

22 July 2018

Text: Jeremiah 23:1-6

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A lot had happened to the prophet Jeremiah. He had been a royal advisor to a king, a spiritual leader to God's chosen people, and a word of encouragement in dark and uncertain times. Jeremiah was God's mouthpiece to a nation who had abandoned God and then paid the price for it. God brought in Assyria and Babylon to be His hands of judgement on the people and as a result, they lived in exile, longing for the days when they were in the land flowing with milk and honey.

Now some could argue that it wasn't Israel's fault, after all, they were led astray by religious leaders who were corrupt and wicked. They were only following the leader, so why would God punish them? He doesn't do that does He? I mean He's their buddy, their friend?

Sometimes it's important to remember that in the Old Testament, we find both a God who is merciful and saves His people time and again and a God who disciplines His chosen people. His fairness and justice is beyond anything that we could ever understand because we can't even imagine someone who is both fair and just rightly at the same time. His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. The Hebrew words for God's fairness and justice is called "Mishpat" and "Zedakok". Mishpat meaning judgement and zedakok meaning righteousness. Judgment and righteousness.

God was fair in His judgement of the Israelites. He had delivered them out of the hands of Pharaoh and given them the land flowing with milk and honey. What did they do with it? They slapped God in the face and said, "You know God, this just isn't good enough. We want more". And more is what God gave them. He allowed them to choose their own leaders. Most of their leaders were poorly chosen, leading them further away from God rather than drawing them to Him. So the punishment that they received was fair, for they had sinned against God.

Yet even in his judgement, His zedakok, toward Israel, He was also righteous. We find that in the fact that though Jeremiah preached about how the children of Israel would be punished for their wickedness, that God would still provide a righteous branch from the stump of Jesse. That branch would "reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord is our

righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:5-6). This righteous branch would be from the lineage of King David and He would be born in a manger in Bethlehem on that first Christmas morning. We know Him as Jesus Christ, our Savior, the only begotten Son of God.

"So what pastor? That was then, this is now, why should we care about Jeremiah, or what happened to Israel. They messed up and they got what they deserved." Well, it was then and that was them and yes, they were punished because they sinned against God. But when you think about it, our world isn't much different from theirs. Look around you. Everywhere you look, you see a fallen sinful world. Where once God was revered and feared, now He is mocked, and removed. Our country alone is no different. The homicide rates in major cities in our nation have increased exponentially over the past 20 years. More children have been aborted than they were 10 years ago. People value fun, freedom to do whatever they want, and the ability to control death, more than they do helping one another, protecting those who cannot speak or defend themselves, and the sanctity of human life.

And God continues to give us both His judgment and righteousness, His Mishpat and Zedakok. He allows for people to harden their hearts while still calling men to preach His words of repentance and absolution. In the darkness caused by sin, God still delivers on His promise never to leave or forsake us and He gives every opportunity to reconcile and come back to Him. His Word is still a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

The realm of the church is no different either. Across every denominational spectrum, itching ears are being scratched all in the name of acceptance. Solid Biblical doctrine is pushed aside for social tolerance. In other words, society is determining who God is and what the Bible says instead of faithful pastors standing as bulwarks proclaiming, like Jeremiah, the truth of God's Word, that they are sinners who need to repent and Jesus became a sinner to save them.

Why does right doctrine matter in the church? Because it's a matter of eternal significance, souls are at stake, eternity matters. When the church scratches the itching ears of the people, then the church opens its door to the false teachers and pastors. Or to put it another way, the church becomes scattered as the children of Israel did, like sheep without a shepherd. Their souls become at risks for losing their faith and they lack hearing the Gospel for them.

Fortunately for us, God will not be mocked. His Word will not return void. He calls men to be pastors and uses seminaries to train them as the Holy Spirit transform them into being His shepherds of the wayward sheep. And He sends them, just as He sent Jeremiah, to preach the Word faithfully and to administer the Sacraments rightly. Then

God goes and gathers His sheep again, bringing them back to His Word rightly preached and His gifts rightly given for them. The sheep hear the Shepherds voice in the liturgy, and they know it, responding back in prayer and praise joyfully, knowing that they are loved, their sin forgiven, that they are not alone, and that their Savior cares enough for them to love them so that they may go and love their neighbors as themselves.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are a restored people, just as the Israelites were. You are a people whose God has delivered you from the bondage of sin and death. That does not mean that you are perfect, you're not. None of us are. But, it means that even in your imperfections, failures, and doubts, that God has remained true to you and will continue to do so through His gifts of Word and Sacrament, for you. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is here for you and always will be. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.