



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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The last time we were in Jeremiah together we looked at the whole issue God had with people believing that they were worshiping him when in fact they were essentially practicing false worship - something God hates.

Today in chapter 8 of Jeremiah we will be looking at this passage we read from earlier verses 4 to 22.

The issue that rises here in this reading this morning is not to do with false worship but rather the false prophets.

While Jeremiah was wrestling with what God was asking him to say to the nation and then having to deliver such a strong message, he was constantly up against opposition in the shape of the false prophets that were countering him along the way.

He would say one thing and they would tell the people something else. They were false in the sense that they were not telling people what God wanted them to hear but rather a popular message that would have them accepted by those who wanted to hear an easier to accept message. An American newspaper recently ran an interesting story. There was a pond in the middle of a housing development that was kept stocked with fish. Evidently, a child had thrown a toy basketball and it rolled into the pond. One of the residents saw the ball bouncing around in a strange manner in the water. When he went to investigate, he saw a large flathead catfish which had obviously tried to swallow the ball, but which had become stuck in his mouth.

It must have looked like a yummy piece of something that catfish like, but his eyes were bigger than his mouth.

If you are not a fisherman, you may not know that catfish like deep water and usually swim near the bottom, so the poor catfish was trying to get down to where he normally lived after he came to the top for a meal. He was totally exhausted from trying to dive, but was unable to because the ball would always bring him back up to the surface. The man who found the catfish pulled him to the side with a long handled net and tried numerous times to get the ball out, but was unsuccessful. He finally had his wife cut the ball with a knife, while he held the fish, in order to deflate the ball and release the catfish. That was one gullible catfish!

He would obviously swallow anything...

The problem with the people in Jeremiah's day was that they were quite happy to believe anything except the truth. Sometimes the truth is just too close to the bone for our own personal comfort's sake. Sometimes the truth creates a reaction in peoples hearts and minds that like the opening of Pandora's box altogether destroys the norm and shakes people out of their comfort zone.

The problem is when the truth comes from God we do not have the choice as to whether or not we will listen to it. We are compelled to listen otherwise we are the ones who will suffer. The people didn't test God's word they simply went along with the crowd. This is such a dangerous thing to do and we would be advised not to go down that road. In this section today we hear God through Jeremiah raising a number of questions but if you look carefully enough it is as if one question in particular: "Why did these people not turn their hearts back to God?"

This question is answered as Jeremiah looks at three aspects of why that might be.

(1) They were irrational in refusing.

There is wonderful picture language used here by Jeremiah as he tries to show just how crazy the people's behaviour actually is.

He says first of all in verse 4:

"When men fall down, do they not get up? When a man turns away, does he not return? Why then have these people turned away?"

Why does Jerusalem always turn away? They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. No one repents of his wickedness, saying, "What have I done?" Each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration. But my people do not know the requirements of the LORD.

In other words Jeremiah is saying – this doesn't make sense – if a man falls down the most natural thing for him to do is to get back up on his feet again and not to remain on the ground, unless of course he has done himself some serious harm and cannot physically get up.

Or if a man takes a wrong turn he doesn't simply keep going until he somehow makes his way back onto the right road.

He stops the car turns around and retraces his steps right back to before he took that wrong turn.

Oh I know what some of you women are saying to yourselves...huh – not if my husband oh no he will drive on 30 or 40 miles trying to get onto the right road rather than admit he is wrong and re-trace his steps 500yards back up the road.

I suppose nowadays satellite navigation does it all for you – you just keep driving and wait for it to re-route you down a road ahead.

In this thing called life however we do not have satellite navigation to tell us the correct roads we should be going down – but we have divine navigation. The Psalmist in Psalm 119 writes:

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

God is our guide and he through his word and the inspiration of the scriptures guides us in the paths that are right for us but which also lead to salvation and a life by his side. People wonder why so many things go wrong in life that otherwise might have been avoided and they fail to see that the reason is that God did not suggest that for them but instead they decided upon it on their own.

God perhaps on numerous occasions told them that what they were doing was wrong but the truth would have taken them away from the momentary pleasure they felt they were enjoying.

Take a moment and think to yourself – what am I presently doing in my life that I know is not what God really wants me to do.

What is there that I know is not according to his will for me but I am still doing it? I have heard him speaking to me but I have decided not to listen to the truth because I know better. Jeremiah would say to you this morning – you are irrational in refusing! It doesn't make sense! God created you therefore he and he alone knows what is best for you.

You don't buy a microwave oven and try to cook a boiled egg in it – although it might seem like a great idea – it doesn't really work.

Oh yes the egg gets cooked and the kitchen gets re-decorated with the cooked egg. Don't worry not this manse's kitchen.

There are certain things microwaves are great doing at because they fall under the manufacturers guidelines – there are things that are dangerous for us to use microwaves for and we are warned about them in the owner's manual.

But the problem according to God is that:

But my people do not know the requirements of the LORD. (V.7)

This leads us onto the second point.

(2) They refused because they were deceived.

Verses 8 and 9 :

“How can you say, “We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD,” when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?”

In the last section we looked at the people boasting that God was on their side since they had the Temple in Jerusalem.

The problem was that what took part in the Temple was not real worship in Spirit and in truth but false worship – simply going through the motions! So too here do they boast that they have the Law of God – what we would term today as the Scriptures or the Bible.

Your God Is Too Safe, is a book about studying the word of God, in it we read, “Curious times, these. There is simultaneously a glut of the word of God and a famine of it, a drought and deluge.

We have every translation of the Bible you can imagine – the NIV, the NEVG, the KJV, the NJKV, the NASR, NRSV, the preacher’s bible, the worshippers bible, the spirit-filled believers bible, the left handed bald gypsy fiddler’s bible, with versions for the nearsighted and the farsighted. (The last was made up).

You can have it in hardback, paper, leather, cloth, in pink, red, oxblood, turtle shell, iridescent orange, psychedelic paisley, with maps and charts and indices and appendices and concordances and holograms of the temple in the back , and a little sleeve with a CD-ROM that takes you on a guided tour of the Holy Land.”

The food is out there – and it’s a banqueting table. We’re just picky eaters. Oh, we’re buying bibles. And sometimes we’re even reading them. But there’s not much evidence that we’re studying them. We’re nibbling, not devouring. And you are what you eat... Have you read you Bible recently or are you simply happy to have one somewhere in the house?

But then thirdly,

(3) Because of their refusal they would be judged.

This final section of our reading is quite hard to understand simply because there are three voices going speaking within it.

There is the judgement voice of God, the people’s voice of despair and Jeremiah’s voice of anguish. God declares a number of things in this passage. He declared that their cities would be destroyed, their fields would be ruined, the people would either be killed or taken as captives. This would all be an awful time for the people and God likened it in many ways to experiencing an earthquake, drinking poison, attacked by venomous snakes or being crushed and broken.

After hearing this how did the people respond?

“Why are we sitting here? Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there!

Instead of turning to God and running to him for mercy they did the opposite they ran to the very things their own hands had made.

This was an example of just how much they had listened to God because moments earlier God had told them that he was going to destroy the very cities they ran to! Then come the chilling words that are oft used at Harvest services:

Verse ²⁰ “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.”

In other words the opportunity is missed, the door is closed, and nothing was done while the invitation was there and now it is too late.....

The noted author, John Killinger, tells a powerful story about a man who is all-alone in a hotel room in Canada. The man is in a state of deep depression. He is so depressed that he can't even bring himself to go downstairs to the restaurant to eat.

He is a powerful man usually the chairman of a large shipping company... but at this moment, he is absolutely overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of life... and he lies there on a lonely hotel bed far from home wallowing in self-pity. All of his life, he has been fastidious... worrying about everything, anxious and fretful, always fussing and stewing over every detail. And now, at mid-life, his anxiety has gotten the best of him, even to the extent that it is difficult for him to sleep and to eat. He worries and broods and agonizes about everything... his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Then, on this day in this Canadian hotel, he craters... he hits bottom. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized, paralyzed by his emotional despair, unable to leave his room, lying on his bed, he moans out loud: "Life isn't worth living this way, I wish I were dead!"

And then, he wonders, what God would think if he heard him talking this way. Speaking aloud again he says, "God, it's a joke, isn't it? Life is nothing but a joke." Suddenly, it occurs to the man that this is the first time he's talked to God since he was a little boy. He is silent for a moment and then he begins to pray. He describes it like this: "I just talked out loud about what a mess my life was in, and how tired I was, and how much I wanted things to be different in my life.

And you know what happened next? A voice!! I heard a voice say, 'It doesn't have to be that way!' That's all." I sat straight up and turned around... I laughed at myself. I thought I must be hearing things. But then I was absolutely certain that I had heard those words: 'It doesn't have to be that way!' He went home and talked to his wife about what happened. He talked to his brother who is a minister and asked him: "Do you think it was God speaking to me?" The brother said: "Of course, because that is the message of God to you and everyone of us. That's the message of the Bible.

That's why Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to deliver us, to free us, to change us... and to show us that 'It doesn't have to be that way,' ...

You don't have to be anxious or depressed or selfish or hopeless. Jesus Christ can turn your life around. If you will welcome Him into your heart, He will make you a new person." A few days later, the man called his brother and said, "You were right. It has really happened. I've done it. I'm a new man in Christ, He has turned it around for me." My friends because of Jesus, the Summer of God's acceptance is still with us but it won't always be...

If you hear the invitation today to turn back to God, or to come to him today for the first time please don't go home today until you accept that invitation.

I am available after the service if you want to talk.

There will be to elders in our counselling room upstairs immediately after this service if you want to talk and have someone pray for you.

I urge you today, listen to what God is saying to you and turn to him in faith.