

<sup>4</sup> The word of the LORD came to me, saying,  
<sup>5</sup> “Before I formed you in the womb I knew<sup>a</sup> you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”  
<sup>6</sup> “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”  
<sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.  
<sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.  
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<sup>17</sup> “Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. <sup>18</sup> Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. <sup>19</sup> They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

-- Jeremiah 1:4-7, 17-19

<sup>1</sup> You are always righteous, LORD,  
when I bring a case before you.  
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:  
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?  
Why do all the faithless live at ease?  
<sup>2</sup> You have planted them, and they have taken root;  
they grow and bear fruit.

-- Jeremiah 12:1-2

<sup>7</sup> You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived;  
you overpowered me and prevailed.  
I am ridiculed all day long;  
everyone mocks me.  
<sup>8</sup> Whenever I speak, I cry out  
proclaiming violence and destruction.  
So the word of the LORD has brought me  
insult and reproach all day long.

-- Jeremiah 20: 7-8

<sup>1</sup> “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. <sup>3</sup> “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. <sup>4</sup> I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.

<sup>5</sup> “The days are coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,  
a King who will reign wisely  
and do what is just and right in the land.  
<sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved  
and Israel will live in safety.  
This is the name by which he will be called:  
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.

-- Jeremiah 23:1-6

Almost every pastor I know has a strong personal affinity for Jeremiah. Most of us begin church ministry with the same self-deprecation that Jeremiah did when God called him to be his voice to his people. Some of us hear from God and ask “what, me?” The best pastors I know never really think that they can do it on their own power or cleverness. They never quite believe that God would ask something as important as the deliberate care of his people from this schmoe.

Yet as we get “seasoned” (or just get cynical), our initial response of “what, me?” turns into “why me?” This is exactly what happens to Jeremiah throughout his forty years of prophetic ministry to Israel. Now, you may know that biblical prophecy isn’t all about telling the future. It’s about critiquing by word or action the way things *are* in hopes of helping people recognize something—or someone— *better*. But as Jeremiah and every prophet before and after him figured out, standing up and speaking the truth—especially God’s truth—often means you get singled out as the party pooper. Even though everyone in Judah at Jeremiah’s time *knew* that the country was surrounded by enemies, was deep in debt, and was allied with foreign powers licking their chops at the prospect of carving up the little kingdom, the religious professionals were preaching what Karl Marx would later call an opiate for the people.

The priests and prophets who helped make up Israel’s religious machinery at the time of Jeremiah lied about what God was *really* saying. On the one hand Jeremiah spoke of the country’s downfall and of an exile into foreign lands because of Judah’s unfaithfulness to God. Yet on the other, the vast majority of religious professionals were eager to keep their good thing going and said “*no, no, don’t listen to that old kook. Everything is fine. Keep bringing bulls and lambs for slaughter. Keep on dropping coins in the coffers. Don’t stop smiling and for heaven’s sake, don’t stop shopping. The Economy needs your shekels!*”

Anyone who's ever had to stand up against prevailing opinion—whether at home or work or in a church community— knows how lonely it can feel to stand up with conviction and say something unpopular. Yet this is exactly what Jeremiah has to do time and time again. It's no wonder Jeremiah's also called The Weeping Prophet. It's no wonder that Jeremiah's "what, me?" turns into "why me?"

So Jeremiah complains. A lot. True, other prophets before Jeremiah complained, but none of them made a habit of it like Jeremiah did. And inbetween complaining, Jeremiah does a lot of moaning, gets angry, gets confused, gets thrown into a muddy well, feels betrayed by God, and eventually gets taken away to Egypt without seeing any of the things he prophesied about coming to pass. I'd say Jeremiah had good reason to complain, especially when you considered the downward spiral of the nation. The Promised Land of Canaan never lived up to its billing. The Israelite Empire was broken in two, with the northern half taken away by the Assyrians about two centuries before Jeremiah. The Babylonians had annexed Judah and had set up Zedekiah as a puppet ruler. Zedekiah, whose name "tseddiq-yahu" means "righteousness of Yahweh", was a political schemer who only sought Yahweh's blessing so that his kingship would have a "divine seal of approval" on it. Now, this might have actually been a politically savvy move—but being the King of God's chosen nation had never been about political know-how, it was about trusting in and leaning on God alone for provision and protection. Eventually, Zedekiah's schemes led him to form an alliance with Egypt to rebel against the Babylonian Empire.

Zedekiah's rebellion didn't go so well, and after a three year-long siege, the Babylonians captured the capital city of Jerusalem and burned it—and the Temple—to the ground. The puppet King named "God is my righteousness" ends up having his sons killed and his eyes gouged out before dying in a Babylonian dungeon.

These were not good times for Judah. In fact, these were worse than just merely being tough times. This was nothing less than the total collapse of the civilization that claimed that they were special to God—and all the nations laughed at their ruin. Jeremiah may well have been depressed and moody, but he saw things clearly and realistically—which means he also saw a future with *hope*.

Jeremiah doesn't manufacture this hope on his own. He doesn't fantasize about golden years, sprinkle it with fairy dust, and then wish upon a star. He gets his hope from *without*, from the promise of God passing into his heart. Yahweh tells Jeremiah that he himself will bring everyone back to the Promised Land under a new King, one from the line of David. "*Though you, my wife, sleep around on me,*" God says to Israel, "*I will still be faithful to our marriage covenant. I will still buy you back, and I will still make you mine.*" The judgment of God on Israel is *always* accompanied by a message of unfair grace.

In chapter 23, God begins with a round condemnation of the shepherds—these self-serving kings—who had abused and abandoned the flock of God. Almost every king after David failed at the tasks of uniting, protecting, and caring for God's people—things good shepherds are supposed to do for their flocks. Instead of serving the people, they made them subjects. To make matters worse, these kings corrupted Israel's national identity. They led Israel into worship of statues as well as allowing the continued injustice against orphans, widows, and the poor within Israel's borders. Israel was supposed to shine like a star before the other nations, yet without these two defining characteristics—love of God and love of neighbour—Israel had lost its light, and became like any other country. As a consequence, God tells these kings that because they failed to pay attention to the flock of God, God would *pay attention* to them—and woe to those who act unjustly and unrighteously who then command the attention of God!

Judah would pay a heavy price by being ripped out from the land that God swore to Abraham would be theirs, but this judgment is not without a promise. God tells them that he himself will gather them back to the land that flows with milk and honey, the richest and sweetest foods of the ancient world. And once they're pulled back into this land that overflows with dessert, God will raise up a righteous branch—a straight branch—from King David's line, a King that will rule with justice and righteousness. What does it mean to be righteous? To act with unimpeachable conduct, to love and serve others as you love and serve yourself. Thus the coming King that Jeremiah speaks of will be one who restores Israel's relationship with God, which then restores peace and safety within Israel's borders.

And the name of this King won't be "The LORD our righteous saviour" as the NIV mistranslates it. The point of this passage is lost if this King's name is just "The LORD is our righteous saviour." Instead, the name of this King should be translated "The LORD our righteousness" or "The LORD *is* our righteousness." It's no coincidence that this name, Yahweh-tseddeq, is the opposite of Zedekiah's name, tseddeq-yahu. It's as if God is saying "this King will reverse everything that Zedekiah and everyone like him has done. He will undo it and usher in an upside-down Kingdom where those who are last shall be first, and those who are first will be last."<sup>1</sup>

Yet those of you who know a little about the history of Israel know that no such King and no such Kingdom ever comes to Israel. There is only one ancestor of King David who fits the description. Only one from the royal house of Judah gathers people from everywhere around the world to make up a new Kingdom, and this King is whose birth we celebrate in a few weeks. This King, like a gardener, grafts us non-Jews like branches into this righteous branch of David.<sup>2</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 19:30, 20:16

<sup>2</sup> Rom 17:11-21

how Jesus gathers a new people in—though not to form a country or even a country club, but to form a Kingdom without borders, ruled with righteousness and justice, and whose citizens span the entire globe.

This King, Jesus, is the only one whose name really is “The LORD is our righteousness”. Anyone who calls themselves a Christian makes that confession. We know only God is good and that we have no goodness outside of him. To be a Christian is to call on Jesus as our saviour (the one who buys us back from death) and to call him lord (the one who now rules over our lives.)

For the most part, we don’t have much trouble with the idea that Jesus comes to seek and save the lost.<sup>3</sup> We like the idea of someone—be it Superman or Barack Obama or Jesus—who comes and delivers us from crime, or economic hardship, or death. Even better, this deliverance is something that we don’t have to earn! It’s already there for the taking because the way to knowing who God is and to truly learning to love him is opened up by Jesus’ self-sacrifice. However, what we—and our culture along with us—have a lot more trouble doing is handing over our entire lives for the guidance and lordship of God. We like free, low-hanging fruit meaning we don’t have to spend and we don’t have to reach; but when it comes to committing our lives to follow God’s way, we *all* get a little tentative.

But if Jesus really *is* this King, and if what he says about himself is true—and if we really *do* want to enjoy a relationship with the living God—then there’s only one way to go. We commit ourselves to bearing the name of this King because he bought us back, and thus our collective name becomes “The LORD is our righteousness.” When we call ourselves Christian, we take on the name of Jesus and point to him as being the one who reconnects us with God. It’s Jesus who makes the bridge between us and the triune God, and it’s only when we surrender our whole selves to the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:10

lordship of Jesus that we live out that strange idea of “being in Christ.” Being “in Christ” means once more being friends with a God who wants to be “family” with us.

Yet this doesn’t mean that once we lean on Jesus’ sufficiency to make us presentable to God that we automatically are perfect people. You see, the way that loving God commits us to is a way of love, but as a famous football coach once said, “*it’s all very simple, but it’s not easy.*” Being the community of God in the name of Jesus means that if we say we are followers of Christ, we are *commanded* to show it by moving forward in reconciliation and relationship. This is why there is no salvation in Christ outside of the church, because you cannot call people you refuse to live with your brothers and sisters.

The church isn’t the Kingdom of God. But when we cooperate with the Spirit of God, it’s a foretaste of what goodness is yet to come. The truth is, the promised Kingdom has come, but it’s not like anything you or I expected. We won’t get called back to Israel because we are the ones who are gathered in Jesus’ name, and we are gathered in the Church universal. Israel failed as a sign to the nations of the loving, just, and righteous character of God, so a new Kingdom had to be gathered to sow seeds of reconciliation with God and each other.<sup>4</sup> As we sow these seeds, it’s this Kingdom’s King who turns our shopping malls and community centres into holy sanctuaries. It’s he who breaks chains of the body and spirit that sets us free to follow. It’s he who breaks open the everyday for the eternal. It’s in the name of King Jesus that we, the flock of God, learn to live together in justice and righteousness. And he—risen, ascended, and enthroned—is the one who will reign forevermore.

- 1.) What is “Christian” joy?
- 2.) How does Jesus’ Kingship touch your everyday life?
- 3.) What does it mean to “sow seeds of reconciliation”?

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor 5:18-21