

25 January 2015

## **Echoes: A Comfortable People**

Jeremiah 2:4-13

We continue skimming through the history of God's people in this sermon series. We started out in Genesis, in the time of Jacob, dropped briefly in on Moses at the time of his call in Exodus, and last week encountered the prophet Deborah in the book of Judges. In each stop, we have seen some different way that the people of God relate to the culture in which they live. In Genesis, for instance, the Israelites were a tiny minority trying not to make waves in the larger society. But today we move to a different time – when the people of God *were* the culture.

After the time of the Judges, you see, Israel decided to have a king, like the nations around them, and for a brief time this worked well. The kingdom of David was strong and that of his son Solomon was peaceful and prosperous. In that prosperity, Solomon built a magnificent temple, so that Israel's God was front and center in Israelite society. After Solomon, things fell apart, though; a civil war divided Israel into two nations – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. But, as in the case of the two Koreas today, the people never lost the dream of reuniting as one people. Well, that didn't happen. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Assyrian Empire came down and destroyed the Northern Kingdom, leaving Judah alone to be the people of God. Shortly after that calamity, though, the good times returned, as Judah got a new king, Josiah.

Josiah became king when he was young and had all the fire and ambition of youth. Almost at once, he began sending troops and settlers north, to reclaim the ruins of the Northern Kingdom. The dream of restoring the Solomonic Empire began to grow. As a part of that dream, Josiah began to restore the great temple that Solomon had built. During that work, a book of the Mosaic law was uncovered in a closet – probably the book of Deuteronomy – and using the laws of that book Josiah set out to re-establish the worship of Israel's God as the linchpin of society. Every idol was destroyed. In fact, even shrines to Israel's God out in the countryside were closed down. Israel was to worship only one God, and they were to worship that God in Jerusalem under the eyes of the priests, who became the most powerful men in Judah after the king. It was a good time to be a worshipper of Israel's God. The book of 2 Kings thinks that King Josiah was just the cat's pajamas – best king since David, but without the adultery thing. Yahweh rules! Our God's number 1! Who could argue with such success?

A young man named Jeremiah could. Listen to what this young prophet had to say during the time of Josiah's great reforms – the reading is from Jeremiah 2, verses 4-13.

*Jeremiah 2:4-1. Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord:*

*What wrong did your ancestors find in me  
that they went far from me,  
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?  
They did not say, 'Where is the Lord  
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,  
who led us in the wilderness,  
in a land of deserts and pits,  
in a land of drought and deep darkness,  
in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?'  
I brought you into a plentiful land  
to eat its fruits and its good things.*

*But when you entered you defiled my land,  
and made my heritage an abomination.  
The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?'  
Those who handle the law did not know me;  
the rulerstransgressed against me;  
the prophets prophesied by Baal,  
and went after things that do not profit.*

*Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord,  
and I accuse your children's children.  
Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,  
send to Kedar and examine with care;  
see if there has ever been such a thing.  
Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed their glory  
for something that does not profit.  
Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord,  
for my people have committed two evils:  
they have forsaken me,  
the fountain of living water,  
and dug out cisterns for themselves,  
cracked cisterns  
that can hold no water.*

At the start, it almost sounds as if Jeremiah's on board with Josiah's reforms. He talks about how Israel had abandoned their God and served Baal – and isn't that just what Josiah's priests had been saying? That it was time to return to the temple of the true God? But Jeremiah has nothing positive to say about those influential priests, or about the rulers of Judah, or even about the other prophets. He says that those who handle God's law don't know God. And then he ends this prophecy with a great analogy. Speaking for God, he says, *My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that hold no water.*

Did you get that? Here's what Jeremiah is saying. It's not just that God's people have turned away from the true, life-giving covenant faith with the God who loves them. They have, and that's bad enough. But instead of turning back to that faith, they've instead built impressive structures of their own. All they needed to do was kneel by the flowing stream of God's grace and drink, but instead they had a capital campaign and a building program and constructed a massive cistern into which they could divert some of the water. They didn't want to go to the source of the water, they wanted to bring the water to themselves, and then just hold it there where they could control it. Their cistern was cracked. It looked great but didn't hold water, so all they really had was an impressive, and completely empty, pit. That's Jeremiah's scathing assessment of Josiah's reforms: You didn't want to seek God; you wanted to incorporate God into your own ambitious plans. You've built an impressive structure, polished up the temple and given its priests all sorts of influence. It looks great. But it's empty of God.

Okay, there are a few echoes here for our time. Remember, this month we're thinking about how the church relates to culture, and there *have* been times when the Church has been very influential in society. In America, it was the 1950s. After the Second World War, there was an incredible spike in church membership – which brought with it immense influence. Those were the years when “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God We Trust” began to be printed on our paper money. Billy Graham crusades were the Must See TV of the era, and Sunday morning church attendance was all but obligatory. Downtown Protestant churches built new buildings or added new wings to old ones because they could barely contain the crowds. Some of you here remember that time. The church looked as if it were on top of the world, and it organized massive denominational structures to support it.

But there are some things we should remember, especially as we have celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. day this week. That influential, prosperous, successful church was also the one that was 100% segregated, that tacitly accepted the Jim Crow laws of the South and the No Negroes After Dark laws in towns throughout the Northern Midwest. That church sat silently on the sidelines through most of the Civil Rights movement. The Church of Jesus Christ – all of it, not just the Black Church – should have been leading the way toward treating all people as equals, because that's where God was. We did not. Why? Because those Civil Rights protesters were out to change society, and the white mainline Protestant church of the 50s had too much invested in keeping society the way it was.

That's what Jeremiah was talking about. When faith becomes powerful and influential, it too often loses its voice. Here's how Jeremiah puts it in v. 8: *The priests have not asked, “Where is God?”* You see, to Jeremiah the role of the religious leader is to challenge the status quo, not protect it. It is to challenge the faithful, challenge the society, and even challenge God. Our task is not to look at society and determine what's in our best interest there; our task is to look at our world and ask, “Where is God today?”

The priests of Jeremiah's time had stopped asking “Where is God?” because they *knew* where God was. “Right here! In our humongous temple! See? Look at those towers! Look at those crowds! Look at our offerings!” But God was not there. Within a generation – as Jeremiah predicted – the temple was destroyed. There were no more crowds and there were no more sacrificial offerings. Where was God? God was in the scattered communities of Jewish exiles who didn't have a temple and so they had to seek out new ways to worship God. I'll talk more about those exiles and their faith next week; I mention them today just so you know that God was still around, still working, still the source of fresh water, still bringing life and grace and joy – to anyone who took the time to ask, “Where is God today?”

A Final Word: In 2011, David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Research Group, published a book called *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith*. According to his research, young adults today are intensely interested in spiritual questions – but they are no longer looking for answers in the established church. That church they describe as “overprotective” and “shallow” and just too doggone sure of its own rightness. Or, in Jeremiah's words, too many of us got comfortable in our success and stopped asking, “Where is God?” Don't ever stop asking that. Let that question be like breathing to you. And we'll be fine.