

*The Man from Anathoth*  
Pastor Jim Bangsund

It's good to be back. Judy and I want to thank the Leadership Team for their trust ... and for the honor of being asked to be involved again during this interim period. As I stand here looking out at you all once again, I think I understand Pastor Dan's first words when he stood before those 800 people after being elected bishop and, with that little grin we all know so well, paused for a moment and then said, "If this works out, it is evidence that the HS has been at work. And if not ... this was your vote." Which, of course, brought the house down.

But, seriously, I have the courage to stand here not because of confidence in the three of us as pastors – though I have that; or in our excellent Staff, which impresses me more and more each day; or even in our solid Leadership Team; but rather because I am convinced that the Holy Spirit has been and *is* at work in both the NALC as well as St Timothy's. And so, as Pastor Jonna noted so well last Sunday, we as Camden Avenue followers of Jesus now move into a new chapter of the same book – that book of what God did in Christ two thousand years ago and continues to do through his people today.

George Sims of Chicago tells of the time the utility company he worked for sent hundreds of workers to Michigan to help restore power after that state's worst ice storm in years. "We were picking up wires in a hard-hit area one night," he said, "when a horn blared behind me. I angrily stomped over to a man in an old pickup truck and yelled, 'Didn't you see those wires, red flags, stands, and barriers back there?' 'Oh, yes,' he replied, 'I got by those all right. It's just your truck that's in the way now.'"

We laugh, but sometimes *we're* like that. We ignore all God's warning signs and put ourselves and others in danger. What does *God* do when we're like that? 600 years before Jesus, he sent his man from Anathoth.

This morning, we begin a six-week series on the prophet Jeremiah, from the village of Anathoth, just northeast of Jerusalem, sent by God to his people and their leaders after centuries of their weaving between, and sometimes simply rebelliously driving over, the red flags, stands and barriers God had erected for their own good. Jeremiah was God's last word of warning before the armies of Babylon finally rolled south and took down Jerusalem, its palaces and its temple. But Jeremiah also brought words of hope, as we shall also hear.

For the next six weeks, we're going to be looking at segments from Jeremiah's life beginning this morning with an overview and continuing next week with his call. Then, in coming weeks, we'll hear what Jeremiah has to say about worship, and about how God seeks to mold his people as a potter shapes clay. Now Jeremiah's life was not an easy one – some have called him the “weeping prophet” – and so we'll hear how he, much like we do, went through periods of self-doubt and even questioning of God. But then came his vision of that great day when God would send a “new covenant,” a vision clearly pointing centuries ahead to when God would enter the world in the person of Jesus.

So you'll want to be here. We have some rich fare ahead of us. And we begin this morning with a bit of the backstory of Jeremiah, the man from Anathoth.

Prophets. When I was young I thought of them as these old guys with beards out ranting at the people and sometimes predicting the future. Well, I don't know about the beard but Jeremiah was a *young* man when he was called. Maybe thirty years old? And he didn't like to rant. In fact, as we'll hear, he didn't *like* it when God sent him to deliver a harsh message – and he told God about that on several occasions.

Although he lived in Jerusalem during some really tough times, in the beginning things actually had started off very well. When God first called Jeremiah, the people had one of the only three good kings Israel ever had – king Josiah who came to the throne at the tender age of eight years old. Josiah's father and grandfather had been just awful. They brought idols into the temple, oppressed the weak and poor folks, and in

general ignored God and his word. In fact, the scrolls *containing* God's word – things that would later be gathered together to make up the Old Testament – had simply become lost in the dusty storerooms and obscure closets of the Temple.

Young Josiah, though, seems to have had some good guidance in his early years so that when he was 26 years old, he started a series of reforms. This included cleaning out the temple of all the idols and other accumulated junk. And when they did, they made a very startling discovery. The priests came across one of those ancient scrolls that had become lost. Our English language Bibles call it a book – a book of the covenant God had made with Israel under Moses many centuries before – the Ten Commandments and other laws.

Actually, it appears to have been an early copy of the book of Deuteronomy because, when it was brought to Josiah, his reforms start to get more focused and the things we read about him doing are precisely the things *found* in the book of Deuteronomy. So for the first time in a long time, things were looking up. Idolatry was out, temple and worship life were revived, the Passover was kept, and the weak and the poor were no longer trampled underfoot.

What an exciting time to be called to be a prophet! And so, at this very upbeat moment in the history of God's people, young Jeremiah immediately started going village to village as an "evangelist of the covenant," if you will. "Things have been going downhill for us," he would say. "Those super powers, Assyria and Babylon, have been threatening us but now we know why; we have been ignoring this covenant God made with us. But now we have hope. We have a good king and, because of him, we've found God's word which tells us where we have failed and how to get back on track with God again." And so it was.

Until it wasn't. Little by little, dark clouds started to return. Yes, Josiah was a wonderful king; and yes, his reforms started moving the needle in the right direction. But ... well ... people haven't changed much over the years. Folks were willing to get on the bandwagon – to return to the temple for worship, to renew the offering of sacrifices, even to keep the

Passover. But then Monday rolled around – or in their case Sunday – and folks returned to their idols, the nobility returned to oppressing the poor, and basically it was the same old same old.

You've heard of Sunday morning Christians? Well, these were Saturday morning Jews, and Jeremiah was aghast. Then angry. Then depressed. Then questioning his call. Good king Josiah died in battle and those who came after him in rapid succession were as bad as those who had come before. Finally, Babylon arrived and it was all over.

I think the book of Jeremiah is the most fascinating of the prophetic books because it is so biographical and sometimes autobiographical. Most of the rest of the books of the prophets are simply collections of their prophecies, but Jeremiah gives us his life, his doubts and struggles, his persecutions. Yes, persecutions. The folks in power didn't like his strong words and locked him in stocks, dropped him into a muddy well, put him in prison, even threatened him with death. Still he remained faithful and continued to speak God's word as it came to him. At one point he is barred from the temple and so he sends his secretary, Baruch, to deliver a scroll with his message. It's brought to the new king who sneers and, as each prophecy is read, slices it from the scroll with a pen knife and throws it into a flaming fire pot. Baruch goes back and, in despair, tells Jeremiah what has happened. Jeremiah says, "Get out your pen, Baruch. We're going to write it all again." And so they did.

His words that most disturbed the power brokers were deemed treasonous: he said that the armies of Babylonian which surrounded Jerusalem had been sent by God – that the king and the people should go out to them and surrender – that Babylon would prevail and Israel would be taken into exile for 70 years. That 70 year prophecy may be his most famous because, indeed, when Babylon prevailed and destroyed city and temple, it was 70 years, almost to the day, by the time the people returned and the temple was rebuilt and rededicated.

But the people refused to listen. Things got worse, as competing false prophets contradicted Jeremiah, insisting that God would never let Jerusalem fall. Who were the people to believe? Who speaks for God?

Finally, as Jerusalem was about to fall, a group grabbed Jeremiah and Baruch and, in spite of their strong objections, fled with them to Egypt. A few final prophecies are found from that period but Jeremiah then disappears from history.

So that's a thumbnail sketch of Jeremiah. Are you ready for the ushers to pass out the tests? No? Well, truth be told, I can see that the ushers weren't ready for that either. But hopefully we now have a few hooks to hang things on in weeks to come.

So now let's use the rest of our time to look at a short piece of Jeremiah that gives the feel of the rest of the book. It contains a well-known text – a favorite of many of us, but one that has a rather unexpected background.

As I said earlier, life started out on a high for Jeremiah with a good king and the rediscovery of the Book of Deuteronomy. But the response of the people became only lip service, and soon the armies of Babylon arrived at Jerusalem's gates. To subjugate the city, the Babylonians took away its leaders – the king and nobility, the priests and scribes, the educated and business classes – took them away to just outside Babylon where they were allowed to establish themselves as a community.

But once more, the false prophets tried to brush it all off. “Don't sweat it,” they said. “We'll just be here a short time; God will soon bring us back to Jerusalem.” But that was *not* God's plan, and so, as we heard in our first lesson this morning, Jeremiah, who remained behind in Jerusalem, wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon in which he said:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; .... Increase in number there; do not decrease. ... Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you [says the LORD]. ... I have not sent them.” *This* is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place” [from Jer 29:4-11]

And *then*, and *only* then, comes that wonderful verse of promise:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” [Jer 29:11]

Even greater hope is found later in the promise of a New Covenant – a promise which looked ahead to the coming of Jesus. We’ll hear more about that in week six.

Now as I go through Jeremiah, several things stand out to me.

First of all, there is a **Pattern** – a pattern we see again and again not only in Jeremiah but throughout the Bible and in our own lives, and it’s this: sin has consequences, forgiveness is real. Sin has consequences, forgiveness is real. Even in our lives as followers of Jesus, we have to admit to often leaving behind a path of unforced errors and self-inflicted wounds that often leads to serious consequences in our lives and in the lives of those around us – loved ones, friends, even colleagues at work.

Now the core of what we believe and proclaim is that, in spite of this, forgiveness is real, and our relationship *with God* is made whole again when we come before him in confession. You are a forgiven child of God solely because of what Christ did on the cross, regardless of what you have done. If you leave with nothing else this morning, I hope you leave with that. But once we recognize “that” – once we know the joy of God’s love and acceptance – there may still be consequences of what we have done, things for which we may need to make amends and which may even leave permanent scars in our lives and in the lives of others.

I often think of two young men who didn’t get that – students of mine back when I taught Hebrew in seminary. Sometimes cheating on tests is found even in seminary, and these two were continually looking at each other’s tests in spite of warnings. Finally, on one test, I gave them each a zero. The next day, they came contritely and asked for forgiveness. “Certainly,” I said, “I forgive you. And I’m glad you’ve come to me.” They immediately brightened and said, “Then the zeroes will go away!” Ahh, now I understood. “No,” I said. “The zeroes have to stand.” Our relationship was good again ... but their Hebrew grades bore some scars. Sin has consequences, sometimes even scars; but forgiveness is real.

The next thing that stands out to me as I read Jeremiah is a **Promise**. A promise not for the next life, in this case, though we certainly *have* that, but rather a promise for right here and now: a promise not of a garden of

roses but of a community of hope and support. We do go through suffering. Jeremiah went through suffering, as we will hear in weeks to come. And the people of Jerusalem certainly went through suffering while in Babylon. What ultimately kept them intact was their doing precisely what Jeremiah told them to do – in the face of contradicting words from the false prophets. They built a community, they worshiped together, they passed on what God had done for them in ages past through Abraham, through Moses, through King David and others. They hadn't been promised a rose garden, but they *were* given a community of hope and support; and so, rather than individuals slinking away to lick their wounds and eventually get absorbed into Babylonian culture, they turned in their darkest hours to that faith community into which they had been born and in which many would die but *through* which they and their children and their children's children would be sustained. That's what God's faithful people do. That's what *we* do.

I thought of that ten days ago when out-of-state former members Darryl and Diane – who said I could share this – suddenly got word that their son David had been struck by a car and killed here in San Jose. They had to make a sad flight in and we visited them over several days at Valley Med as grim matters like donating organs were sorted out. That Friday, we talked about the possibility of Darryl's coming to church on Sunday – Diane would not be able to – and I mentioned that, if he did, he would, of course, be faced with answering the question from friends, “And what brings you back to San Jose?” He thought about that for a moment, and then quietly said, “I need to be there.” And so he was, receiving support and encouragement from a number of us. “I need to be there.” Because we have been given this community of hope and support in which, not merely in our most joyful hours but also in our darkest hours, we support one another with the hope we have in Christ.

A *pattern*: sin has consequences, forgiveness is real. A *promise*: of a community of hope and support. And finally a **path** – a path of faithfulness. Jeremiah goes through a good deal of anguish and suffering that, in many ways, gives a preview of Jesus. Just as *Jesus* anguished for his people, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I have

longed to gather your children together, ... and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34), so *Jeremiah* wept for *his* people. “Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people” (Jer 9:1). And Jeremiah’s *physical* suffering at the hand of the authorities also pointed ahead to the much greater suffering and sacrifice of Jesus – a sacrifice which made us right before God.

Yet through it all, the path Jeremiah walked was a path of faithfulness – and in weeks ahead, we’re going to see how that relates to *our* everyday walk, as well. On the surface, you see, one could say that Jeremiah’s ministry had failed. The people didn’t turn back, and Jerusalem was destroyed. Yet we still read his words today, and when it comes to prophets, Jeremiah is second only to Isaiah. Because what God finally sought from him was faithfulness, not success – faithfulness that led to a clear answer to the question, “Who speaks for God?”

You see, when you become a follower of Jesus, your primary “assignment,” as it were, is not just to be successful (though we do strive for that, too). Rather, your primary assignment is simply to be faithful – faithful as you address whatever challenges and opportunities God puts before you. So it was for Jeremiah, so it is for you and for me.

My friends, for me that is a tremendously freeing thing. We live in such a success-driven culture. And don’t get me wrong; again, success is a worthy goal – I’m not an advocate of going out there to fail! But what God seeks first and foremost in his relationship with you is simply your showing your thankfulness for all he has done for you in Christ by being *faithful* in addressing what he places before you. After all, ultimately the *results* are in his hands, not yours. That’s a freeing thing to know, too.

And so, when Jeremiah, probably somewhere in Egypt, finally came to the end of that challenging life of following where God led, I’m sure he heard those words which would surprise him even as one day they will surprise you and me: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much.”

Let us pray ....