

The Heart of the Matter
John 14:15-17
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I went to the website of the American Heart Association this week and I learned there that cardiovascular disease is still the number one killer of Americans. There's a heart attack every 40 seconds. There's a stroke every 40 seconds. Average age of your first heart attack, gentlemen, will be 65.6 years of age. Ladies, 72 years of age. Number one risk factor after smoking is obesity. How many of us struggle with our weight in America? 39%. I think you are probably thinking about now, "Wow, I'm really glad I went to church today. What a joyful message from the pulpit. We're all going to die of heart disease and one out of three of us is struggling with our weight. Well, I won't be a pot that calls the kettle black today. I could use a few off the midriff myself.

I want to talk to you about a different kind of heart disease this morning — one that affects our values, our virtues and our faith. It's a spiritual heart condition that is as deadly to our spirit as cardiovascular disease can be to our bodies. As a pastor, I am very aware that many of us are struggling with that disability here in America. We are heartsick over events in our nation and world. We see things that we value very greatly called into question. We look for virtue and find little or none in leadership.

This can bring on a crisis of faith. What are you doing in the world, God? You look out into the world and it seems like a very different place...it seems to me than just 20 years ago or 50 years ago. And there have been some very powerful expressions of this written in editorials recently that kind of get at the heart of the matter. And it's a spiritual matter that we're in. And that is probably why we do come to church on a Sunday; because we need an anchor

and we need a lighthouse and we need a lamp to show us how to live in these times that we're in today.

I want to talk to you about Jeremiah this morning, about his life and times because if you think we have it tough, you should have lived in his era. Jeremiah, called "the weeping prophet" and is one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. There are 52 chapters attributed to him. And there was another one who wept in the Bible; do you know who he was? Like Jeremiah, he wept over Jerusalem. His name was Jesus. He lived 600 years later.

Jeremiah was born around the middle of the 7th century BC, maybe a little bit later. His generation was, arguably, the toughest generation in the story of God's people as it related to God's covenant to them — the one that began in the wilderness at Mount Sinai with the gift of the law and Moses who brought the two tablets, the ethical law of God, a gift to us to know, objectively, what is right and what is wrong. And God's people became a people of law with a lawful king unlike any other people, unlike any other king on earth at that time. That's what made it so distinctive. That is the gift of the Jews to the world — that our God is a God of love, that we can know God's will for us. That our God is not capricious and changeable but steadfast and sure.

The promise of the covenant at Sinai was carried forth into a land flowing with milk and honey. That was promised. Moses had the people on the far bank of the Jordan River and he said to them, "These are the statutes of the commandments of the Lord, your God and keeping them there is life and prosperity and breaking them there is death and adversity." Therefore, he said, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." Deuteronomy 30:15

God's people were a people of the covenant. The promise that God would be our king, would guard and defend us from our enemies, if we would offer God our obedience. This is the groundwork, the platform, of our faith, then and now.

So time passes and the Israelites decide they want a king like all the other kingdoms around them. Well, we want a king too. We want the panoply of power. We want an army. And, Samuel the prophet said, “Are you sure you want a king? Are you sure you want the taxes? Do you want a draft? Do you want eminent domain? Do you really want a king?” They said, “Yes, we don’t have a king. How can we defend ourselves?” You know the story. So David became king. And God promised to the people that there would never fail to be a descendent of David on the throne of Israel forever. That’s the second covenant, the Davidic covenant.

And time passed — roughly 400 years and in those 400 years, what we find is the people of Israel and later of Judah (one kingdom became two after Solomon), they didn’t keep the law of God but they broke it on a daily basis, as do we. If you really sit down and look at the ten commandments, do you really get past the first? I don’t. There’s a lot competing in my life for sovereignty. I have to come and remind myself who is sovereign every day. They fell short and we fall short.

The story of the Old Testament is largely that story. You can read it — first and second Kings, first and second Samuel, first and second Chronicles, God’s people. God sent the prophets to speak truth to power. That’s the role of the prophet. They don’t have political power; they have spiritual power. Their role is to be able to walk into the courts of power and say, “Thus saith the Lord.” It’s a unique role in our spiritual genealogy and one that we have seen work in our nation as well. The truth is able to speak to power and we are able to reorient ourselves and remember what is really important and move forward.

The story of the prophets is a heart breaking one. They are persecuted, killed and no story’s more sorrowful than Jeremiah. We know more about Jeremiah’s heart more than any other prophet. It’s revealed in the Word. You

can read the book of Jeremiah and see this man's anguish. He's a humble guy. He wasn't an Elijah. He was quiet but he felt deeply the word that had been given him. It caused him to lose friendships, to lose society. The priest told him he couldn't marry anyone. They tried to kill him more than once. They threw him into a cistern; they put his in stocks in the town square for people to spit on and laugh at. You can read about his laments in the Bible.

But Jeremiah knew deeply, in his heart, that God wasn't done with the people. He saw what was coming. He lived in a time when the kingdoms were flourishing. The great powers of the middle east were quiescent – Egypt and Syria. By the eighth century, things began to change and in the north there rose a new power, Nineveh. In 722BC they came and they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and turned it into Samaria. They deported all the Jews and imported foreigners. About 100, 150 years later now, the situation is facing Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. That was where Jeremiah lived. He tried to counsel the leadership to be pragmatic about their situation; to understand where the power is. Assyria was declining, Babylon was rising.

There was one king in that period that offered hope to Jeremiah. His name was Josiah. He became king at like nine years old. His father was assassinated in 640 BC. In the story of Josiah, he goes to the temple and the book of Deuteronomy is rediscovered. The original book had been forgotten, walled into a wall of the temple. The priest had forgotten; the people had forgotten. They were recovered and Josiah read them, front to back, and it said he was silent. Then he stood up and said, "We need to do something about this." He initiated a spiritual reform in Judah and Jeremiah was excited by that. He went from village to village to help the renewal of God's law so the people might be obedient once again. But, they weren't. It didn't stick. The old political ways began to dominate.

There was an elite in Judah at that time, the wealthy people. They had stony hearts with respect to the poor and the needy. They were out of touch. This was Jeremiah's life and time. Things came to a head in 587 when Babylon was at the gates of the city, Nebuchadnezzar. The king became a client of the king, Zedekiah. A tribute was required. The politics continued over the next ten years and the party that favored Egypt won the heart and the mind of the king and he stopped paying tribute and then, in 587 Nebuchadnezzar came back again. They tore down the walls and he destroyed the temple and he executed Zedekiah's two sons in front of his eyes and then he blinded the king and he took him and about 8,000 other people into captivity. And Jeremiah, God's prophet, has to make sense of that. What happened to the covenant at Sinai? He was thrown into a crisis of faith. Yet, as is so often the case, when we are in a crisis of faith, God speaks to us in a new way and we're given a new understanding of how God is still with us in this world.

How many of you were, or know someone who has undergone a significant loss in the last 12 months? The loss of a job, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a child? These things come upon us and they can rock us to the heart. They rock our faith. They can cause us to question everything that we thought we understood about our relationship to God. How could you allow this to happen? This was a good person. God, how can you let this be? I come to church, I pray, I give, I try to be a good person and here I am. This is exactly where Jeremiah is and it's a matter of the heart. Yet, for Jeremiah, God revealed something more in that darkness of his nation and the ending of the kingdom, now was a province with a governor. Jeremiah was a dreamer and in his dreams he was given a vision of the future and it was a future of hope. How many of you know Jeremiah 29:11, "Consider the plans I've made for you, says the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not calamity, to give you a future of hope. For you will find me if you seek me with all your heart."

That's the gift of this man, the weeping prophet, the most sorrowful and abused, has yet given this word for us.

Chapter 30 & 31 of Jeremiah, where our text is from today (31:31-34), is called the 'Book of Comfort'. In it we find a promise of the future when God's people will return to the land and repopulate it. Then, we are told the days are coming, says the Lord. And that's a future cast, that's not specific. The days are coming, says the Lord, with a covenant that you broke at Sinai which you didn't keep though I was your husband, says the Lord. I will write my law upon your hearts. The heart of the Old Testament is not only the seat of the emotions, it's the seat of the mind and the will. I will write my law, says God, on your hearts and you will all know me, from the least of you to the greatest.

Jeremiah's also the one that individualizes and personalizes our relationship to God. It's not simply collective blessing and collective punishment. We now are going to have our own relationship and we will be accountable for that relationship. Jeremiah gave us that insight. "I'll write the law on your hearts from the least of you to the greatest. You will all know the Lord. The word "know" in Hebrew is the same as love. It's intimate, it's personal.

And what will we know about God? And that's the last part of our text, "for I will forgive your iniquity." That's what it means to know God, God who forgives us. And remember to sin no more. This is the new covenant. Jeremiah gave it to us. And 600 years before is Moses and the ten commandments and 600 years later is the upper room. And Jesus says, "Take, eat, this is my body. It is my body; it is for you. And this cup is the new covenant and he knew exactly from who he was quoting, Jeremiah. This is the new covenant sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sin.

In JR Tolkien's book, Lord of the Rings, Frodo is anguishing over the times that he's living in. And Gandalf says, "It is not for us to choose the

times that we live in. All we have to decide, he said, is what to do with the item that is given us.”

We want to end today by allowing us to be reminded that we don't get to choose the times that we live in. We can even be heartsick over them but we have this strong and sure covenant of grace. That our Lord Jesus Christ is with us. In fact, he is in us. We will know him here, inwardly and personally and it will change us. He is the light and when we walk in that light, we will see light as well.

There's a singer/songwriter named Danny Gokey and he tells the story of a pastor who witnessed an open heart surgery. At that surgery, the pastor looked down at this woman and they cracked open her sternum, pulled the heart out and they repaired the coronary heart arteries, all four of them. They placed the heart back in to the cavity and the next thing that happens before they close up is that they have to restart that heart. The patient's been on a profusion machine except in this case the heart didn't start. It just wouldn't start. The pastor's looking through the window and he watches the surgeon kneel down and whisper into the patient's ear. “Mrs. Johnson, your heart is repaired, it is well. I need you to tell your heart to beat again.” And it did! It began to beat.

Maybe, when we're heartsick too, and we feel like there's not a whole lot to hope for, maybe we too can hear his voice whispering to us, “I need you to let your heart beat again. I need you to live. I need you to believe. And trust me, for I am with you and I am in you, and I'm the Lord. Because the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. Amen.