**The Book of Jeremiah: *To Tear Down, To Build Up***

**Sunday June 6, 2021**

**“Hear, O Israel” (Jeremiah 5:20-31)**

As the book of Jeremiah continues, the situation gets progressively worse. God’s invitation to his people to “*return to him”* has fallen on deaf ears. His people continue to be rebellious, obstinate and indifferent to him. While God is loving and long-suffering, his patience was wearing thin. What would it take for God to bring this headstrong people back to him? What will it take for God to get our undivided attention so that we would be more focused on listening to his voice?

*Listening* is essential to the covenant relationship between God and his people. The central prayer of Judaism is the *Shema*. Its words are taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*.” This prayer is called the *Shema* because it is the Hebrew verb “to hear,” which begins the prayer. So, these words of Scripture and this prayer bid all God’s people to hear and acknowledge that he alone is our Lord. These words summon us to give our complete and exclusive worship to him and him alone by loving him with our whole heart, soul and mind. The core of our relationship with God is responsiveness to his voice that embraces both listening and obeying. Truly hearing God and really paying attention to his voice are essential to our relationship with him.

In this morning’s Scripture lesson the Lord instructs Jeremiah to proclaim a message to the inhabitants of Judah. It begins, like the *Shema,* with a summons to *hear* -

“*Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear*” (5:21). The Lord’s message to his people seems doomed right from the start. How can they hear God since they are spiritually blind and deaf? They have the organs of sight and hearing, which seem to be functional, but they have wilfully closed themselves off to God and are completely unresponsive to him. Their problem is not only with their eyes and ears, but also with their hearts. God addresses them as *foolish* and *senseless people.* The word “*senseless*” here literally means that they have “*no heart*.” The call of Deuteronomy 6:4-5to love and serve the Lord *wholeheartedly* is being ignored by the people who behave in a strikingly opposite manner. They are a people without a heart (5:21). Instead of a heart for God, they have stubborn and rebellious hearts (5:23). They are unable to make a heart-felt acknowledgement of God’s provision and care (5:24). The heart of the people, central to the covenant relationship, had become alienated from God. No wonder, Jeremiah 4:4 directs God’s people to “circumcise yourselves to the Lord*, circumcise your hearts.”* The outward act of circumcision was not sufficient; God wanted them to go beyond the outward religious practice to an inward heart-filled devotion to him. This is not something particular to Jeremiah’s audience for God’s people in every age have struggled with matters of the heart in their relationship with God. For instance, in Revelation 2:4, the Lord Jesus confronted the church in Ephesus because they had forsaken their *first love;* they had abandoned their love for God.

Jeremiah traces the sad condition of a people with “a stubborn and rebellious heart,” who “have turned aside and gone away” (5:23). What happens to a faith community with a heart that has forsaken God? *They no longer give true worship to God*. In verse 22 the Lord asks his people, “*Why don’t you honour me? Why aren’t you in awe before me?*” (5:22, *The Message*). The evidence of God’s power and sovereignty are clearly visible. The crashing waves of the mighty oceans seem overpowering, yet God has drawn a line in the sand that they cannot cross (5:22). Yet the people fail to recognize God’s greatness and give him the reverence that he deserves. They are unwilling and unable to recite the heart-felt call to worship of verse 24, “*Let us live in awe of the Lord our God, for he gives us rain each spring and fall, assuring us of a harvest when the time is right*.” The cycle of the seasons, the refreshing rains, the growing gardens and the bountiful harvest are all gifts from God. When God’s people do not speak, think or acknowledge the sovereignty of God, they soon picture themselves to be independent, self-sufficient and self-made. When we fail to recognize that all that we are and all that we have comes from the hand of God, we begin to take the credit for everything. We assert our independence from God. We begin to worship the idol of the self.

What happens to a faith community with a heart that has forsaken God? *The most vulnerable in society are forsaken as well.* Our faith in God greatly impacts the way that we live in the world. When we ignore God, we tend to disregard his demands on our lives and live for ourselves. We might even claim to believe in God, but if we’re not truly living for him, we’re *practical atheists*. Jeremiah’s indictment of Israel contains the familiar vocabulary for human sinfulness. God rebukes his people for their *iniquities, sins* (5:25), *wickedness* (5:26), and *treachery* (5:27). These words, of course, can refer to individual sin but in this passage the moral evil seems to be more extensive as it impacts the larger society. The prophet paints a picture of sinfulness that harms the most helpless and vulnerable. God’s people have enabled a culture of inequality and injustice to grow in their midst. With God out of the picture, the helpless ones are no longer cared for or protected. The unscrupulous are allowed to exploit and abuse defenseless people in order to gain more wealth and power (5:26-27). Basking in the creature comforts of their riches, they close their eyes to dismal conditions of those at the very bottom. They deny justice to the fatherless and exploit the poor (5:28). When God’s people abandon God, they also abandon a commitment to justice for those that he deeply cares about - the weak, the poor, the defenseless and the marginalized. Will God stand by and do nothing about this? God’s righteous indignation at this sad state of affairs is very evident. He declares, “*Shall I not punish them for these things? Shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this*?” (5:29).

What happens to a faith community with a heart that has forsaken God? *The spiritual leaders neglect their calling and fail to serve God.* God describes the failure of Israel’s spiritual leaders as “*a horrible and shocking thing*” (5:31). The prophets were uttering false prophecies and the priests were ruling with an iron fist and the people didn’t mind at all (5:31). When spiritual leaders cease to serve God, it has a tremendous impact on the spiritual well being of the faith community. The prophets were empowered to speak God’s message to the community and to call his people to be attentive to the voice of the Lord. The priests were anointed to lead the community in the act of worship, to intercede on their behalf before God, and to offer them spiritual guidance. Regrettably, the prophets and the priests were failing miserably. Instead of speaking God’s truth, the prophets were uttering falsehood. Instead of giving humble service to God, the priests were grasping for more and more power. These words prompt me to reflect more deeply on my role as your pastor. I have a prophetic role within our community as I reflect on Scripture each week and urge you to pay closer attention to his voice. Like the prophets of old, I have the task of calling God’s people to forsake their wayward ways and return to him. I also have a priestly role as I guide the community in worship, engage in intercessory prayer and offer spiritual direction. I ask myself, am I doing these basic, yet essential tasks?

The last line of Jeremiah 5:31 contains an ominous question, “*What do you think will happen next*?” No answer is given, but the larger context of chapters 4 to 6 gives plenty of hints. God’s people have been weighed in the scales and found wanting! Disaster, destruction and invading armies are coming! The people ceased listening to God and their stubborn and rebellious hearts had abandoned him. Let’s be a people with ears that hear, eyes that see and hearts that love God.

When our Lord Jesus was on the earth, an expert in the Jewish law asked him what the most important commandment was. Citing the *Shema,* he replied, “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’. The second is this, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).