

Lent V, Year B 2024
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Ok, I'm going to need your help to begin this sermon. Who remembers Three Dog Night? And their song "Jeremiah was a bullfrog?" Ok, with a little help from Three Dog Night and Youtube, we're going to sing it together. Ready?

Jeremiah was a bullfrog
He was a good friend of mine
I never understood a single word he said
But I helped him drink his wine
And he always had some mighty fine wine
Singin' Joy to the world
All the boys and girls now
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me

This is the way that my Old Testament professor in seminary introduced us to the prophet Jeremiah. Maybe Ceci had the same professor? Anyway, he then began to lay out his argument this way:

- Jeremiah was a bullfrog: The prophet Jeremiah was once thrown into a cistern with mud, the native habitat for bullfrogs, right?
- He was a good friend of mine: Jeremiah did have a good friend, Baruch. Maybe Baruch is singing this song instead of Three Dog Night.
- I never understood a single word he said: The prophet is very hard to understand. There are sections where it is very difficult to know who is talking, for example, is it Jeremiah? God? Israel?
- I helped him drink his wine: the prophet Jeremiah talked about wine – he says in chapter 13 that every wine jar shall be filled with wine.
- Singing Joy to the world: God through Jeremiah is to bring joy to the world
- All the boys and girls now: Jeremiah references young men and young women in chapter 31
- And there is an allusion to the 2nd plague of frogs – Jeremiah was forcibly taken to Egypt where "he and his kind" might have been right at home.

I think this professor ended this fun introduction to Jeremiah with something like, "it's possible to make Scripture say whatever you want it to, but studying it gets you the best idea of what's going on."

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and we enter Holy Week at the conclusion of that service. We have heard from several prophets over the course of our lectionary, beginning with Ash Wednesday. The prophet Joel invited us to return to the Lord with all our heart. To Fast. Weep. Mourn. Rend. Return. While attackers in the book of Joel leave a desolate wilderness where Eden had once been, God leaves a

blessing. God's desire is to hear the people's lament, which is much more important than preparing a defense of the attackers. Lament is the action of naming the difference between the life God calls us to live and the deathly practices around us. Joel calls on the people to lament as an act of trust in God. Lament is to generate hope in God's coming renewal.

Today the prophet Jeremiah announces a new covenant with God. The 10 tribes of Israelites had divided into two nations. In the northern kingdom was Israel, the southern kingdom was Judah. Jeremiah lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, about 20 miles outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, of course, was its capital. He was an outsider of Jerusalem, from a small town, probably not very well educated as a priest, and provides the perspective of one who is on the outside looking in. The town he lived in was a place that the king sent priests he didn't like, but Jeremiah was born and raised there.

He is not a very happy prophet. He is called by God to be a prophet when he was in his mother's womb. The only tool he is given is words. As a grown man, he uses words to denounce Israel's unfaithfulness to an exiled people living in Babylon.

Jeremiah lived during a time of intense warring and powers that devastated the lands of the Middle East. He lived in the 7th century before the birth of Christ and lived through 5 different successions of kings in Judah. He knew about divided loyalties and abrupt changes in national life. He served people who were divided politically and geographically.

Jeremiah receives the word of the Lord, which is directed at Jerusalem and Judah, and the foreign nations, and it includes both love for the people and disdain and anger at their disobedience. God appoints Jeremiah "over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." His task is first to condemn, and then to build up. R.E. Clements writes that Jeremiah's awareness of political realities in his time caused him to preach a message that reflected the fact that "hope took full and serious account of the measure of Israel's sin." "Hope took full and serious account of the measure of Israel's sin." In other words, without serious reflection on their sinfulness, hope would not blossom. He calls the people to both reflect on the seriousness of their wickedness and to return to God, a lover who wants to be reconciled to his beloved.

Our reading today comes from the last portion of the book of Jeremiah. It shows a new covenant, one that God will write on our hearts. It will not be contained in the Temple in Jerusalem or on a tablet that is accessible to the insiders only. The new covenant will be free to all, and the hope of the new covenant will be carried within us.

It's not lost on any of us that there is new violence and warring in the Middle East. I am no expert and really can't speak to the political realities in the region now. I only see the destruction, devastation, and pure disregard for human life regardless of which "side" we're talking about. Unfortunately, all too often scripture is quoted by too many people to justify horrific acts. We know through Jesus that God weeps. And God calls all of us to repentance, to lament the ways in which we all fall short, and to lament – to name the

differences between the ways in which we live our lives and the ways in which we fall short of God's vision for our lives. Lamentation brings hope.

Jeremiah condemns the Israelites for their sinfulness and disobedience from God. But he doesn't leave them with that message. The word of the Lord to the people through Jeremiah is that a new covenant will be written upon their hearts, that they are loved and desired as a lover desires his or her lover. But without the call to repentance – which means to turn around, turn back, or to change directions and face God again without our backs to God – without the call to repentance, we will be unable to desire God, we will miss the joy that we could know by facing God. The laws of God have been written on our hearts and we cannot avoid them. It's why we grieve so much when we see the effects of war on all people.

God's law and love have been written on our hearts and lamentation is our call when we see how we have turned away from who we have been created to be. As our collect for Lent 5 says, "Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found."

Repent and return to the Lord, and there you will find your joy. Amen.