

More than 600 years before Jesus was born, King Josiah ruled the land of Judah. He was the last king of Judah to be faithful to God. His father and grandfather had been horrible rulers. Under their reigns, many of the people had turned to idolatry. So, when Josiah became king, he tried to transform his people by leading them to greater faithfulness to God.

But it didn't work.

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In the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign, a young man named Jeremiah showed up. He told everyone, including the king, that God had been speaking to him. The Lord said, "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I blessed you to do something holy. You are going to be a prophet to the nations of the world.

"Your majesty," Jeremiah told the king, "you can imagine my surprise. I told God that I couldn't do it. I'm too young. I'm barely an adult. I've got no training. No experience. What do I know about being a prophet?"

But God wasn't having any of that. "Don't say, 'I'm too young. Don't tell me you can't. You're going to go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you to say. "Don't be afraid, because I will always be with you. Guiding you and taking care of you." And so, Jeremiah's adventures began.

As a prophet, Jeremiah's job was to show people where they had gone wrong. He was called to point out their sinfulness. To show them how they had broken God's covenant. God also instructed him to tell the people that things were going to get worse before they got better. The Babylonians would declare war against Judah. The great temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed and the people would be taken to Babylon to be the slaves of King Nebuchadnezzar.

God told Jeremiah that when the people asked, "Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us," he was to tell them that since they had forsaken the Lord and served foreign gods in their homeland, they would now serve foreigners in a land that wasn't theirs.

***Jeremiah preached his message again and again.*** And when talking didn't work, God asked Jeremiah to do things. To be a living parable of what the Judeans lives would be like if they didn't start turning themselves around.

He bought a large, expensive clay jar and then smashed it in front of the temple leaders to show them what was going to happen to Judah.

He made a yoke of wood, the kind of thing you would put on oxen and hung it around his neck as an example of what was going to happen to the Judeans. The Babylonians would make them slaves and treat them the way you would treat cattle and beasts of burden.

One of my favorite Jeremiah stories is when God asks him to buy a linen belt, which is a polite way of saying that the Lord asked Jeremiah to go out and buy a pair of new underwear. He had to put this belt on and make sure that it didn't come into contact with water. In other words, keep wearing it, but don't wash it. Next God told Jeremiah to take the belt and bury it in the ground. Several days later, God sent him back to get the belt and then he was to wear it around town. The message to the people was that just like Jeremiah had tied this garment around his waist, God had bound the people of Judah to his covenant. And the people had treated their relationship with God in the same way Jeremiah treated the belt. It had been completely ruined and abused.

For forty years Jeremiah tried to convince the people to change, but it wasn't until Nebuchadnezzar enslaved 10,000 Jews and destroyed the city of Jerusalem that people finally began to really pay attention. And that brings us to today's text. Jeremiah had announced God's judgment with gloom and doom and terror. And now the judgment has come to pass. The smartest, brightest and best of Judah have been exiled to Babylon. And it is now, in what seems to be the worst possible time- the lowest moment in their history- it's now, that Jeremiah writes to the exiles to share with them a message of hope. Finally, there is good news.

God said, "the time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the agreement that I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of Egypt. They **broke** that covenant. They didn't stay faithful to our promises —even though I *loved and cared* for them as a husband. Even though I was their God.

*"Here's the new agreement that I will make with the people of Israel. "I will put my law within them – write it on their hearts! I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

*“They won’t have to teach each other or encourage their family members saying, “You must know the Lord! They won’t have to go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. All of them will know me intimately.*

*“I will be merciful when they fail, and I will forgive their wrongs. I’ll forget they ever sinned! I will never remember or mention their sins again. I’ll wipe the slate clean for each and every one of them.”*

This speech comes from the section of Jeremiah known as “the book of consolation.” And the promises that are made in that book are as extreme and radical as the judgment that had occurred. Jeremiah proclaimed a message of good news that should lead the people from mourning to joy. They have been brought to life out of death. Incredible as it may sound, the exile that they were experiencing was a sign that their old life, their broken, faithless life was now dead. **Now** restoration can take place. **Now** there can be new birth. **Now** there can be resurrection.

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Over the years, people have argued about whether there is anything really new in the new covenant proclaimed by Jeremiah. After all, this whole “I will be their God and they will be my people,” thing wasn’t unfamiliar to the people of Israel. They may have not always acted like it, but they knew what God was like. They knew what the covenant and the law were all about. They knew the stories of Moses and Egypt and the ten commandments. What’s new in Jeremiah’s message is that “all” people will know God. From the least to the greatest. There won’t be some folks who are more important or closer to God. There won’t be any need for priests or pastors or prophets or intermediaries, because in the age to come, God says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more,”

God says – I will forgive and forget. This is powerful preaching. This is life changing not just for the people of Judah and Israel, but everyone. Everywhere. At every time.

Jeremiah wasn’t just talking about the little mistakes we make or even the horrid things we might do or leave undone in our daily lives. This is about restoring the world to the way it was meant to be. Reforming and renewing politics and creation, community and culture, body and soul. All will be made new. This is gospel and good news.. but are we there yet? Have we arrived in those days that “are surely coming?”

Yes and no.

God worked restoration for exiled Israel some six hundred years before Christ was born. And God brought restoration to all people and all the world in Jesus Christ. But it’s pretty clear that we aren’t yet to the time that Jeremiah described. His is a vision and prophecy of a day when God’s kingdom will be fully seen and embraced by the whole world. Until that time, we will remain both saint and sinner. Both broken and forgiven. And maybe that’s what Reformation Sunday is all about- being on the way to the world that Jeremiah described. Soon and not yet. Here but not quite.

There are signs of God’s kingdom all around us but there are also signs most everywhere that the gospel has not yet been fully embraced.

The idea that anyone, would go into any place of worship and murder people who were gathered to pray. People who had come for worship and to celebrate the birth of a new baby. The time is sure coming, but it is not here yet.

The idea that someone would come to Bible study and after meeting with a group of welcoming folks – would kill them. The time is not here yet, when everyone will know the love of God.

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We are called to love God with our whole heart, our whole mind and our whole body. What does God want from us? To do justice, to love kindness and have a relationship with God that is marked by humility. We are called to share the good news that the God who promised to love and forgive the exiles from Judah is the same God who promised to love and forgive us! The God who re-created and re-formed the people of Judah when the whole world discounted them as losers and failures - that God also breathes new life into us. Even when we find it hard to believe that we could ever be worthy of God’s attention ever again, the truth is, God does this kind of thing all the time. God is always and completely a God of grace.

No matter how tragic the circumstances may appear to be, God can always bring new life out of what appears to be a lost cause. He did it with the exiles. With the people of Israel. He did it with the church when things weren’t looking so good. God can do all things. Which is why we read this text today. We need to be reminded that everything, life itself, depends solely on the grace of God.

He has declared that we are free- and if the Son of God says you are free, then you are free indeed! And yet there are people who hear the gospel and say, “No, they aren’t free. Their God asks them to keep his word. To live with a law that is written on their hearts. How is that freedom?”

One of my all-time favorite books is Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. This week I was reading it again and towards the end of the story L’Engle describes what I think it means to be freed by the Son of God.

One of the primary characters, Calvin, has asked Mrs. Whatsit if there is a way that they can learn what will happen in the future. Calvin and his friends have been challenged to make a daring rescue and he wants to know if they will succeed at the task they have been given?

*Mrs. Whatsit said “If we knew ahead of time what was going to happen we’d be—we’d be like the people on Camazotz, with no lives of our own, with everything all planned and done for us. How can I explain it to you? Oh, I know. In your language you have a form of poetry called the sonnet.”*

*“Yes, yes,” Calvin said impatiently. “What’s that got to do with [anything]?”*

*“Kindly pay me the courtesy of listening to me.” Mrs. Whatsit’s voice was stern, and for a moment Calvin stopped pawing the ground like a nervous colt. “It is a very strict form of poetry, is it not?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“There are fourteen lines, I believe, all in iambic pentameter. That’s a very strict rhythm or meter, yes?”*

*“Yes.” Calvin nodded.*

*“And each line has to end with a rigid rhyme pattern. And if the poet does not do it exactly this way, it is not a sonnet, is it?”*

*“No.”*

*“But within this strict form the poet has complete freedom to say whatever he wants, doesn’t he?”*

*“Yes.” Calvin nodded again.*

*“So,” Mrs. Whatsit said.*

*“So what?”*

*“Oh, do not be stupid, boy!” Mrs. Whatsit scolded. “You know perfectly well what I am driving at!”*

*“You mean you’re comparing our lives to a sonnet? A strict form, but freedom within it?”*

*“Yes,” Mrs. Whatsit said. “You’re given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you.”*

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What are you saying with your life? We have the freedom to do and say so much. Even our Time and Talent sheets are a part of what we choose to say. They may seem like forms with little check boxes, but those commitments of time along with our financial commitments, say something about our priorities and our values. They make a statement about who we are and what we believe.

Let’s celebrate this day by finding new and exciting ways to bear witness to our faith. Reformation isn’t just about the church but about us as well. How can we be reformed and renewed? What are YOU saying with your life?