

What do you see, Jeremiah?

Jer. 1:1-13; 8:14 - 9:1

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Thank you for the couple of Sundays off! Eli and I were at Men and Boys Retreat at Camp Mennoscah a couple weeks ago, then I was here for a Sunday, and then this past weekend I was at WDC Ministers Retreat on Friday and Saturday and then I ran in the Prairie Fire ½ Marathon on Sunday morning. Thank you for those regenerative experiences!

So after I introduced the series on the prophets, Pastor Lois has taken you through a deep dive into the prophet Amos, and then last week Hosea. I want to begin this summary message of Jeremiah with a story:

A number of years back in my former career as a combine mechanic at a John Deere dealership, I got a call from my supervisor in the middle of the day in the middle of wheat harvest. I was already probably on my third or fourth in-field service call of the day and when my phone rang I answered it, knowing it was my supervisor checking on my progress and to let me know where I was going next. I gave him the update on my status, and then he told me about my next call that he was sending me on. As soon as he mentioned the combine was an 8820, I'm sure my shoulders drooped a little. The 20 series combines went out of production 38 years ago! They are the ones that had the cab offset to the side with the engine next to the cab which meant that all the heat from the engine competes with the air conditioning system. Furthermore, all the main drive belts were routed to the main pulleys under the drivers seat, so to replace those belts you have to remove the seat and work in the confined space of the cab. Why JD thought it was a good idea I will never know!

And when my supervisor told me where the machine was located, my heart sank. I knew exactly which machine this was (It was nowhere close to this area, and don't worry, I won't ever tell a story in a sermon involving any of you unless I ask your permission!). I and my co-workers had worked on this machine numerous times every harvest. It was held together by duct tape and baling wire. We only worked on it during harvest when it was broken down. Never during the off season since the customer "does his own maintenance work" which we learned

means he puts a fresh layer of duct tape over the holes in the grain tank and maybe adds some hydraulic oil to the reservoir to compensate for the many oil leaks. We all dreaded working on it, because you would go to fix what is broken down—the problem that is currently stopping it from being able to harvest at the moment—but as you worked on it you would observe MANY other problems that are just about to stop the machine from harvesting! Belts hanging by a thread. Chains so stretched and worn that they are trying to walk the sprockets, augers so worn out that the flighting looks like a saw blade, bearings squeaking, shaker arms clanking. Years earlier when I had worked on it the straw spreader was about to fall off of it so I had helped him put a ratchet strap on it to hold it up until he could “fix it later”. It was still being held up by the same ratchet strap years later.

“His fountain auger stopped turning,” my supervisor told me. Well, ok, it's at least not a problem with a belt under the seat. The fountain ager is the one that takes it into the grain tank. But I know that the fountain auger drive gearbox that was the likely culprit can be a real bugger to get apart since the fountain auger itself is usually rusted on to the output shaft, especially on machines that spend a good bit of their life outside in the weather—like this one does.

When I arrived there in the customer's farm yard where he had parked the combine under a shade tree thankfully, sure enough when I opened the side panel the drive pulley to the gearbox was crooked and of course the output side of the gearbox was producing no rotation. I knew that a bearing had failed inside the gearbox allowing the gears inside to disengage from each other. So I looked up the parts that I would need on my laptop, saw that yes, we have the gearbox parts on hand at Mcpherson. So I sent the parts order to the parts department and sent the customer on his way to get the parts. In the meantime, I would get this thing taken apart.

Well, of course, the fountain auger that was worn down to half its original diameter and was sharp as a razor, would not come off of the output shaft of the gearbox—even after I had used my air-hammer on it. Plan B was what we called the gas wrench (cutting torch). I would have to torch off the shaft at the base of the auger in order to get things apart. So I got the torch out and started cutting the shaft. I barely got started when I realized that there was fire everywhere down in the sump hole and all around the elevator housing. Apparently there

had been a big hole worn through the bottom of the sump where grain had been leaking down to the ground. And someone, the customer, since he couldn't get up in there to put duct tape up there, had stuffed an old t-shirt up under it and then stretched a couple of tarp straps around it to keep it in place to stop, or slow down, the leak. So when the fire and hot metal from my torch hit that t-shirt diaper that was loaded with grain and dry dust, it ignited. I quickly undid the tarp straps and let it fall down to the ground and stomped it out, and after dousing the remaining fire with the water fire extinguisher that I carried on the back of the truck for such occasions, I sized up the project that had just gotten bigger. The gearbox that had failed attaches to this upper sump piece, so this would be the time to replace it. I quickly called the parts department...the customer was still there at the store—so I added upper sump housing piece that we happen to have in stock to the parts that the customer would bring back with him.

So after I had finished torching through the fountain auger and shaft, and got the gearbox taken off, I would next work with taking the upper sump off. In order to do that, you have to take all the bolts out of the top of it and flex the clean grain elevator away from the side of the machine to remove it from the top of the clean grain elevator. As I did this, I heard a crinkling metal sound down at the bottom of the elevator housing. To my dismay, I looked down and saw that the metal tube from side of the machine to the bottom of the elevator that usually flexes just enough to allow the top to be removed was worn and rusted so thin that it just crinkled and nearly broke in two!

By this time the customer was back with the parts. I showed him what was going on. He wasn't worried. We'll fix that tube at the bottom later, he said. I noticed he had a fresh roll of duct tape on the dash of his old pickup, along with a whole lot of other things on the dash.

Well, I don't know that you want to hear a sermon just about the details of a combine repair service call, so let me summarize by saying that I eventually got things back together as the sun had gone down and by the time we wrapped about half of his roll of duct tape around the bottom tube it was dark. We started the machine up...and kicked it into gear.

Everything turned! It may have been squeaking and banging and clanging a grinding, but all was turning! He headed to the field with the one headlight that

worked, determined to cut enough to fill his truck yet that night. Ordinarily I would put my tools away in the truck and follow the customer to the field if it wasn't far to make sure everything was ok. But on this machine, everything is never ok—its just a matter of time until something else fails. With all the rust, wear, years and years of neglect, not to mention the age of the machine and the fact that more and more of the parts were becoming obsolete, all of us technicians agreed that even if the customer were to decide to fix everything, it would not be feasible. The cost of the parts alone would easily be triple or quadruple the value of the machine! The 4 of us technicians talked about how we quietly hoped that at some point there would be a failure so vast and catastrophic that the customer would finally see that the only option was to send the whole combine to Mike's Equipment at Buhler, or Abilene Machine (scrap yards). We were convinced that any profit he may have generated in his farming was being swallowed up by his combine repair bills!

Our prophet of the day is the prophet Jeremiah. The book begins with God calling Jeremiah. God says in V7 "Jeremiah, where I send you, you must go, what I say you must say"—which reminded me of the song that I chose for today "where you go I'll go, where you stay I'll stay". And then God stretches out a hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth and says, "Jeremiah, I am putting my words in your mouth." Going forward, you will speak my word, and what you speak will go out and do its work. The Hebrews had this understanding of God's word that God speaks, and things happen. God's word and the action are one and the same. Like in the creation story, God speaks "let there be light," and the sun appeared...

Next, God gives him a vision of a pot boiling over from the North, and God says, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" The answer to "What do you see?" is that he is to prophesy to the people of Judah that destruction is coming. The people of Judah, having found themselves caught between the superpowers of the day—Babylon to the northeast and Egypt in the southwest—have been trying to appease Babylon by seeking the support of Egypt and making alliances with them to try to keep their little kingdom from destruction.

But God says through the prophet Jeremiah, don't even pray for Judah to be delivered from this threat. Yeah, there may have been a brief moment of restoration, or a temporary "combine repair" made under the good king Josiah,

but destruction is still coming. Don't try to avoid it. Don't keep trying to fix that old combine! Let it fail already. Restoration is not feasible. Do not pray that the kingdom will survive, God tells him, because that's not going to happen. Instead, Jeremiah's task is to prepare the people of Judah for destruction and exile. The message is, "If you want to live, yield to the coming exile."

You know, I wonder what seemingly existential threats we may be carrying with us today?

Could it be that rather than pray for deliverance from the perceived threats and exiles of life we may be facing, or from exile we are currently in that feels like foreign land, we would do better to embrace exile in some way? God's word through Jeremiah to people in exile was "build houses, and live in them, plant gardens and eat from them. Seek the welfare of the city where you find yourself. Settle in. embrace it. It's going to be a while."

It's Mother's day. I once knew of a mom who for years enjoyed having her children come to her home for Sunday lunch. As they grew up and some got married and started families of their own, she worked so hard to try to keep that Sunday lunch thing going but it got harder and harder. Finally, when her children made it clear to her that they sometimes want to have lunch with friends, or do other things, it was a hard thing to swallow. The unknown of exile is hard. It feels like failure. Would her family disintegrate if they didn't keep this weekly get-together going? Faced with little choice, this mom began to embrace the exile and settled into the new reality, she and her offspring slowly began to find other ways to keep connected, electronically, and she found that the times when they were able to get together were perhaps sweeter and more delightful than ever before.

Is there something in your life that you have been holding on to for dear life?

I shared a bit of my own exile story with you when I was candidating here last November. Resigning from ministry and divorce felt like I had been conquered and drug off into exile. Distraught and disoriented, I began a career as a combine service technician. To my surprise, I found that I enjoyed it. And now as I return to ministry over 19 years later, I return with greater emotional health than in my earlier years, with less of a sense of neediness around this call to

ministry. I have experienced more of a sense of wholeness and completeness aside from myself as a person who serves in the role of pastor.

When you embrace exile, not everyone will understand what you are doing. At the same time Jeremiah is speaking for God that destruction is inevitable and unavoidable, other false prophets were preaching messages that the people preferred to hear. Those false prophets said that Jerusalem would never be taken because God would protect them and their beloved temple.

Where are we as the Alexanderwohl community in this universal story of conquest, exile, and return? I don't know, but I wonder...

Jeremiah persists in telling the kings and religious leaders that they will not succeed when they try to fight and defend themselves against Babylon. Their only hope is to surrender. *This is not a welcome message.* It sounds like treason! Shut up, Jeremiah! You are discouraging our warriors by telling them they cannot win!

Poor Jeremiah. His message is so unpopular with those who did not want to hear it that they plotted to kill him and put him in prison. Eventually he's thrown in a muddy cistern and left there to starve. Jeremiah feels like God has done him dirty. It's hard being a prophet. God does, however, provide Jeremiah with a sympathetic friend that can somehow tolerate his hard prophecy—and who pulls him out of the cistern.

He goes right back to prophesying, sad tearful laments for the coming fall of Jerusalem, like the one that Judy read for us 8:19 “there is no healing, only grief. Listen to the weeping of my people all across the land. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? We hear the tears and sadness of Jeremiah, and even the sadness of God at the destruction that is inevitable.

But woven in and throughout the book of Jeremiah, *something else* is also being spoken, and acted out. In chapter 18 God tells Jeremiah to go watch a potter at work. He observes the potter turning a piece of pottery. There was something that wasn't right about what was shaping up, so the potter folded it up and started again and that one brought the potter satisfaction with what was created. God is the potter, God's people the clay. A hopeful image, in the midst of what seems

like hopelessness. The time in exile will not be time wasted, or time where our lives are on hold. Rather, it is a time of being recreated, re-made more into the image of the potter-who we know is God.

And of course there is Jeremiah 29:11 where God says to those in exile some of the most hopeful words that we often write to our graduating seniors or college graduates “for I know the plans I have for you...plans for a future filled with hope..”

There is so much more that could be drawn from Jeremiah, but the theme of destruction, exile, and promise of return is the central theme. Richard Rohr says this pattern of order, disorder/exile, to re-order or return is a somewhat universal movement that I think many of us can observe in our own lives, or in the life of our faith communities.

I couldn't help but think of Alexanderwohl and the journey we've been on in recent years regarding how to respond to abuse, and the safe-church practices that we are implementing. For many of us, the safe church conversations and practices may not have been very welcome. It was disorienting and maybe felt—or feels, like foreign exile. And I commend the safe church committee for their hard work at keeping the conversations going as they've reviewed our former practices and work to implement new ways of doing things that are safer for all of us. And with time, we will have adjusted to the new ways of doing things where it is everyone' job to abide by these things, and something like a return from exile happens where this is just the way we do things here because we care about Alexanderwohl being as safe a place for people of all ages.

Do you see yourself somewhere in this pattern of order, disorder or disorientation, and re-order, as in this exile story of God's people?

Perhaps have been pursuing a degree or a career path, and suddenly or gradually, unwelcome things change—and you find yourself exiled, in a foreign land so to speak, disoriented, not sure what is going to happen next in your life.

Or perhaps you are looking at retirement, or are recently retired, and the usual ways of ordering your world have been taken away from you..

I wonder if sometimes farm families who have farmed the same land for generations feel forced into exile at the thought of being the last of their family to farm their land? I don't know. I haven't been in that situation. But I wonder.

Maybe you are in the midst of a sort of exile, in a foreign place or a crisis of sorts that you wouldn't have chosen or desired. Trust the process, Jeremiah would say. God is working. Settle into this reality in which you find yourself. You are clay in the hands of the loving potter. And in due time, God will restore you to the desires of your heart.

And if you find yourself on the return side of exile, perhaps looking back at that time of exile with fresh eyes considering how God's providence has been there for you and brought you out the other side stronger, more confident than ever of God's love and tender kindness even through the hardest of times.

May these words from Jeremiah give us hope this morning, regardless of where we may find ourselves in this journey of exile.

Oh, and the combine? Several years ago it had a major failure of the chaffer frame. Replacement parts were not available to repair it, not even from the scrap yard. So we were finally able to convince the customer to scrap the whole machine (park it out in the hedge row), and he purchased another machine that was newer..but not much better shape! Oh well..