

2nd Sunday in Lent February 28, 2010

Jeremiah 26:8-15 òRemaining Faithful When under Fireö

I am reading the book of Exodus this month, and I read something this month that I did not recall reading before. Perhaps it stood out for me because I was working on this sermon which I would later call òRemaining Faithful When under Fire.ö Moses went to Pharaoh with the request that he let God's people Israel go a three days journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God. Pharaoh of course said, òNo,ö and he also decided the Israelites had too much time on their hands that they had time to think about such things, and so he increased their workload. Previously, they were given straw to make their bricks; from now on, they would have to find their own straw, which meant more time they must serve as Pharaoh's slaves each day.

The people, who were previously excited about Moses going to Pharaoh to mediate for their release, now turn on him and become very angry at his interfering in their comfortable situation. (Well, I suppose what is comfortable is relative to your situation, be you a slave or free.) Instead of Moses making things better for them, the people said that he had made things worse! So they told him to leave them alone and go away.

Here is an example of the people not only rejecting the message that Moses brings, but also rejecting the messenger. And while we might sometimes feel like this when we are rejected for trying to bring a message to others for their spiritual good, the people of Israel also went a step further. They called on God to judge Moses for what he had done for them. Moses remained faithful to God and God's message, even when he was under fire. So must we.

God's Word makes it clear that God has two messages, or words, that we must speak ó law and gospel. People sometimes don't like the law, and that is true of the people in our text today from Jeremiah. The people didn't like Jeremiah's strong statements of law. They became very critical of him. They ask him a question that shows this:

"Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?" And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. (v. 9)

So what happened at Shiloh? Shiloh was an early city in Israel where the Ark of the Covenant was kept along with the tabernacle that the Israelites made in the wilderness as a traveling worship center. When Israel was in the wilderness after they came out of Egypt, God gave Moses instructions how to build the tabernacle. After it was completed, the portable worship center moved with them during the 40 years until they came to the Promised Land and the tabernacle was set up permanently at Shiloh. On one occasion just before David became king, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant; but when problems developed for the Philistines because they stole the ark, they sent it back to Israel on a wagon being pulled by a cow. The Ark never was returned to Shiloh. In fact, Shiloh was likely destroyed by the Philistines around that time, and the tabernacle was moved to Gibeon until Solomon brought it to Jerusalem.

So Jeremiah warns the people in our text that Jerusalem and the temple are due to become like Shiloh because of their disobedience. God had seen the evil they had done and he was going to bring destruction on them and their temple. It is a very strong statement of judgment against the people, but it was nothing new to them. The prophets up to Jeremiah's time had repeatedly warned them not to be disobedient. Sometimes the message of law was so difficult for a prophet to speak that it could be emotionally and spiritually painful to the prophet to speak harsh words to his people. But it was the message that God had given Jeremiah and the other prophets to speak, and they knew they must obey God rather than people.

God actually has two words for us to speak ó law and gospel. For the people of Jeremiah's time, the Gospel includes the good news of the favor God holds for them, by grace, that God has acted for them to make them a great nation, that God delivered them from slavery and Egypt, and that God would protect their divine right to the Promised Land. However, God's gracious disposition toward them did not excuse them from obedience of faith solely in God and of obedience of the 10 Commandments. God was always ready to speak a word of God's love and forgiveness to a repentant Israel, but God was also prepared to speak a strong word of law to bring the people to their knees when they disobeyed and strayed after idols. When Jeremiah spoke of the impending judgment for Jerusalem, God was seeking to bring the people to their knees and repentance.

God's Word always includes a message of law and a message of Grace. The Bible also says that that God's Word always draws a response. God's Word will never return empty to God. It will always accomplish the work that God sends it to accomplish.

In the case of our text, God sent Jeremiah to speak a message of law that would bring the people to repentance, and thus to faithful worship and service of God. If the people would respond positively to Jeremiah's message of judgment, the people would follow God's preferred response, which is their **REPENTANCE**. Whenever God speaks a strong message of law to people through his messenger, he is showing them their sins so that they will respond in humble confession of their sins.

So for example, when God sent Jonah to Nineveh, we can see two instances where God sent a message of law that drew God's preferred response. When Jonah went to Nineveh and announced judgment on the people for their evil and disobedience, and said that God was going to destroy their city, the king and the people responded in repentance. They turned from their sin to God. They even

put on rough clothing as a sign of their repentance, and they prayed for God's forgiveness. God accepted their repentance, and God did not destroy their city.

There is another response of repentance that God received from someone in Jonah's story, and it was a result of a judgment that God brought down on Jonah himself. When God sent Jonah to Nineveh to speak a word of judgment against the people, Jonah refused to go. The Ninevites were Israel's enemies, and so in Jonah's thinking they did not deserve a chance to repent. So Jonah sailed away in a different direction from Nineveh, heading far away on a ship. However, God brought Jonah on his knees in repentance in the belly of a fish, and he obediently went and spoke God's message of law and judgment to the Ninevites. Both Nineveh and Jonah responded positively to God's Word.

However, there is another or alternate response, that God doesn't want to receive at the preaching of his Word, but which sometimes is the response, and that is **REJECTION**. Sometimes when the prophet would speak God's Word of judgment, the people would refuse to listen and obey. This is the case in our text for today. Jeremiah warned the people that the city would become like Shiloh because of their disobedience; and while some of the people thought the nation should listen and obey, many others said that Jeremiah deserved to die. They rejected Jeremiah's message of law and judgment.

Rejection of God's message of law happens, but it is not the response that God desires to be the result of the prophet's witness. Still it is necessary for people to hear the law, accept the warning and repent, so that they are ready to receive the message of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But when repentance is rejected, there can be no message of God's love and grace. Because if you don't acknowledge your sins, why would you feel the need for a Savior through the forgiveness of sins.

This is what can make it very difficult for the Christian. We want to tell people about God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, but we cannot do so until someone is ready to hear the Gospel. Like Jeremiah, we are God's witnesses to speak both law and gospel. We are only the messenger, which is actually a very blessed and holy role to play. Like Jeremiah, we can also feel rejection when people don't receive our witness, but we are only doing what God is calling us to do to speak both God's law and gospel. The responsibility of the messenger is not to be focused on ourselves and any negative response to our witness, because our witness is never about us. It is about the message. Too often we become so focused on ourselves that we can feel that we are being rejected. The way Jesus explains it, though, is that when it seems that people are rejecting us, it is not us they are rejecting. People are rejecting Jesus and God. Our responsibility is to be faithful, which is how Jeremiah explains it to the people. He says:

Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. (v. 12)

We are only the messengers, and we are faithful messengers when we keep our focus on the message and not on ourselves. The fact is, we are to speak about the hope we have in Jesus Christ, which means we must sometimes speak God's law, as well.

So what is the message that is to remain our focus? Jeremiah spoke to the people of his time both law and gospel:

Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. (v. 13)

Jeremiah told the people a message of law that they must reform their ways and obey the LORD their God. They were living in violation of the 10 Commandments and the will of God. They were so focused on material things in this life that these things became their idols, or other gods to them. They did other things that opposed God, and they were not always mindful of the needs of their fellowmen. They did not love people with the love of God that serves.

So sometimes we must be bold and confront ourselves and other people with a statement of God's law when disobedience of the 10 Commandments endangers our or their spiritual welfare. Sin separates from God, and so knowledge of sin is necessary in order to understand the grace of God that God wants to give to us through the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we must be bold to speak God's message of law as faithful stewards of God's message.

And like Jeremiah, there is also the opportunity and privilege we have to speak a word of grace. So Jeremiah's words were very harsh to the point that some people were ready to repent and turn back to God, Jeremiah was ready to speak a word of grace that God would relent and not bring judgment on the people. So when we speak both God's law and gospel, we help people to see their sin so that they are next ready to see God's love for them through our crucified and risen savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is not always easy being the messenger; but when we keep the focus off of ourselves and focus instead on the message, then our message of God's law and Gospel will work tremendous changes in the lives of others and of ourselves.

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