

You Shall Be as My Mouth

In the name of him who bids us take up the cross and follow, dear friends in Christ: Last Sunday, with the violent storm that destroyed so much property still so fresh in everyone's mind, someone said to me that a sermon on Job would have been welcome since so many people were feeling like him. I understood perfectly. But in response I explained that by the typical Thursday evening (like the one on which the storm hit), something like 75 percent of the work I'm going to do on a sermon is already done. It's awfully hard to shift gears that late in the game – especially considering that a lot of my time Friday and Saturday was spent in clean up rather than in sermon preparation. Besides, Job was the focus of the Sunday sermon just a few weeks ago. So the way I've got it figured, you got the message in advance. Now *that's* planning.

Anyway, now that I've had time to prepare, today we'll be looking not at Job, but a guy who had it much worse. You see, with Job, the vast majority of his life is pretty sweet. He's got it all: he's wealthy, he's got a big happy family, everything's coming up roses for him all the time; and then, after a long time—*bam!* He loses it all. Shortly thereafter he gets sick and covered with painful boils. His life is really the pits for a while, there's no doubt about it. But it doesn't last. After he suffers a while – a relatively short while compared to the span of his life – the Lord restores his health and gives him back everything he lost times two. He dies at an old age rich, well loved, and happy. Overall, it's still a very good life.

That's not the case with Jeremiah the prophet, from whom we heard in today's Old Testament lesson. His story is arguably the saddest in the Bible. Unlike Job, whose troubles came suddenly, severely, and then passed, Jeremiah's problems just kept piling up on top of each other. They built without letting up toward a dark, catastrophic doom that spelled the death of a nation. And what's worse, perhaps, is that the Lord told Jeremiah in advance that his ministry was going to end badly. Sent to warn God's people of the impending disaster they would face if they did not repent and return to the Lord, he already knew at the get-go that very few if any would heed his warning. "They're not going to listen to you", the Lord told him. "And I will destroy them." It must have been pretty depressing.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Allow me to set up the historical situation. It's the second half of the 7th century BC, the time of the divided kingdom – except that the northern kingdom of Israel has already fallen. They're gone. After many years of pleading with that wayward nation to give up its idolatry and pagan practices and return to the worship of himself, the One True God, the Lord finally acted in righteous judgment. He allowed the empire of Assyria to come in and wipe them out. Ten of the twelve Tribes of Israel essentially ceased to exist. Those people who weren't killed outright were sold as slaves and scattered throughout the empire. The handful who remained were those who were too old, too sick, or too crippled to be bothered with.

Meanwhile, in the south, only the nation of Judah remained of what were God's people. And unfortunately, they didn't learn the lesson they should have from watching God's judgment fall on their northern brethren. Instead, in the years that followed, they seemed even more determined to follow in the footsteps of the rebellious Israelites who were destroyed. To be specific, what they were doing was allowing the worship of the various Canaanite deities of the original inhabitants of the land to coexist and mix with the worship of the Lord God. So at best they treated the Lord as just another one of the gods in a wide pagan pantheon; and at worst they thought of the Lord as the Israelite version and name for the Canaanite rain god Baal. This being the case, it was only natural that they would set up an idol of Baal right in the Temple of the Lord – along with the idols of Baal's voluptuous goddess consorts. They even built on the Temple grounds quarters for the cultic prostitutes (both male and female) who went along with sensual worship of Baal and his

companions. And with the center of the Lord's worship thus defiled, you can imagine what was going on outside the Temple. On every hill and high place they set up altars to various pagan gods – including the bloodthirsty Molech to whom parents sacrificed their infant children by throwing them alive onto burning coals. They also allowed what we call the satanic arts to flourish: fortunes tellers to help you plan your life, necromancers so you could contact your dead relatives, and sorcerers and witches you could hire to hex your enemies—they were everywhere, and their services were in high demand.

And you need to understand that these innovations that corrupted the religious faith of the nation of Judah didn't happen overnight. They came in over a period of about sixty years during the reign of an evil king named Manasseh. He was pushing these changes from the top, but he was only successful in doing so because the majority of the people wanted them. They liked the perceived freedom of not being morally accountable to one God who cared about how they behaved and who would one day call them to account. And so those who wanted to remain faithful to the Lord and to his Word were shouted down, marginalized, and, in the end, openly persecuted. But imagine now what your own faith would be if you were raised toward the tail end of this time. What would have been shocking sacrilege to your grandparents would be only natural to you. You'd be used to seeing idols everywhere, including the Temple. And the very idea that the Lord God of Israel was somehow superior or unique among the gods would be a foreign concept.

Well, eventually (thankfully) wicked King Manasseh died. And after a mercifully short reign of just a couple years, so did his equally wicked son. His eldest son, in turn, was an eight-year-old named Josiah. And upon taking the crown, he decided that he would be a devotee of the Lord God of Israel – but understand that his knowledge of what that meant was shaped by the corrupt culture he grew up in. Anyway, when he was about 18, to do the Lord a favor (because that's what pagans do for their gods), Josiah ordered the renovation of the Temple which was very much in need of repair. And one of the priests while digging around through the temple treasury to find funds to pay for the project, stumbled across a copy of the sacred Scriptures. He started reading about the Lord, his commandments, and his covenant with Israel – things long since forgotten and unknown to his generation. He sent the scrolls up the chain of command. And then the high priest took them to the king, who ordered them to be read aloud. And what he heard terrified him. No doubt he was delighted to hear that the Lord was the only God there is, and that he had chosen Israel to be his special covenant people; but when he compared what the Lord required to what was actually going on, he rightly concluded that the nation was past due for judgment. He tore his robes in sorrow and repentance, and ordered a wholesale house cleaning. It was the Old Testament version of the Reformation. The idols were destroyed, their altars torn down, their prophets killed, and the cultic prostitutes and those who practiced satanic arts were driven out. And God's holy Word, which had been so long neglected, ignored, and forgotten, was once again heard throughout the land in all of its truth and purity.

And a young priest named Jeremiah was part of it all. That's why we hear him say, "Your words were found, and I ate them ... [they] became to me a joy and the delight of my heart." It seems Jeremiah threw himself into the study of God's rediscovered Word. He internalized it. It became a part of him. And he found that it satisfied the deepest longings of his heart. He rapidly emerged as a leading Bible scholar. And it's sometime early in this process that the Lord called him to be a prophet – his living spokesman – to bear his name and to speak his Word to the nation. We know that he became the close friend and confidant of King Josiah, and that the two of them worked together for several years to complete the spiritual reformation the king began.

But then, just when the future was starting to look up, good King Josiah was killed in an ill-advised battle with the Egyptians. For the next several years these enemies dominated Judah, and they selected from the House of David the men who would rule over the land of Judah as their puppets. Their choices were invariably weak, vacillating members of the royal family they could

easily control. And having no backbones, these worthless kings soon allowed all the idolatry and evil practices Josiah fought so hard to eliminate to come back in full force. Jeremiah was disillusioned and distraught at these developments. He was stunned at how quickly things turned around. And he realized that you can change people's outward behavior with laws and decrees; but you cannot change their hearts.

So Jeremiah found himself pretty much alone in his delight in God's Word and his faithfulness to the Lord. But he was still the Lord's prophet, the one called to speak God's Word to that generation – a generation without the slightest interest in what the Lord had to say. But faithful to his calling, he did speak. He urged the people to repent and return to the Lord. With tears he warned them of the coming judgment of God that would surely fall if they did not. He did this for many years. And for his effort he was rewarded with ridicule and mocking. To this was added shunning and isolation – the cold shoulder from the other so-called “men of God”. And then came deliberate attempts to silence him: at first with all the dirty tricks you can think of, and when that failed to stop him, open hostility and physical abuse.

This is what Jeremiah is complaining about in today's reading. “Lord, I'm being attacked and insulted for your sake – for standing up for your truth – and you're letting it happen. Why aren't you defending me? Why aren't you striking down my adversaries? My pain never ends. My wounds don't heal. There's never any joy in my life. And it seems to me that your promises are like a spring that dries up in the summer: no good when the heat is on and I really need it.” It's not the first or the last time Jeremiah lets fly with such accusations against the Lord. And I think most of us can think of times in our lives when we've felt the same way. But the thing for us to see is that these are words of rank unbelief. Jeremiah claims to delight in the Lord's Word and to trust in his perfect wisdom; but when the Lord does things his way and in his time, Jeremiah wants to tell the Lord everything he's doing wrong. The fact is that he doesn't trust the Lord. And in that sense, there is no difference between him and the people who were worshipping false gods.

And so the Lord calls him to repent of his unbelief. “If you return [to me], I will restore you and you shall stand as my spokesman. If you utter what is precious [that is, what I tell you to say] and not what is worthless [namely, more of these complaints of your faithless heart], you shall be as my mouth.” And it's really quite an honor, if you think about it: to be used by the Lord as his mouth, to speak his powerful word, and through it to give life and salvation to those who will hear, repent, and believe – be they many or few. This is the noble task to which Jeremiah was called. And that's why the Lord tells him that he may not bend, twist, or otherwise soften the message. “They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.” This is always a danger: that in an effort to be liked or treated well, the Lord's spokesman will say what people want to hear rather than what the Lord has to say. And then the Lord gives Jeremiah words of comfort. As long as he speaks the Lord's Words, he promises to make him an invincible wall of bronze. “They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail ...for I am with you to save and deliver you ... I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.”

After the death of Josiah, Jeremiah served as God's prophet in Jerusalem for another 25 years or so. In that time he saw things go from bad to worse. Kings, priests, the people – for the most part they all failed to listen to what the Lord had to say through him. Despite his warnings, they just kept on marching on blindly, stupidly, and unnecessarily toward their destruction—which came in 586 BC when the armies of Babylon did to them what the armies of Assyria had done to the northern kingdom of Israel a century and a half before. So by any human standard, we'd have to judge Jeremiah's ministry to be a failure. He could not prevent the destruction of the nation he tried to save by turning it back to the Lord. He was never popular; never well-liked. Instead he was consistently reviled, despised, rejected, and abused—just like the Lord for whom he spoke.

In the Lord's eyes, however, Jeremiah had a very successful ministry; and his is the evaluation that counts. How was it successful? Jeremiah did as he was told. He served as the Lord's mouth and faithfully delivered God's Word. And the Lord kept his promise to Jeremiah. He sustained him in his trials. He bolstered Jeremiah's faith when it flagged. He called him to repent when he doubted the Lord and felt sorry for himself. The Lord did not allow his enemies to defeat him. And he had the prophet safely taken to Egypt before the hammer of judgment finally fell on the rest of faithless Jerusalem.

It raises the question, though, why does the Lord bother? Why call a man to serve as his mouth when he already knows that the message will fall on deaf ears? Three reasons come to mind. First, for the sake of the handful that did listen, repent, and place their trust in the Lord. There were a few, and they too were rescued both in time and more importantly in eternity. The second reason is that the Lord in mercy gives witness to his truth even to those who will not believe so that they are without excuse. They won't be able to stand in the judgment and say, "We never knew. You never gave us a chance." Wrong. They have heard. And they rejected the truth. The third reason is that it's part of the cross that all the faithful children of God must bear. Following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, who for our sakes and for our salvation was reviled, rejected, despised, condemned, and put to death for bearing true witness to the Word of God, all who similarly speak God's truth will suffer. And this is not for no good reason. It's one of the ways the Lord uses to cause us to turn to him for strength and comfort precisely so that giving us his Word and Spirit we will remain faithful until the end and receive his promised salvation.

And this is important for us because we have been called to be used as the Lord's mouth in our generation. Sure, the task is most clearly laid on pastors like myself; but all of us have a part to play in it – especially you who are teachers and parents – but everyone to some degree. Our own generation is not unlike the one Jeremiah was born into. There are many people who, though they have heard of the Lord, have only the foggiest notion about who he really is. And even in so many churches that bear his name, the Lord's Word is being twisted, turned, or worse, completely neglected and contradicted. This is why today we have so many women serving as ministers in various churches against the clear Word of God. A generation ago, it was unheard of. Now it's the standard in many church bodies. Other churches are teaching that the Lord God and the Allah of the Muslims is the same guy. They're doing exactly what the Israelites did with Baal: confusing the true God with one who's made up. This too has been going on for several years. The changes that are being made today are things like sanctioning abortion and gay marriage – not just saying that these things aren't sins, but that they actually please the Lord. Today, at least, these are a scandal to some of us. In a generation it will be so commonplace in some churches that there will be people who never knew there was a controversy. I shudder to think what the next battles will be as we continue this steady slouch toward Gomorrah. But I do know this for certain: continuing to speak God's truth is going to draw ever more criticism and attack.

And this is why it's all the more vital that we learn the lesson Jeremiah did: that as long as we speak God's Word, which is precious and life-giving, and not the worthless complaints of our hearts when we whimper on account of the cross of opposition we have been given for our good, then we are as the mouth of the Lord, proclaiming his truth, his forgiveness, and his salvation to all who will receive it. Forgiving us of our faithless tirades and strengthening us to stand with his Word and Spirit, may our gracious God and Father give us the grace to take up this cross and follow wherever Christ his Son leads, and in the end receive his promised salvation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!