

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
Jeremiah 26:1-15

It wasn't that it wasn't true, that it wasn't timely, or that it wasn't trustworthy. It wasn't that it wasn't spoken in love, or that Jeremiah wasn't rightly called and sent by God to speak it. Why did they reject Jeremiah's message? It was because they didn't like what he had to say. They didn't want their sins corrected. They wanted to continue in them. ***"This man deserves the sentence of death,"*** they said, ***"because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears."***

God did not want to punish them. He'd pled with them again and again to repent, through prophet after prophet, and still now He urged Jeremiah, ***"Do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds."*** Jeremiah's voice was to be like a fire alarm or like a tornado siren, calling them to safety through repentance.

I remember in college they would test the fire alarms in the dorms from time to time. It was almost always in the morning. I'm not a morning person. I remember lying in bed debating if I should get up and leave the building. I was usually one of the last ones out. Why did I eventually leave? I was afraid it might not just be a test that time.

Judah had tested God too many times. There was nothing fake about the alarm the Lord was sounding. They knew better, and their punishment would be all the more severe because of that, if they would not repent while there was time. ***"If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you,"*** the Lord warned, ***"and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth."***

Shiloh was the city where the ark of the covenant was kept when Israel settled in the promised land. It was the site of the tabernacle, where God dwelt among men. But the ark had become little more than a lucky charm to Israel over time, and they offered little more than lip service to the God who dwelt among them in the tabernacle. They might have spoken words of faith at Shiloh, but they marched right back to their lives of intentional sin afterward. And so God allowed the Philistines to destroy Shiloh and carry off the ark of the covenant. Israel was on its own, and that was their own doing.

Sometimes I'll run an idea or an outfit past my wife before I put it out there for public scrutiny. I know it's hard to believe, but I don't always bat 1.000 in my thinking and I'm not necessarily a fashion icon. Sometimes she has less than supportive words. Sometimes she even laughs. Now, if it's a sweater vest, I dismiss her criticism, because I know I look awesome. Everyone looks awesome in sweater vests. But otherwise, I try to take her reaction to heart, even if it stings at first. Even though I don't like to admit it, she's kept me from speaking or acting like a fool more than once. She for some odd reason loves me, and so she has wanted to protect me from detriment or shame. And that is what God does through His Word. He wants to keep us from detriment or shame, pricking our deadened conscience like a shot of penicillin.

The life of the Christian is a life marked by lessons, by correction, by hard but necessary words, by admonition and exhortation, and yes, by warning. God did not give us His only begotten Son for us to squander our salvation and be damned. No, the thought of losing even one of those for whom His Son died pains Him beyond belief, and the angels rejoice when even one of His children repent. So don't get mad when the Lord corrects you, whether through His Word, His called servants, or your brothers or sisters in Christ. Don't become stubborn in pride when the Lord wants to restore you to the humility of faith. Don't be put off when the Lord chides your lifestyle or opinions when they contradict with His will. He is preserving you in His grace. He is building you up in the faith. He is protecting you from the wolves. The law may be a bitter pill to swallow sometimes, but the gospel gives it a sweet aftertaste. Sometimes the most important words loved ones can share with us are those that sting at first, but serve us well in the long run. And no one loves us more than Christ.

What happened after the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant? Like a trophy, they set in the temple of their god, Dagon. Unfortunately for the Philistines, their idol was no match for the Lord. Dagon had not captured the Lord. The Israelites had sent Him away through unbelief. When the Philistines went into the house of Dagon the next morning, the idol had fallen on its face before the ark. They put him back in place, but the same thing happened again the next morning, but this time both his hands and head were cut off as well. Dagon was powerless, only the trunk of his carved body remaining. Terrified, the Philistines sent the ark back to the Israelites. I won't go into all the details now (1 Samuel 5,6). The point is that the pagan unbelievers did what Israel hadn't. They feared God and were terrified of His wrath. ***"Send away the ark of the God of Israel,"*** they said, ***"and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people."***

God's Word, like the ark, does not lose its power because when it goes unheeded. The ark brought the Philistines to their knees. God in His goodness, even though Israel had not returned to Him, brought about the ark's return to them. He returned to them. And He has returned to us. Though we have woefully neglected His Word—who of us knows it as we ought, has obeyed it as we ought—He has still sent it to us today. He still speaks. He still calls. He still corrects. He still points the way to salvation. Listen. And don't be offended if you if His words hit close to home. No, be thankful.

We Christians have much more than the ark of the covenant. We have the Word of God made flesh, who has tabernacled among us and offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. As Dagon fell before the ark, so we on Wednesday saw those who came to arrest our Lord Christ fall in Gethsemane before He allowed them to arrest Him. Don't close your ears to your Savior, especially when and if you do not like what He has to say, because that is when it is most pressing that you listen. Don't make Judah's mistake. That is a recipe for disaster. No, ***walk as children of light, not of darkness, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.*** Amen.