

Jeremiah's Welcome Sermon
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Jeremiah 7:1-15

We have great ushers here at LaGrave. They do a wonderful job. They greet you with a smile, and hand you a bulletin. They help with any problems that might arise. They are friendly and welcoming. Jeremiah would make a terrible usher. In our passage, Jeremiah is the opposite of welcoming. Jeremiah stands at the entrance of the people and he yells, "Go away! Get lost you fakers! You're not welcome here!" Everyone is streaming into the temple for worship. And as they come through the gate Jeremiah berates them: "What do you people think you are doing here? You think that God is impressed with all your sacrifices? You think this temple is so great and so long as you keep bringing your little lambs and goats here God will keep you safe!? You're not safe!! If you don't change the way you live God's going to knock this place down and you with it!" Not a recipe for church growth.

The Bible doesn't record the people's reaction to Jeremiah's words that day. But you can bet they were offended. Because Jeremiah wasn't simply being loud and obnoxious at the temple gate, he was also attacking and questioning one of their most cherished institutions. He was attacking the temple. The temple was a symbol of national pride and strength! What Jeremiah was doing was roughly the equivalent of spitting on the flag in a room full of veterans. For the Israelites, the temple was a huge symbol of security and God's favor. When people looked up and saw the temple in the middle of their city they thought, "We are God's people and we are safe!" No matter what was going on in the world, no matter what trouble was brewing in Babylon or Assyria, no matter what marauding armies might be on the border of their country, the people could turn and look at the temple and feel, in the words of verse 10, "We are safe." 'Everything is going to be okay. God is with us. We are his chosen people. He will shelter us under his wings.'

And this wasn't simply a random feeling these people had, this feeling was anchored in the words of Scripture. This was what the Bible said! Psalm 127: "those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever." Nothing can shake the mountain where the temple stands! And even one of our favorite Psalms, Psalm 46 says, "there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place in which the most high dwells, God is within her she will not fall!" There it is: She will not fall. Thus saith the Lord. To live in the shelter of the temple was to dwell secure.

But now here was Jeremiah shouting at the gate, telling them that their worship was useless, that God was displeased, and God was going to destroy the temple and sweep them away. It is as if someone were standing in the tower door entrance pointing a finger at you and saying: "You people come into church every Sunday morning and say, "Jesus Loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!" Don't count on it!! Do you think God cares about your fancy church services, your carefully crafted sermons and your polished anthems! If you're not taking care of the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, if you don't treat each other justly, if your time is spent chasing success and pleasure, all your fancy choral anthems and all your beautiful postludes and all your carefully crafted sermons are worthless to God."

Why is Jeremiah saying these things that will make people angry, and might even get him in trouble? Because the people have completely missed the point of the temple, and they have completely missed the point of worship. For them worship has become all about security and comfort. They want worship that will make them feel good about themselves. But that wasn't the purpose of temple worship. Temple worship was always meant to push them, to move them.

Let me put temple worship in Biblical context for you. The temple worship had its beginnings in the building of the tabernacle. If you want to understand the tabernacle you have to understand it as the replanting of the garden of Eden on earth. You remember what happened in the original Garden of Eden? It used to be a place where the Lord walked with human beings, right next to them. He lived among them, but then human sin destroyed the relationship and we were cast out of the garden into a world of thorns and struggle. God no longer walked in our midst the way he used to. But God has not given up on his world or on us, so he calls a people Israel. They are going to be his people. They will be his treasured possession! But not so that he can enjoy fellowship with them while the rest of the world falls to pieces. His special relationship with Israel is for the whole world! Exodus 19:6—I called you so that you would be a kingdom of priests. You will represent me to the world. The whole world will see the way you live and they will know that I am the one and only true God. So God and Israel weren't an exclusive club, they were a mission society. Their lives were meant to be a sign of God's love and justice and righteousness in the middle of the world.

The tabernacle is at the center of that missional community. When God has Israel build the tabernacle, it's like he replants the garden of Eden. In the middle of the desert, the garden is replanted. The tabernacle is carefully constructed. Within its curtains everything is clean and holy. It's like 500 square yards of heaven on earth. Look at the decorations of the tabernacle—fruits and heavenly beings—it's meant to evoke the heavenly garden. And God comes back to walk in the garden. After it's built, the glory of God comes down into the tabernacle and dwells there. When the people of God worship in the tabernacle, their worship and the life that flows from that worship is meant to show the life of the garden, the life in harmony with God, to the rest of the world. Tabernacle worship was not about making Israel feel good about itself. The tabernacle is not an end in itself, it points to a future where all the world will be filled with justice and righteousness and it calls the people to embody that future before the nations.

The temple is sort of the next stage in God's plan. It is bigger and more splendid than the tabernacle, and instead of being the center of a wandering tribe, it is the center of an established nation. Now the worship doesn't just anchor a wandering people; it anchors a people who live in the land. The temple and its worship are meant to create a whole nation whose life together in a place shows the world the glory and supremacy of God. The temple is also a little bit of heaven on earth. The temple is not an end in itself, it points to a future where all the world will be filled with justice and righteousness and it calls the people to embody that future before the nations.

The next stage in the temple is revealed when Jesus dies on the cross. What happens at the moment Jesus dies? The curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. You can think of that as God's temple renovation. God is initiating a large scale expansion. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus defeats the power of evil and shows his Lordship over all creation. Now the temple won't just be in Jerusalem. He rebuilds the temple, and it's us. He is our head and our high priest and we are his temple. Now all over the world there are worshipping communities, and in our worship and in our life together we do the same thing that the temple worship did. Our care for each other, our care for our neighbors embodies the new creation life. It's a witness to the justice and righteousness and love of God. It's a witness to the Kingdom of

God that's meant to bless those around us and draw them to Christ. The church is not here to make us feel good about ourselves. The church is not an end in itself, it points to a future where all the world will be filled with justice and righteousness and it calls us to embody that future before the world.

The last stage of the temple is in the vision of Revelation. In John's vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21, where is the temple? That's a trick question. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem—Revelation 21:22. That's because everything is the temple. The rule of God, the holiness of God, the peace of God has filled the earth. Jesus is the temple and he is all in all. Here's an interesting but important detail. What's the shape of the new Jerusalem? It's a perfect cube (Rev 21:16). Why does that matter? Well, what else in the Bible is a perfect cube? The inner part of the temple, where the holy place and the most holy place were. That was also a perfect cube. So the imagery is that the New Jerusalem is like a Holy of Holies. The Lamb reigns at the center of the city and the whole earth is a temple of his glory.

Do you see the trajectory of the temple throughout scripture? Tabernacle. Temple. Church. New Jerusalem. At every stage the worship of the temple and the life of the people who engage in that worship points beyond itself to this plan of God. Because of that trajectory, worship can never just be about us and our security and our tastes and our needs—it is meant to equip us to be witnesses of that story of redemption and change.

Jeremiah is so angry, the Lord is so angry with his people, because they've made the temple worship about them. It's about the security and well-being of their homes, the security and well-being of their nation. It's about them feeling good about themselves. There's no push for change in themselves. There's no push for change in the society. There's no sense of witness and mission. Week after week it's 'God loves you and he won't let anything happen to you.' Jeremiah says, "Hah! The Babylonians are coming; they will knock this temple flat."

Prosperous and relatively comfortable churches all need to spend time with Jeremiah 7 once in a while. Prosperous and relatively comfortable churches who really work hard at polishing their liturgy and making it beautiful really need to spend time with Jeremiah 7. Is our worship pushing us down the road toward the new creation? Is it pushing us towards witness and mission? Is it changing us? Or is it the beauty of it, the excellence of it, simply making us feel secure and loved and comfortable. It's tricky because security and assurance is a huge part of the gospel. In Christ we are secure, we are forgiven. As we read and sang earlier in the service, we are his beloved children and nothing can take us from his hand.

But there are different ways that security can function in your life. On the one hand there is the safety designed to bring comfort. If you go to one of those resort hotels in Mexico often these resorts will come with tight security. Crime rates in some of these communities can be pretty high, so the resort will have a sort of perimeter to its compound, it will have cameras, it will have security guards all set up so that undesirables cannot get in, and so that the people inside can have fun and relax and do whatever it is they like to do. This is security for the sake of ease and comfort.

There is also a kind of security which has a completely different function. When I was a youth leader, one of the events we would do was a High Ropes course. For those of you who don't know High Ropes involves a series of activities and challenges that you try to perform that involve balance and coordination. The tricky thing about these activities is that they take place 40 to 50 feet in the air. You walk across a balance beam without using your hands. And you do it 50 feet in the air!! You swing from one tire swing to another, 50 feet in the air! You walk across a tightrope holding on to a dangling rope, 50 feet in the air. It is fun and challenging. None of

this would happen if you weren't tied in to a security line. Before you go up and try these challenges, the facilitators put a harness on you so that if you ever slip, you fall maybe two feet before your safety line catches you. Without the safety line, no one would ever do any of these activities, they would be too dangerous and too scary. With the safety line the tasks are still scary, but now you can try things and take risks and experience things that you have never experienced before. This is a different sort of security: A security that enables you to confidently take on tasks that would otherwise be impossible.

For the people of Judah, the security of the temple had become that first kind of security, the security of ease and comfort. A kind of spiritual resort. A worship spa. God meant for the promises of his covenant and the security proclaimed in the temple to be the second kind of security, the kind that equipped them for the work of justice and righteousness. His promises are a lifeline that enables ordinary people to attempt great things for God without fear.

Congregation, Christ has laid down his life for you, and there is nothing that can separate you from his love. You're strapped in the harness and your lifeline is secure. Go out and attempt great things for him.

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