

Seeds of Our Faith
Jeremiah 31:23-25, 31-34
March 29, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel from John contains several themes that will be repeated as we approach Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter Day. This is not our only opportunity to hear about them. So I'm not going to preach on the Gospel today because its content soon will come up again.

And instead, I ask that we consider the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, who was called by God to prophesy during the sixth century B.C. Jeremiah's prophecies are important because they, along with oracles of other Old Testament prophets, were the foundation for development, a few centuries later, of Jewish ideas and doctrines that helped pave the way for Jesus Christ.

Here is how it happened. And this will be a different type of sermon. Jeremiah and other prophets proclaimed wonderful promises from God that created hopes and expectations in the Jewish people during their exile and shortly after they returned. These hopes and expectations, however, went unfulfilled for centuries, and things actually got worse as they were persecuted by other nations.

And this disconnect between the glory of God's promises and the painful realities in which they lived began to undermine their understanding of a powerful and sovereign God who had chosen the Hebrew people for himself. They wondered if God had forgotten about them.

Then, during the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, about four hundred years after Jeremiah's death, and about two hundred years before Christ's birth, interesting things started to happen.

Jewish religious ideas began to emerge that could give hope to a disillusioned people. They began to embrace new reasons for still trusting God even though these uplifting words of Jeremiah and other prophets did not bear any resemblance to the lives they were living.

And some of these ideas, for the first time, focused on supernatural things. Prior to this time Jewish religious practices were narrowly centered on obedience to the law given to Moses. They were based in the here and now, not the hereafter. But changes appeared in several ways.

One was that the people began to accept an understanding of life after death. They also began to believe in God's divine justice at the end of history so that their wicked oppressors would be punished and they, if they lived righteous lives, would be rewarded. In addition, more concrete expectations emerged about a messianic figure who would deliver them from their distress.

Does this start to sound familiar? These new ideas that appeared in the time just before Christ became the cultural seedbed and nurturing climate for the teachings of Jesus and development of Christian doctrines in the New Testament. Jesus did not just drop out of the sky and start saying things no one ever heard before. Instead, many of the doctrines he proclaimed could have resonated nicely with newly developed currents of Jewish thought.

II.

That's a brief summary of this sermon. Let's explore it and begin with some background. We know that the history of Israel's Old Testament relationship with God was one of blessing, disobedience, discipline, repentance, and blessing again, followed by the same seemingly endless cycle.

Jeremiah and the other prophets were part of one of these cycles. They were God's agents who appeared about eight hundred years before Christ, and after the civil war that divided the once powerful nation of Israel into two second-rate countries. The northern kingdom still called itself

Israel, while the southern kingdom took back its ancient name of Judah. The Bible says that all the kings in the north did evil in the sight of the Lord, and all but two kings in the south did the same.

So, God sent these prophets to call the Jewish people back into obedience of the law he gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai centuries earlier. And God's words through these prophets usually painted a bleak and dismal picture of destruction if the people continued in their evil ways. But God also promised forgiveness and blessings if they repented and lived righteous lives.

But they did not repent, and these frightful prophecies came true. The northern kingdom, Israel, was defeated in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians, and ten of the twelve Hebrew tribes went into captivity or dispersion and were never heard from again. About one hundred and fifty years later history repeated itself when the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered by Babylon.

Jeremiah entered the picture between these two disasters. And he spoke to the people of Israel already in exile, and to the people of Judah for whom exile was still in the future.

And let's look at what God told Jeremiah to say to them in today's reading. God said he would restore their fortunes and bless them. All who were weary and faint would be satisfied and replenished. He would make a new covenant with them and write his law on their hearts so they no longer could disobey. And he would forgive them and remember their sin no more.

III.

Well, what really happened? We know that the new covenant was several centuries in the future. But the people of the time did not think that far ahead. They easily could have thought Jeremiah was speaking God's promises for their own lives. This led to the problem I described earlier about how God's promises differed from reality.

So let's review how God's plan unfolded. Six hundred years before Christ, Babylon conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and took the people into exile. Then Persia conquered Babylon and the Persian king let the people return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They had religious freedom but not political freedom, even though their lives were not that bad under the Persians. This is where the Old Testament ends.

But then, after the temple had been rebuilt, the Greeks conquered Persia and things changed for the worse. Now we are in the time between the testaments. And the Greeks were more harsh than the Persians, especially in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

This led to a Jewish revolt, and the Jews won their freedom for more than a century. But they could not govern themselves. They replaced the traditional high priest with a self-serving political priest, corrupted temple worship, and basically mismanaged the country.

This produced another civil war. And by this time the Romans had conquered the Greeks in other parts of the world, and the chaos brought about by the civil war in Palestine was just the excuse the Romans needed to occupy Jerusalem and take over the country. To locate this in history, Christ would be born in less than sixty years.

The Greek and Roman occupations, and the disastrously brief period of Jewish independence, gave rise to a sense of frustration. The Jewish people looked at the words of prophets like Jeremiah and understood they would be living blessed lives. But they looked out their front windows and saw they were living cursed lives.

IV.

And so we ask how the people coped with this conflict between prophecy and reality. An answer appears in literature of the times that reaffirmed God's sovereignty but also promoted new ideas

of hope. And, of course, this literature is not in the Bible because it was written after the Old Testament was finished, but before Jesus was born.

One of these ideas was resurrection and life after death, and it was new to Jewish thinking. During most of the Old Testament, Jewish hopes for eternity rested with a good name that would live on after death, and sons to carry on the family line. There was no expectation of an afterlife.

But during this later period of heightened persecution, martyrdom, and revolution some Jews began to reinterpret Scripture. And works such as the Apocrypha and other external writings began to circulate. These writings supported the belief that God was still with them and would take care of them in the next world because of the suffering they had endured in this one.

And closely related to hopes for life after death was the growing idea of divine justice where God would punish the wicked and reward the righteous in an otherworldly future.

This was another new idea. Just as there was no sense of an afterlife, there also was no established belief that there would be heavenly consequences for how people behaved on earth. Concepts of reward and punishment were limited to what happened during one's lifetime on earth, and that was it.

Finally, this period just before Christ witnessed new hopes for a messianic deliverer. And although the Old Testament contains references to a messianic figure, there are different views in Hebrew Scriptures about whether God would come to earth to rule in his own right, or whether the messiah would be God's agent as a human being, or would be transcendent supernatural figure.

There also are different biblical views about what, exactly, the messiah would do. Today's reading from Jeremiah, for example, is hopeful and uplifting about a new covenant and forgiveness, but is somewhat vague about actual restoration of the nation.

In any event, these messianic ideas became more clear during this time of persecution and oppression. Expectations were heightened that a kingly messiah would restore the dominance of Israel among the nations of the world, and that all nations would recognize and pay homage to her. The Roman boot would be removed from the Jewish neck.

V.

So, we see that Jeremiah's uplifting promises of Israel's future glory, along with similar promises of other prophets, ignited a beacon of hope that burned brightly for a while, but eventually could not penetrate the clouds of oppression hanging over the Jewish people.

And the peoples' cultural and social response to their deplorable conditions created ideas that eventually set the stage for John the Baptist as he boldly walked out of the Galilean wilderness to proclaim the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And that's the point of this sermon. Old Testament prophecies like we heard today from Jeremiah created hopes and expectations in the Jewish people that went unfulfilled for centuries. They responded during the time between the testaments with new thoughts and doctrines that created a fertile garden in which our own Christian theology could take root and grow.

So, we see that these original Jewish notions about life after death, divine judgment, and the coming messiah served as a bridge between the Old Testament and early Christian expressions in the New. And we also can see that the fundamentals of what we believe today, and what we will proclaim when we say the Nicene Creed in just a moment, have their origins in the early Jewish community into which Jesus was born as the fulfillment of prophecy. *Amen.*