

Location: Pawtucket Congregational Church, UCC  
Date: June 22, 2014  
Scripture: Jeremiah 20: 7 – 13, Romans 6: 1b - 11  
Title: A Warning from the Past  
Preacher: Rev. Ruth Richards

*Note: this was preached to a congregation that consisted of regular worshipers and a group of about 20 college students, non-churchgoers, who were staying in the church for a week while training to go out as teams to spend several weeks working to promote awareness of Climate Change and encourage activism in local communities to reduce the use of fossil fuels. This project is called Climate Summer. We had also just baptized a baby, Charlotte, in this service.*

For those of you who in something of an alien environment this morning, I should explain that this is the bit where we read some obscure writing from the ancient past that the minister then talks about for a while. The trouble is that this text, the scripture, the Bible reading tends to be kind of incomprehensible. So even with the best of intentions you might find yourself kind of tuning out while it's happening ...

For those of you who are here regularly, you will recognize that this is the bit where we read something from the Bible that the minister then talks about for a while. The trouble is that the text, the scripture, the Bible reading is kind of incomprehensible. So even with the best of intentions you find yourself kind of tuning out while it's happening ...

Common ground!

So before Mary reads from the prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible I'm going to introduce him and his times to you, otherwise we'll none of us have the slightest chance of understanding what's going on and why.

Jeremiah was born at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era, so about two thousand six hundred years ago. When he was a young man, perhaps still a boy, he got a call from God to prophesy, to speak God's message to the people of the southern kingdom in the land of Israel. And the message that he had to bring to them, and especially to the king at that time, was bad news. In Jeremiah's time, the powerful and fearsome Babylonian empire was expanding its territory, and the tiny land of Judah, with its capital city of Jerusalem, was next on the list to be engulfed. Conquered, overcome.

And it was Jeremiah's task from God to tell them this.

Jeremiah's take on the impending doom, the capture of Jerusalem and its destruction was that the people of Israel were going to be punished by their God for turning away from God. God was going to do this by stirring up the Babylonians against them.

Jeremiah did not mince his words; he did not pull any punches. He gave it to them straight – he was really the original “Repent for the end is nigh” guy with the sandwich board, only in his case he was right, the end was nigh, at least in some ways, although most definitely not in others. For Jerusalem did eventually fall to the Babylonians. Now, I want to make it clear that I don't personally believe that God actually punishes one people by raising up another against them, but that was what Jeremiah understood was going on, and he certainly was right in reading the signs that a powerful military empire was going to suck up little Israel easily.

Now, as it hadn't happened yet, the people, and especially the temple priests and officials (who were responsible for this inappropriate stuff going on) did not care for Jeremiah's message. One in particular – perhaps the head of the temple police force, for there was such a thing, when he heard Jeremiah, promptly put him in the stocks for a day to teach him a lesson. No more disturbing the peace and upsetting and annoying the people. They wanted to hear good news – that God wouldn't let anything bad happen as they were God's chosen people. At which Jeremiah told him in no uncertain terms that he was to be called “Terror all around” for when the city fell, he and his family would perish.

And then, Jeremiah turned and railed against God, complaining to God in equally uncompromising terms for giving him this impossible task, and also making it impossible for him to turn away from it.

Now, finally, at last, I think we're ready to hear the words of Jeremiah as he bawls out God in Chapter 20 of the book that bears his name.

O Lord, you have enticed me,  
and I was enticed;  
you have overpowered me,  
and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughingstock all day long;  
everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the Lord has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.  
If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
then within me there is something  
like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.

For I hear many whispering:  
"He has nothing to say but bad news; doom and gloom! Denounce him! Let us  
denounce him!"

All my close friends  
are watching for me to stumble.  
"Perhaps he can be enticed,  
and we can prevail against him,  
and take our revenge on him."

But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble,  
and they will not prevail.  
They will be greatly shamed,  
for they will not succeed.  
Their eternal dishonor  
will never be forgotten.  
O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.

Sing to the Lord;  
praise the Lord!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy  
from the hands of evildoers.

*[pause]*

May the Holy Spirit speak to us through these words of Scripture.

So Jeremiah is the poor prophet caught between the rock that is God and the hard place that is the people of God; He's the guy with the news no one wants to hear and yet he is compelled to tell it, to speak these words of doom and destruction. Even worse - he has wisdom from God that if the people will change their ways, the fate that will befall them can change. If they only listen, turn to God, believe Jeremiah's messages, all will not be lost. Although God has stirred up a mighty enemy against them, they have a chance to change things – the outcome is still in the balance.

Later on, Jeremiah tried to persuade the king and the government in Jerusalem that if they negotiate with their enemy, the very worst will not happen. If they get over the idea that God will not let anything bad happen to them, and live with the reality that they don't stand a chance of winning this battle, there is hope. Although they will still lose their independence as a nation, they will survive, them and their children, the future generations. They will still have homes and families and livelihoods. There was a chance for survival, if they listened, if they changed. But they didn't listen.

Let me repeat, *I personally don't believe that God deliberately sends doom and destruction on human beings to punish them.* Neither do I believe that God has favorite nations that God takes care of, and disfavors other nations that God abandons.

The God I do believe in is the one who would rather hang on a cross reviled by all around him. The God in whom I believe is the one who threw in his lot with us by becoming one of us, Jesus. Jesus also preached a message of radically inclusive love and welcome that was so challenging, to another vast empire, the Roman Empire, and another set of religious officials, that they, too, stopped up their ears and executed him. And his followers believed that he had risen, forgiven, and set them free from fear of what others might do to them.

But I do believe that actions have consequences. And as I listen to those who speak of climate change, and those who are determined to discredit them and ignore the need to change the way we all live in every part of this one planet that we all share, I think that some of us have more in common with a 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE prophet in the Ancient Near East than we may have first thought.

And I think of Jeremiah's brutal honesty and determination to tell truth, even though it cost him dearly, in many ways. It would have been so much easier to just go with the flow and keep quiet. But he could not do that. He could not overlook the inconvenient truth that he understood God to be revealing to him. He could not overlook God's call to him to speak that truth, for the help of the people he was charged to speak to. Poor Jeremiah was compelled to keep at this hard task, risking his very life.

Some of you, here this morning have taken up the challenge of taking a hard message to many people. A message that we must change, for the survival of our children and future generations. What will we be facing, as a nation and as the human species if do not commit to reducing our craving for fossil fuels. What damage has been done and will get worse if we cannot turn from the determination to have domination, not only over other nations, but over all living species? What will the world be like for all of us, but especially the youngest among us, Charlotte and Zachary, in 20 years' time, in 50 years' time?

What will happen if our political system continues to favor popularity at all costs, making the hard decisions to repent of our lack of stewardship ever harder to make? Yes, I believe we are baptized into new life because of Jesus Christ, but we have a responsibility to care for *all* life.

It is a hard message to carry, that we must change our comfortable but wasteful ways before it is totally too late. But just as God raised up prophets in the past, now prophets of our times are carrying a warning, to challenge all of us, politicians, leaders, governments, and ordinary people, who would much rather ignore what might happen if we cannot change. Read the signs. Love creation. Pay attention to the physics, and use the time wisely. So that the Lord can deliver the life of the needy from the hands of the destroyers.  
Amen.