

Scriptures: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Jeremiah 2:4-13

All You Clans of Israel

Today's our last sermon in our series, "Prophet Margins," and we'll wrap up by spending it with the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah's an interesting Bible figure. He lived during the time when Judah was getting ready to be carried off into Babylon. According to Jewish tradition, Jeremiah's life ended when he was stoned to death in Egypt, by his own people, who were tired of hearing the things God was telling Jeremiah to say.

Last week we looked at Jeremiah's call story. This week we're looking at how Jeremiah tells God's people what had been done for them previously by God – and how they hadn't held up their end of the deal. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Jeremiah 2:4-13. I'm reading from the New International Version Bible today. **Read Jeremiah 2:4-13.**

"Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel," (Jer. 2:4). I know we've been talking during this series about the two different kingdoms that came out of Israel after the north rebelled against Solomon's son. But this is a generalized message to both. Jeremiah writes "all you clans." All means all! It's a word for the north, and for the south. And if we pause long enough to think deeply about it, it's a word for the Church today, as well.

Why Do People Do What They Do?

"This is what the Lord says: 'What fault did your fathers find in Me, that they strayed so far from Me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves,'" (2:5). See, God's trying to get His people to think here. What happened? Why did they stray from Him? We aren't told the "why." It's a question people have asked through the ages. "Why do people do what they do?"

Free will. The ability to choose. God blesses us with an intellect, and we're given the opportunity to use it for good or ill. The people of Israel and Judah followed idols – those are false gods – and Jeremiah describes them as "worthless." Look what happens to the people. God says they "became worthless themselves!" That's pretty harsh! I want to show you something else here in Jeremiah's book. He actually outlines what God's people are doing.

Check this out with me. Jeremiah 7:17-19 says, "Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to

anger. But am I the One they are provoking?’ declares the Lord. ‘Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?’” See, the idolatry ends up turning into a sordid affair that the whole family takes part in! I’m sorry to say this friends, but there are modern-day idols which we bow in worship to. I’m going to lay a few of those out for you in a moment – it’ll be uncomfortable, but you need to be aware.

Golden Calves

“They did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?’” (2:6). It turns into a very sad situation. We’re reminded of one of the main things God did for His people – He brought them out of Egypt, where they had been slaves. He carried them through the desert – where they wandered for forty years because of their stubborn disobedience. It boiled down to idolatry. While Moses was on the mountain, the people had Moses’ brother, Aaron, make a golden calf, and they worshiped it. God had to tell Moses to go back down the mountain because the people were sinning, and He was going to wipe them all out – and Moses pleaded with God to not destroy the people.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. Moses came down the mountain radiant – glowing from being in the presence of the glory of God – sees what the people are doing, and smashes the stone tablets the Ten Commandments had been written upon. Those Ten Commandments had been written by the Lord’s own hand. In his rage, Moses shattered them to pieces. That’s a good visual of righteous anger! Can you imagine receiving something precious – from the very hand of God – and in a rage smashing it to pieces? It’s what happened with Moses. It happens with a lot of people today, too. God blesses them with relationships, families, children, careers, communities of faith – and they get bent out of shape and smash them to pieces. We’re imperfect people – each one in desperate need of a Savior!

“I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled My land and you made My inheritance detestable,” (2:7). Not only does God carry His people through the desert, and provide them with bread from heaven to eat on a daily basis – He carries them into a good land. The Hebrew word used for fertile here, is a word that means “orchards.” God brings His people into a land filled with orchards. Isn’t that the truth? He gives us the very best – He gave us His Son – to make our relationship with Him, and other people, right again.

Instead of following God, they ignored Him. “The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who deal with the law did not know Me; the leaders rebelled against Me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols,” (2:8). Baal was a fertility god of ancient Canaan. He was represented by a bull, and people would pray to him to ask for rain and good crops. Church, do you see why God was so upset when

His people would worship these golden calves? God is the Giver of every good, and perfect gift – He gives the rain and the fruit. No other god does that!

Idolatry Becomes a Family Affair

What does God do? “Therefore I bring charges against you again,’ declares the Lord. ‘And I will bring charges against your children’s children,” (2:9). Earlier I mentioned that the whole family gets twisted up into the idolatry of the parents – here we see it play out. The idolatry negatively impacts the parents, the kids, the grand-kids – it becomes generational. Idolatry becomes a family affair.

I started a new job this school year, I think most of you know that. I’m working in Auglaize County at a public charter school that is a drop-out prevention program. We work with kids in grades 6-12 who are at-risk for dropping out. Most jobs in our country today won’t hire you without a high school diploma. That’s why it’s important for these kids to finish high school – even if it’s not a traditional high school! Well, they’ve actually given me opportunities to do professional development in areas that interest me – dealing with the science of reading, and that area of research; and working with society’s marginalized. Children with disabilities are marginalized in our schools.

Thursday I was at a training in Lima, featuring Ruby Payne, a nationally and internationally recognized researcher on how poverty impacts societies. The topic she spoke on was how poverty affects people’s emotions, how to recognize it, and how to keep classrooms and other people safe. Part-way through the session, she gave us a break, and indicated she’d come down to talk with us. Now, there were over 1,000 people there – but somehow, I managed to get all the way to the front of the auditorium, and stood and had a brief conversation with her.

She’s Christian – and the compassion she calls professionals to use in dealing with others, shows it. I told her a little about myself – about teaching and also being a part-time pastor here. She took my book, which she had written, and wrote, “Rob, For the hope you bring to students and adults,” and then signed it. That is what we have in Jesus Christ – we have the Hope – and the world is in desperate need of it!

Some Modern-day Idols

God next tells His people, “Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there ever has been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But My people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols,” (verses 10-11). In other words, look at all the world, has any nation swapped its gods for another? Of course, the answer in that day, and even today, is no. I mentioned earlier about some modern-day idols that are going to make us uncomfortable as we lay them out. I’m going to lay out two or three, but there are a pantheon – multiple – of them.

The bottom line is, that anything which we focus on more than Jesus Christ, is an idol. If we spend more time washing our cars, painting our houses, or shopping, than we do on being with Jesus in prayer, in the Bible, or making Him known through our words and actions towards others, that's idolatry. We have a problem with materialism in this country. People kneel at the altar of Bank Account and try to predict and pinch every penny, and heaven forbid that any of our money should be taken as tax and used in a way with which we disagree! When we focus on self, instead of others, that's idolatry.

The Church in America has an idol. Marissa was invited to participate this summer in the Sidney Civic Band. They have concerts on Friday nights, usually at the court square. The last one, at the end of July, was at a church in the area, due to inclement weather. The last song the band played was a medley of *Stars and Stripes Forever* and *God Bless America*. Now, those are great songs. Great songs for July 4th celebrations. I was shocked to see a lady, down in the front row of the church raising her hands – getting her worship on – to *God Bless America*. It's not a song of praise to God. When you read the lyrics of it, it's a song of praise to the nation.

If you look at the last hundred years or so of American History, the Church has often tried to use the government to achieve its goals. In the process, the Church has been seduced by power. When the Church sits down with Presidents and Congress, it begins to believe too much in the power of politicians, and too little in Christ's power. We start to believe too much in politics, and too little in prayer. That's idolatry. In our first passage from Hebrews this morning, we heard, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" – friends, He's not sitting on the Throne wrapped in an American flag! He's bigger and greater than that!

Where Is Our Hope?

The United Methodist Church, specifically, is now wrestling with an idol. There is a branch of the United Methodist Church wanting to split off, and form their own separate denomination. Their reason for doing this boils down to a disagreement over human sexuality, specifically homosexuality. The United Methodist Church has a *Book of Discipline*, which is the church law book, and it hasn't changed since at least 2016. It says there are lifestyles which are incompatible with Christian teaching.

These same folks who want to split the United Methodist Church over homosexuality have no problem telling local churches to not pay money – we call them apportionments – to their annual conferences, even though some of those funds go directly to care for children in United Methodist orphanages. Do you see the hypocrisy in this line of thinking? Sin is sin. We all fall short – that's another sin – and instead of turning our focus where it ought to be, we're focused on ripping people apart who aren't like us.

I'm convinced Jesus sits on the Throne, looks down here at all the stuff people do who say they love Him, and He surely cries. There are times when we must grieve Him terribly. "Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the Lord. 'My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water,'" (2:12-13). Despite digging our heels in, digging these broken, cracked cisterns which don't hold water, He still loves us. Jesus calls us to be better bearers of His image.

How many cracked cisterns will we dig in our desire to keep our ideas of what we think God is like from changing, before we recognize that He is much greater than we can imagine, or our minds can conceive? Are we placing our Hope in cracked cisterns, or in the Risen Christ who lives, loves, and reigns forever?

Prayer: Almighty God, as You have sent Jesus to be for us light and truth, send now Your Spirit upon us to grant us grace and strength to follow in His footsteps this day. In His name we ask it, Amen.