

07.26.26 ~ Pentecost 9

“No Longer Captive”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Prophecy

Jeremiah 3:17-18, 21-25 ^{TLB}

Pew Bible 650

¹⁷ The whole city of Jerusalem will be known as the throne of the Lord; all nations will come to him there and no longer stubbornly follow their evil desires. ¹⁸ At that time the people of Judah and of Israel will return together from their exile in the north, to the land I gave their fathers as an inheritance forever.

²¹ I hear a voice high upon the windswept mountains, crying, crying. It is the sons of Israel who have turned their backs on God and wandered far away. ²² O my rebellious children, come back to me again and I will heal you from your sins. And they reply, Yes, we will come, for you are the Lord our God. ²³ We are weary of worshipping idols on the hills and of having orgies on the mountains. It is all a farce. Only in the Lord our God can Israel ever find her help and her salvation.

²⁴ From our childhood we have seen everything our fathers had—flocks and herds and sons and daughters—squandered on priests and idols. ²⁵ We lie in shame and in dishonor, for we and our fathers have sinned from childhood against the Lord our God; we have not obeyed him.

Leader: These Are God’s Words of Confession.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Romans 7:1-2, 4-6 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 982

¹ Now, dear brothers and sisters—you who are familiar with the law—don’t you know that the law applies only while a person is living? ² For example, when a woman marries, the law binds her to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies, the laws of marriage no longer apply to her.

⁴ So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God. ⁵ When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death. ⁶ But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.

Leader: These Are Apostle Paul’s Words.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Forgiving Lord, we worship you today and every Sunday in freedom and relative comfort compared to our brothers and sisters around the world, yet we all enjoy the same salvation. Thank you for providing your son, Jesus, who went to the cross on

our behalf. It has been a tough week, and we surrender our burdens, worries, and grief to you and the Holy Spirit for healing and renewal. Please help us remember that we are no longer held captive in sin, poor decisions, and evil temptations. In these passages, we confess our sin and accept the invitation of mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Be with us now as we continue to hear God's messages through servants Jeremiah and Paul. Keep us humble, disciplined, and faithful as we enjoy the spiritual freedom you promise for eternity. Speak through this message and messenger. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thank you again for your flexibility about worship. For the last few weeks, we've been learning more about the prophet Jeremiah and the Southern Kingdom of Judah before the exile and Babylonian takeover. His writings illustrate the connection between God's people's spiritual condition and the events of their political and cultural history. Yahweh is the sovereign Lord of this history: their creator, father, and provider. Yet Jeremiah's hearers and readers were (and are still) stubborn and rebellious, worshipping pagan fertility gods and goddesses rather than the one true God. They had become slaves to this sin and temptation, despite the prophets' warnings from God. By this part of Chapter 3, some of the people decided to confess their transgressions and repent.

Last week we defined "apostasy" and righteous living, exact opposites. We all have a pretty good idea what sin looks like, and now we know that righteousness (or holiness, if you will) is more about having a right relationship with the triune God than rigid, legalistic obedience to the law. Let's add and define "repentance" this morning because it is a central theme to these passages. For Jeremiah, repentance requires both confession of guilt and acknowledging Yahweh as their one and only Lord. He offers grace and mercy to the repentant sinner. And of course, we hear that again from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans about

Jesus! Repentance is also a “turning around” or “*metanoia*” in the Greek language, and I prefer the word transformation to conversion, although both words encompass the heart’s spiritual condition and one’s lifestyle.

Here, though, in Jeremiah, God reminds both Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom) that they can receive forgiveness if they promise to repent and stop following “their evil desires;” or as one translation puts it, “stop following the stubbornness of their evil hearts.” God promises both nations (and us), repentant sinners, the gift of the will to obey God, but as we learned, only the “backsliding Israel” (in the King James translation) took God’s offer. Judah, despite the offer and the warnings, chose to continue her apostasy and defiled worship and idolatry of stone and wood. They stayed divided theologically in other ways and continued territorial land struggles for centuries. Of course, through our 20/20 hindsight, we know that in the New Testament, both nations were reunited under Roman control during the incarnation of Jesus, and despite the divisions we see now, will be reunited in harmony upon Jesus’ second coming.

In and through Jeremiah, God makes more promises: to regather his remnant from the coming exile, reuniting Israel and Judah; to place shepherd leaders over them for instruction, care, and feeding; to replace the ark and the temple they will receive a new type of covenant and worship; and Yahweh will eventually restore Jerusalem to be his governing throne. The last paragraph today is first, God’s last offer to his children, Israel and the people’s response of wailing, weeping, confession, and repentance. Israel is truly sorry for her actions and disobedience. They are ashamed of their behaviors and know now that sin

is slavery and addiction, substituting for their love of God and his provision. They return to their love of God and pray for his mercy and grace. The prophet tries to share this testimony to get Judah to do the same, but we will see.

In Romans so far, Paul reminded them that sin leads to death; only obedience to God's will leads to a life of righteousness. The setting, remember, is that Paul is preaching to both Gentiles and Jews, but neither group honors God. The Jews have God's law, but have stopped following him of their own accord, and they definitely do not believe in Jesus as Messiah. Through Paul's supernatural encounter with Jesus and his teachings, he introduces Jesus' sacrifice as atonement for their sin. Living a sinful existence is eternal death, but if they (or we) accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord, sin and evil could not bind them (or us) in slavery with chains. He uses marriage as an illustration, since that was a law that they knew well. If a woman's husband was dead, she was no longer legally married to him and was freed to re-marry and therefore have sexual relations with another man without being considered an adulteress. He ties that image to the believer dying in Christ through their baptism, because although many were "backsliding" as we heard in Jeremiah, they had been baptized in Christ.

Paul was covering all his bases: the self-selected unbelievers, the former believers, and those who had never heard the good news at all. Doesn't that sound like our world today and who we should be reaching? Back in the Fifties and Sixties, it was common for evangelists to guilt or shame people into conversion at large events, the "altar call" Billy Graham experience. Now that worked for many sinners who repented, but

if they were not immediately connected to a church congregation or church community, they never took their faith or spiritual maturity any further. That still happens today, and yes, like the photo on the bulletin cover, the feeling of euphoria from being freed from the slavery of sin is real and empowers new believers to pursue God's word through solid Christian teaching, disciplined spiritual practices, and sanctification (a lifestyle of becoming more holy or saintly). Of course, some drop out because we are such flawed humans, but there is still hope. Righteousness or holiness is more about having a true and deep relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, not just a surface connection. Some people might use the words friend vs. acquaintance! Like the old hymn, "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*" by Joseph Mendlicott Scriven:

¹ What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer!

I had a call from someone yesterday asking me to pray with them over the phone, and after my intercessory prayer, they prayed and reminded me of those words and concepts. Although I may not be committing sin, I was carrying needless worry and pain over things I cannot control like AC and death; those burdens steal God's peace, distract, and enslave us. Through our right relationship with Jesus, and victory over death through resurrection in our baptism, we've been freed from following the law, and we've been freed from the eternal consequences of sin. Our responsibility is to accept his transformation of our lives and then act on it to share the

Gospel with others beyond the walls of this church building. Are you freed from your chains of popularity, desire, greed, lust, worry, or insecurity enough to get uncomfortable inviting someone to church and perhaps being rejected? Grab some of my business cards around the church to hand out to people you think might need Jesus. Can we plant seeds among those we meet on a daily basis or occasionally to help them see the hope of freedom from their burdens? God must be a priority! We are no longer captives to the sin that holds us back as individuals or as a church. What are we holding onto that prevents repentance? Asking Christ to transform our hearts is repentance, either for the first time or the millionth time. What would it mean to you to be truly free to serve the Kingdom in a new way, or to share your faith freely without fear of rejection or criticism? Maybe you are already doing this, and if so, wonderful! Keep praying, keep asking, keep studying, keep serving, and keep coming back to worship. Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Thank you Lord for the guidance and challenges you give us in your Scriptures. Help us to be obedient and close in relationship with you. Help us also to live out our faith and share it with others. Transform our hearts and minds, Lord, to be centered on you and your calling, rather than just on the many details of life. Remind us that you took mercy on us and we celebrate your undeserved grace. Thank you for your forgiveness and for your son, Jesus. May we invite others to worship and love you as we do. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.