart-felt. During that season, I remember many conversations with my dad, the pastor of my home church, in which I argued vehemently that this new style of music was *real* worship – it was passionate and it swept me up in a way that the singing at my church didn't quite have the emotive power to do. I insisted that this different way of entering into the presence of God was true worship.

Through many years of studying the nature of worship, I realized that my experience in high school was missing the bigger picture about worship, which turns out, is way more than just singing! I realized that, unintentionally, my posture of worship itself was a form of idolatry. Please hear me: I'm not saying that expression or emotion in singing is bad! Wanting to experience a deep emotional connection with God in worship can be a good thing. What I'm critiquing is my own posture toward it. The style of my worship became more important than the God I was worshipping. I also didn't pay much attention to the words I was singing – which, as I look back years later, I realize were mostly about me, lyrics like "this is the air I breathe ..." I wanted the emotional feeling of connection in worship more than I wanted to worship the living God!

We have an opportunity today to broaden our posture of worship to better align with God's will for us. We have the opportunity to allow the Spirit to speak to each of us as individuals, and collectively as a church. What can we learn from Israel's failure in how they understood and practiced worship? Let's spend a few minutes reflecting on this. As we sing this next song, ask yourself: Who is your worship for? Who is it about?

CONGREGATION SINGS: LORD, WE WORSHIP YOU

Let's keep grappling with Jeremiah 2. Notice that this oracle is addressed to the people in Jerusalem. In other words, we see that Jeremiah's prophetic word is spoken when God's nomadic people are finally settled. They are at home in promised land. For the residents of Jerusalem, the wilderness is a distant family memory, like a faded photograph covered in dust. So why the mention of the wilderness? What the Lord is saying here is that it was when His people were unsettled, displaced, when they had no permanent sanctuary, no familiar cornerstones by which to mark themselves, no permanent means of practicing rituals and making offerings, it was *then* Israel's love for God was most pure and most devoted. It was in a season of exile that Israel's worship was most faithful to God. How surprising!

The flip side of this coin, of course, is that it is when God's people were settled in permanence, routine, prominence and abundance that their allegiance slipped. In a place of settledness, Israel became discontent and self-indulgent, bringing upon herself judgment from the Lord. A settled spirituality, Jeremiah seems to be saying, is a dangerous spirituality. Perhaps our own expression of spirituality has become too settled. Perhaps the familiar and the comfortable have caused us to lose focus on what really matters in worship: love of God. In just a few moments we will have some space to reflect on these hard questions: Are there idols in your own heart about what matters in worship that you need to acknowledge to God, in order to let him alone occupy the throne of your allegiance? As we turn toward God in a time of prayer and confession, let us embrace the opportunity for our devotion to be deepened, as Israel's was in the wilderness.

CONGREGATION SINGS AND PRAYS IN CONFESSION

Part II

So far this morning we've talked about Israel's adulterous love for lesser gods, and how Israel's most faithful worship of God was, surprisingly in a season of exile. But there is one important thing we've left out in our study of Jeremiah 2. It's verse 3, in which we read:

³ Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest ...

This reference Israel being holy seems to come out of the blue. But for a Jewish person it would actually resound like a gong. This is because the phrase "holy to the Lord" was shorthand for something no less significant than Israel's identity. In the wilderness, something of indelible importance happened: Israel was claimed by God as His special people, given an identity and a purpose. In Exodus 19, it's recorded like this: From Mount Sinai, the LORD called to Moses and said, "This is what you are to say to the people of Israel: ⁴'You have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'"

In Leviticus 19, the people are reminded again of this vocation: The LORD said to Moses, ²"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'" That word "holy" has come up in both passages. What's going on with Israel's call to holiness?

The concept of holiness can be confusing because we associate the word with lots of different things, especially individual piety or moral purity. As it turns out, the chapters in Exodus and Leviticus that immediately follow God's statement about Israel's identity actually define what is meant by holiness. As it turns out, holiness is not only purity before God; it also hinges on treatment of neighbor.

Check out all these references to how the people's holiness before the Lord depends on how Israel's neighbors are cared for and treated: **(show slide of selections from Exodus 22-23, and then Leviticus 19)**

Did you notice some common threads and themes? One thing I notice is that the same types of people are mentioned over and over again: the poor, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, the deaf, the blind. What do all these people have in common? They can't care for, provide for, or defend themselves. They are powerless. And God makes it very clear to Israel that their holiness depends how well they love these powerless people among them, even those who are outsiders – the foreigners and immigrants. In other words, Israel's holiness depends on their practice of justice.

I think we should take a time out here. Before we go any further, we need to acknowledge that we have just stepped into troubled waters. These words, and particularly this concept of justice, is loaded. In our cultural climate, the word justice is often associated with political agendas. And for this reason, conversations about justice have brought unrest to our own congregation. So let me be very clear: in talking about the call of God's people to practice justice, I'm not talking about a social agenda. This is not a conversation directed to a room full of elephants or donkeys. My intent is to address a room full of Jesus-followers. And what I am talking about is Scripture - the Word of God that transcends political differences and is authoritative for all who follow Christ.

So, if we're up for the challenge of allowing Jeremiah's hard words to shape us, let's take this moment to set the record straight about justice and its importance in the biblical worldview. Did you know that the word justice shows up in the Old Testament more than 200 times?! Literally, justice means making things right. It is correcting what is wrong. In the context of Scripture, doing justice means loving neighbor, especially the neighbor who can't care for or provide for herself. And almost every time it shows up, the word appears in reference to a relationship in which God's people are supposed to care for the poor and vulnerable among them, as God has cared for us in our own powerlessness against sin and death.

Justice isn't just an Old Testament thing. Jesus embodies God's character of justice in the way He interacts with those around Him, by perfectly loving God and loving neighbor. Jesus fulfills the call of God's people to do justice to the sick, the sinner, the poor, and the marginalized. And beyond that, on the cross, God's ultimate work of justice is accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection, when He crushes the dark powers that enslaved the world, when he bears the consequences of our sin, and puts all things to rights by restoring the world to the abundant life for which God designed it. This is justice. It is caring for the powerless in their plight - as Jesus did for me and for you in the plight of our sin - and healing what is wrong. Biblical justice is central to the Gospel.

So let's walk this talk about justice back to Jeremiah. The phrase "holy to the Lord" refers to Israel's vocation to practice justice as representatives of God in the world. Israel has failed in its call to be holy. The implication in Jeremiah 2 is that, just as Israel abandoned its love for God, which corrupted its worship, so too has Israel abandoned its love for neighbor.

I heard a story about an enthusiastic worship leader who went down into the seats of his congregation to join the people in sung worship. As he closed his eyes and danced to the music, he became so enraptured that he didn't realize he was literally stepping on the toes of the people behind him. Over and over he unintentionally tread on their feet, caught up in his own experience of worship.

Israel, swept up in her own desires, not only lost sight of God; like the exuberant, toe-crunching worship leader, Israel also lost sight of neighbor. God's people's inattentiveness to orphan, widow and foreigner in their midst is the second reason judgment falls upon them. Mark Labberton, the President of Fuller Seminary, puts it like this: "For all of our apparent passion about God, in the end much of our worship seems to be mostly about us." My friends, Jeremiah's hard word for us today is that we also can make worship about ourselves. Like the people of Israel, we, too love lesser gods of our choosing. Like the people of Israel, we, too, focus on our own experiences to the neglect of those around us.

Jeremiah offers these challenging to God's people not to make them feel ashamed and guilty, but to give them an opportunity to respond, to be refined by the Spirit. And we, too, have an opportunity to respond to God's call into deeper faithfulness in our love for God and neighbor as a response to God's love in Christ. How will you respond today?

The good news in the midst of this challenge is that even when we acknowledge our weakness and failure, we can have confidence in the strength of Christ. Jesus has already done this work for us. Really, when all is said and done, the pressure is off of us, because Jesus has worshipped God perfectly, representing us. In Him, we are enabled to worship. Jesus has loved God and neighbor perfectly, representing us. In Him we are enabled to love God and neighbor with heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus has enacted the perfect justice of God. It is in Him that we are enabled to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.