

JEREMIAH – ON THE WHEEL

GOD'S GREATEST DREAM

I wonder what God thinks of the world? A sobering truth for me is that I am not God! But I might have some idea of what God thinks of the world. Perhaps it begins with why God created anything at all. Ever wonder about that? Why God created anything at all? Here's what I think.

The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4 v 8). The very nature of love is to give. Love always gives. Love always moves toward the other, it always shares what it has. Love is movement. God is love: in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there is always a movement of love. Love always flows between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It might be described as an interweaving dance of love.

God creates because He wants others to participate in love, his love, the love that flows from Father to Son to Spirit to Father.

God has a dream: that he might give and share love. And God's greatest dream is that he might give and share his love with those he created. So, God creates! At the core of the universe is self-giving, self-sacrificing love. That is the nature of God. That is the nature of love. But we know what happens: the people God created freely choose the way of evil, not love. Love must always be freely chosen, you cannot impose or coerce love. Love is a choice.

The Bible is the story of God pursuing his greatest dream in love. God, in himself, had never known the anguish, distress, heartbreak, pain, grief or hurt of a broken relationship. God, himself, had never known disappointment, loneliness, betrayal, injustice, frustration. God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit were wonderfully complete. God created a world in love, for those he created to know love. But love is a choice.

Adam and Eve made a choice – a choice not out of love but out of the pride of their own hearts: “you will be like God!” Sin – the choice made, not out of love, but out of pride, wrecked everything. Still does. God's heart was broken and it still is. God's bigger and better story of his great love is still alive, because God is love, and love wins.

The Bible is the story of God's love. It is full of stories of God desperately wanting the people he created to live in his love. In the Bible we read the story

of God's heart of love waiting, hoping, longing, forgiving, welcoming, leading, guiding. God chooses a people, Israel, through whom he can demonstrate his love. He woos them, helps them, leads them, guides them, rescues them, provides for them, protects them, fights battles for them. He gives them the best way to live, in love. His greatest dream is that they would know his love and live in his love. But his dream is bigger and better than that. His greatest dream is that through Israel, all people will see his love, know his love and live in his love.

When Israel didn't do so well, God gave himself:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son.
(John 3v16)

Self-giving, self-sacrificing love is at the core of the universe and God wants, longs, hopes, waits – that all people will know his love and live in his love. Which might seem a strange introduction to what we are thinking about in our journey through the book of Jeremiah. But I invite you to hang in there, because it is my conviction that this is exactly and ultimately what the book of Jeremiah is really all about.

A Message About Egypt

46 This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations:

²Concerning Egypt:

This is the message against the army of Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt, which was defeated at Carchemish on the Euphrates River by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah:

³“Prepare your shields, both large and small,
and march out for battle!

⁴Harness the horses,
mount the steeds!

Take your positions
with helmets on!

Polish your spears,
put on your armour!

⁵What do I see?

They are terrified,
they are retreating,
their warriors are defeated.
They flee in haste
without looking back,
and there is terror on every side,”
declares the LORD.
⁶ “The swift cannot flee
nor the strong escape.
In the north by the River Euphrates
they stumble and fall.
⁷ “Who is this that rises like the Nile,
like rivers of surging waters?
⁸ Egypt rises like the Nile,
like rivers of surging waters.
She says, ‘I will rise and cover the earth;
I will destroy cities and their people.’
⁹ Charge, you horses!
Drive furiously, you charioteers!
March on, you warriors—men of Cush and Put who carry shields,
men of Lydia who draw the bow.
¹⁰ But that day belongs to the Lord, the LORD Almighty—
a day of vengeance, for vengeance on his foes.
The sword will devour till it is satisfied,
till it has quenched its thirst with blood.
For the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will offer sacrifice
in the land of the north by the River Euphrates.
¹¹ “Go up to Gilead and get balm,
Virgin Daughter Egypt.
But you try many medicines in vain;
there is no healing for you.
¹² The nations will hear of your shame;
your cries will fill the earth.
One warrior will stumble over another;
both will fall down together.” (Jeremiah 46 v 1-12)

You will note here that Jeremiah is now the prophet to the nations. Mostly though, Jeremiah has been prophesying over Israel, but between chapters 46

and 51, Jeremiah now speaks to the nations. He begins in chapter 46 with Egypt. In Chapter 47 verse 1 we read that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines. In Chapter 48 we read what the Lord Almighty says through Jeremiah concerning Moab. Chapter 49 has what the Lord says to Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar and Hazor and Elam. And in chapter 50 He spoke through Jeremiah the prophet, concerning Babylon. There are ten nations mentioned, between them, covering an area of nearly a million square miles. Between them, they are the powers and superpowers of the ancient world.

And what does God say to them?

Well, in essence, he says the same things he's been saying to the people of Israel, which runs a bit like this:

"I am the Lord Almighty, the ruler of the nations. I am the one who created you. I created you to know my love and to live in my love, but you persist in choosing the way of evil out of the pride of your own hearts. If you persist in living in this way you will bring about your own destruction. The gods you have created will not be able to save you, as you seem to think. But my heart goes out to you, because I love you, I am longing, hoping, waiting, watching for you to turn from your destructive ways and turn to me. I want you to live in the best way, and that is the way of love."

Now, truth is, you won't read those words in any of the words Jeremiah prophesies over the nations. Jeremiah has carefully crafted his words to be specific to each nation he speaks. His words to each nation are written only to them, with details that do not apply to the other nations. But the overarching message is the same. It is a message of warning about judgement, but a message of judgement that anticipates salvation. What does that mean? In truth, most of each message is about impending judgement – the consequences of choosing their own way, but at the end of each prophecy, there is a message of hope. At the end of each message comes the message of salvation. In each message there is always the possibility of the nation's turning to God.

So, for example, to Egypt the message of salvation and hope is this: "Later, however, Egypt will be inhabited as in times past," declares the Lord (46 v 26).

We would do well to remember something important here. In God's love, judgement is always restorative. That's another way of saying that the purpose of judgement is never really about punishment, but bringing people back to God's love. The truth of God's bigger and better story is that God loves those he created. He wants no-one, ever, to perish. God's judgement is not about God's wrath being satisfied in a way that causes God to destroy people. Why would God do that? Why would the God, who is love, want to destroy the people he created? Well, quite simply, he doesn't!

What God wants, his greatest dream, is for those he created to live in the light of his love. Judgement, God's wrath, is better understood as God handing people over to the consequences of their choices. It breaks God's heart to do that, because that is not what we were made for. But he is love, and love allows free choice, and in these chapters of Jeremiah, God uses the prophet to speak to the nations the same message he has been speaking to Israel.

We are living in unprecedented times. We know that we are, I think, living in a time when there is an extraordinary focus on the nations of the world we don't normally see. The outbreak and spread of the coronavirus have given the nations of the world something of a shared identity. Every nation is living in a new fear, every nation is fighting. The nations of the world find themselves strangely pulled together in this time. The nations of the world are working together to find a way through this time. The nations of the world will work together to find a vaccine against the virus. The nations of the world need a message of hope.

The message of hope from Jeremiah to Israel and the nations was that they were greatly loved by God. We just celebrated Easter. Easter reminds us that self-giving, self-sacrificing love is at the core of the universe. It reminds us that God's greatest dream is to know and be known by the people he created; it reminds us that God so loved the world!

Even in this difficult and challenging time, this is the message of hope. It is the message of God's greatest dream, the message that we can participate in his love. The message that there is a bigger and far better story than the one we see in front of us right now. The nations would do well to hear this message.

Friends, we would do well to hear this message. Jeremiah wrote his prophecies carefully with care and specific details to each nation. The truth here is that God meets the nations where they were at. He still does.

The same is true for you and me. God knows you better than you know yourself and he will meet you where you are at. God's greatest dream is that you will come to him, open your heart to him, now, in these moments, wherever you are at. So that he can love you with his great and magnificent love. It seems that Israel and the nations struggled with that.

How about you?

One last thought. Max Lucado asks a challenging question: What if one day Jesus were to become you? You would be exactly the same person you are now: same personality, talents, relationships, fears, challenges. But you would have Jesus's heart! You would have his heart of love for others: his greatest dream that they would know his love.

I'm wondering how, in this current crisis, you would live out that heart of love. How would you live out that heart of love towards those you can connect with? Perhaps, as we open our hearts to God's love, we will grow a more forgiving, compassionate, listening, honest, pure, hope filled, rejoicing, enduring heart. A heart that reflects the heart of God and his greatest dream to a world that so desperately needs to know it.

Prepared by Rev. Ian Phillips, live streamed on Sunday 19th March 2020.