

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **A VISION FOR THE WORLD**

(Jeremiah 46-51)

Study #8

### **Sermon series: Faithful**

(Stories from Jeremiah)

#### **Introduction: A shrinking world, an enlarged life...**

My father passed away nearly twenty years ago, at age 82. He was a good man and I still miss him.

But, as he aged, I noticed Dad became less interested in things that had always interested him and his circle of friends grew smaller. He was always a private man - and he became more private, ingrown.

I remember thinking in his last years, *"Dad's world is shrinking.* And we all get that. A shrinking world and a smaller life are common for any aging man or woman.

These days, when we talk about a shrinking world, we often mean that the world is shrinking. That is, that the increased speed and ease of communication and transportation has shrunk distances and time. Increasingly, we are a part of a global village.

A trip across America once required years. Literally. Today we can leave New York in the morning and arrive in LA before noon. Satellites allow instant communication with anyone who has a cell phone. Small world.

Increasingly, what happens anywhere effects everywhere.

- When disease breaks out anywhere on the planet it is only a matter of days before it hits San Antonio.
- If because of a pandemic, people drive fewer miles in Madrid, Spain, oil and gas wells in South Texas sit idle.
- A business decision by Apple or MacDonald's or Amazon will roil markets.<sup>1</sup>
- Saber-rattling in North Korea puts the rest of the world on high alert.

The world is one grand butterfly effect, where the actions of one group may affect everyone and everything else. The policies and the economies and the armies of the world's nations are on our minds because they all affect us all.

So, yes, the world is shrinking.

Ironically, though, a shrinking world means more exposure to different cultures and distant nations, leading to an expansive life. Even in 2020 because of 24/7 news cycles and the Internet, we are more familiar with and conversant about and concerned for the big, broad world than ever before.

It is true that we all, very naturally, have a global perspective. But - and here's my point - that's nothing new.

An expansive life predates the Internet by thousands of years because when God's people have been at their best, living according to our Manufacturers' instructions, we have always been a people with a heart for the world.

I am grateful to God that when the church of Jesus is operating the way He designed it to work, we find...

- ...groups of friends linking arms to send resources to foreign lands AND to UTSA, Vista Community College, and Marshall High School.
- ...a great interest in fostering the unparented, and in serving the unborn, the disabled, and the elderly.
- ...lots of money being funneled toward the welfare of people that the givers have never even met.

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<sup>1</sup> I have eaten at MacDonald's in most every country I have visited, and you probably have, too (or you could have if you had wished to).

It was the Great Commission, not the Internet, that gave us the global village. And the church's interest in serving, worldwide, springs from the heart of God. Biblical faith has always been aggressively international.

For the last two thousand years - again, when the church has been at its healthiest - Christians have crossed racial, linguistic, geographic, and cultural borders because of a belief that no people on earth and no person on earth is irrelevant to God.

Today we'll look to Jeremiah again and we'll see a man with a heart as big as God's world.

As he aged, his world didn't shrink. His world and his life became expansive. He invites us to embrace a God-centered, expansive life, too.

#### *Globalism in the prophets*

Jeremiah's interest in the world was typical among the Jewish prophets. Most all of the sixteen major and minor Old Testament prophets spoke to the global situation of his day.<sup>2</sup> Three of the prophets were focused entirely on a nation other than Israel.<sup>3</sup>

So, it isn't surprising that chapters 46-51 of Jeremiah's book are all about the nations of the world in which he lived.

Sure, he had lots to say to his own people, Israel. But from the beginning, God had commissioned Jeremiah to be **[1:5] a prophet to the nations.**

#### *Orienting to Jeremiah's "Oracles to the Nations"*

In these chapters (46-51) Jeremiah speaks to nine<sup>4</sup> nations. The oracles are of varying lengths and they follow a generally geographic order, flowing from west to east, and from near to far from Israel.

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 13-23; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2 - for a prophetic focus on the nations.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah and Nahum regarding Nineveh, and Obadiah regarding Edom.

<sup>4</sup> It is possible to count the oracles as ten, dividing the words to Kedar and Hazor. I'm treating this oracle (Jeremiah 49:28-33) as one.

There is an order of the oracles, but it isn't the order that's important. What's important is the *message* of each oracle and the *fact* that the oracles are included in Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

It is important, too, to note the life that the author of these oracles lived.

The man who wrote to and about these nine nations, the prophet Jeremiah, was a true home body.

### **Knowing the World**

#### **Jeremiah, Home Body**

Jeremiah was born and raised three miles northwest of Jerusalem in the small village of Anathoth.

As far as we know, he never left Israel,<sup>6</sup> except for a brief stint in Egypt, a trip taken against his will near the end of his life.

Most of you listening to this message have traveled much more widely than Jeremiah did. A world traveler he was NOT!

But we learn from reading through these oracles that even if Jeremiah's physical experience of the world was not broad, in his mind, in his imagination and in his spirit, he was a jetsetter.

#### **Jeremiah, (mental) World Traveler**

The geographical range of the nine messages he gave relating to various nations encompasses some 750,000 square miles.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There is debate as to the order in which these oracles should have been recorded. Our English Bibles have them in the same order as the Hebrew Bible. In this order, the nations are listed, roughly, in a west to east order. But the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, or LXX) arranges them differently, with the nations listed in order of political prominence. Many believe that these oracles against the nations circulated for a time as an independent work.

<sup>6</sup> Actually, Judah, the southern part of Palestine / Israel.

<sup>7</sup> That's three times the size of Texas.

The reach of these oracles extended from as far west as Egypt to the Kingdom of Elam in the east, from Damascus in the north to Edom in the south.

The messages to the nations make up six full chapters in Jeremiah's book, so we won't be looking at each verse separately.

Instead, we'll do a flyover of the oracles three times, each time for a different purpose.

During our first flyover, you'll get the "gist" of each oracle. You'll see that Jeremiah had done his homework. He hadn't been to any of these places, but he knew them inside and out.

First, he writes to and about Egypt.

*The humbling of Egypt (46:1-28)*

By the time Jeremiah wrote this oracle, the Jews had mostly endured a long and difficult fourteen-hundred-year history with Egypt.

The patriarchs - Abraham and Jacob and his family - took trips to Egypt. Jacob's family excursion led to four hundred years of slavery.

Over the centuries, Egypt and Israel had, at times, been allies. More frequently, they were enemies.

At the time of Jeremiah's writing, Egypt was a major player on the world stage.

But she was about to engage in - and lose - one of the most important military battles of the ancient world, the Battle of Carchemish, a city located north and east of Israel on the banks of the Euphrates River.

***[2] To Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt, which was by the Euphrates River at Carchemish, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah...***

In this oracle written about Egypt's loss at Carchemish - which hadn't happened yet! - we get an education about Egypt.

Jeremiah mentioned Ethiopia and Put (v. 9), Egyptian allies who fought and lost with Egypt at Carchemish.

Jeremiah knows about and mentions Egyptian cities: Migdol, Memphis, Tahpanhes.

He references one of Egypt's chief gods, Amon, and the Nile River and the city of Thebes. He refers to the ruler of Egypt as "Pharaoh", not "king."

Having never been to Egypt, Jeremiah knew a lot about Egypt. And then he shifted his focus to Philistia.

*The sword of the Lord against the Philistines (47:1-7)*

***[47:1] That which came as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines, before Pharaoh conquered Gaza.***

From ancient times, the Israelites lived with and did battle with the Philistines. In his message to Philistia and shows knowledge of Philistine coastal topography, alliances with other nations, and military strength.<sup>8</sup> Next up, the nations of Moab and Ammon.

*Tears for Moab (48:1-47)*

***[48:1] Concerning Moab.***

***Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Woe to Nebo, for it has been destroyed; Kiriathaim has been put to shame, it has been captured; The lofty stronghold has been put to shame and shattered.***

The land of Moab was located on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, the other side from Jerusalem. Jeremiah would have been able to see Moab's harsh terrain and from Jerusalem, and he mentions Moab's treacherous topography.

<sup>8</sup> Five major Philistine cities - Gaza, Ekron, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath.

Jeremiah also lists place names: Luhith and Horonaim, a long listing of Moabite cities. The god of the Moabites, Chemosh, comes in for special treatment. Then, he spoke to and about Ammon.

*Ammon, dispossessed (49:1-6)*

**[49:1] Concerning the sons of Ammon.**

**Thus says the Lord:**

***“Does Israel have no sons?***

***Or has he no heirs?***

***Why then has Malcam taken possession of Gad***

***And his people settled in its cities?***

The Ammonites lived in the desolate Dead Sea region and were long-standing enemies of the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

A few centuries earlier, they had hired a false prophet, Balaam, to curse the Jews. The Jewish judge, Jephthah, fought the Ammonites, as did King Saul and King David.

Their god was Molech - to whom they offered their own children as sacrifices - and Molech had been worshiped since the days of Moses (that is, for nine hundred years!).<sup>10</sup>

Continuing, Jeremiah next speaks to the nation of Edom.

*Edom stripped bare (49:7-22)*

**[7] Concerning Edom.**

**Thus says the Lord of hosts,**

***“Is there no longer any wisdom in Teman?***

***Has good counsel been lost to the prudent?***

***Has their wisdom decayed?***

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<sup>9</sup> Like Moab, the Ammonites came to be a people through very sinful means (see Genesis 19). And they had both long been enemies of the Jews. But there were ties of kinship with Israel, as Abraham’s nephew, Lot, was the father of both nations and Ruth (a Moabitess) was the mother of David’s ancestor.

<sup>10</sup> Referred to here as “Malcam” a variant of the name Molech.

The nation of Edom came from Isaac and Rebekah’s older son, Esau. Through the centuries there had been constant battles between the Jews and the descendants of Esau/Edom.

And Jeremiah knew Edom’s fame for both wisdom and for inaccessible strongholds.

Attacking Edom was notoriously difficult, and Jeremiah noted her supposed invulnerability.

Moving his focus northward, Jeremiah next references the world-class city of Damascus, the only city to receive an oracle.

*Damascus in panic (49:23-27)*

**[23] Concerning Damascus...**

Located north of Israel, not far from Carchemish,<sup>11</sup> the city had already been heavily damaged by the Assyrians a century and a half earlier, a fact which Jeremiah seems to have known.

He predicts a soon to come total annihilation.

**[24] “Damascus has become helpless;**

***She has turned away to flee,***

***And panic has gripped her;***

***Distress and pangs have taken hold of her***

***Like a woman in childbirth.***

We are nearing the homestretch as we reach the land of Kedar, a nation of Bedouin tent-dwellers in the desert to the west of Babylon.

*The tents of Kedar in affliction (49:28-33)*

**[28] Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated. Thus says the Lord,**  
***“Arise, go up to Kedar***  
***And devastate the men of the east.***

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<sup>11</sup> The site of that epic battle between Egypt and Babylon.

Jeremiah mentions the tents and camels and flocks and the distinctive hair styles (v. 32!) of the men of Kedar.

Jeremiah knew that Kedar was the most powerful of the Arabian tribes - and he mentioned it.

The next to the last nation mentioned is also the most distant, geographically, from Jerusalem. Jeremiah writes about Elam, sitting at the northern end of the Persian Gulf.

*The bow of Elam broken (49:34-39)*

**[34] That which came as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, saying:**

**[35] "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, I am going to break the bow of Elam, The finest of their might.**

We don't know of any involvements between Israel and Elam during this or any other time period. We really don't know why Jeremiah mentioned this ancient Persian power.

But he did mention it and knew that their capitol city was Susa and that it had mighty and skilled archers.

The last oracle to the nations concerns Babylon.

*The doom of Babylon (50:1--51:64)*

The empire which was soon to strike the decisive blow against Judah receives the longest oracle about her own future, taking up two full chapters of the book. And, while I won't say anything about these two chapters now, Jeremiah reveals an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Babylonian.

#### **APPLICATION POINT FOR 2020 FOLLOWERS OF JESUS:**

In wrestling with the question, "What do we do with these six chapters of the Bible?", I just want to make sure we don't miss what is unmissable.

Jeremiah, a man who never traveled much more widely than that six-mile round trip from Jerusalem to his hometown of Anathoth, was a man of the world.

It was his grasp of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the world powers of his day that allowed him to write insightful prophecies to and about these nations.

He knew their geography, history, politics, religion - and their importance. He was not cloistered, and he was not *ethnocentric*.<sup>12</sup>

He was Jewish and no doubt glad for that. But he gave due weight to the global community.

I believe that Jeremiah's mental engagement with his world is a call to you and me to understand and to engage with our own.

Biblical faith is never an isolationist faith.

We are called to be interested in the world - its issues and its concerns, its problems, and its peoples. Our interest in the world is based on our core belief that God is the Lord of the whole earth.

Among the lessons of Jeremiah's oracles to the nations is that we who follow Jesus should be as well-informed about current events and world trends as possible.

Learn about your world - and from a wide-ranging set of sources. Read the Wall Street Journal AND listen to National Public Radio AND watch the CBS evening news AND read World Magazine.

Learn about other political systems, far off lands, neighboring faiths, third world struggles. Understand the flow of history.

Engage with the world. Be informed. Be conversant with the great themes of our day.

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<sup>12</sup> Ethnocentricity (a and one that I was exposed to when I spent a summer in Germany, 1976) is the belief that one's own people are superior to other peoples.

Jeremiah could have never prophesied as powerfully as he did without being interested in and informed about the goings on of his day. And your familiarity with the world will make you a more effective tool in God's hands.

But his oracles about the nations tell us something besides his interest in the world in which he lived.

The oracles shout, from every line, his confident trust in God.

### **Trusting the One Who Made the World**

#### **Egypt?**

The rumors making their way to Jerusalem as Jeremiah wrote were that the Egyptian army, seeking to imitate the Nile, was going to "surge" and overwhelm the Babylonians. It was a grand and glorious Egyptian vision.

Jeremiah prophesied Egypt's destruction while Egypt was still a mighty power. He knew that God had decreed her downfall. So, he said so. Out loud.

#### **The Philistines?**

The Philistines had been a stubborn presence in Palestine from time immemorial. Centuries earlier, King David had broken much of their strength, but they remained a thorn in Israel's side into the days of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, confident of what the Lord had revealed to him, predicted their soon, complete eradication from the stage of history.

#### **Moab and Ammon and Edom?**

Moab and Ammon and Edom were the back-street thugs of the Ancient Near Eastern world.

They lived in inhospitable lands and were unassailable - until the Lord decreed their destruction, which Jeremiah proclaimed.

#### **Damascus? Kedar? Elam?**

Likewise, for Damascus. An influential, but unjust city will be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

The people of Kedar were elusive desert-dwellers, thought to be beyond the reach of Nebuchadnezzar. Their time came to an end.

The warriors of Elam, expert with the bow and arrow, will find their bow broken.

And Babylon? Whew.

#### **Babylon?**

As Jeremiah sat down to write, Babylon was the most-feared nation in the world. Still, he prophesied what God told him would happen to Babylon, namely that she would be destroyed.<sup>14</sup>

Oh - that could never happen! ...and it did, only decades after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

#### **APPLICATION POINT FOR 2020 FOLLOWERS OF JESUS:**

Jeremiah lived in a during scary time. World powers were vying for supremacy, his own nation faced imminent destruction, and his personal security was tenuous, at best.

Yet Jeremiah spoke with utter confidence because he not only knew his world, he knew and trusted His God.

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<sup>13</sup> It was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 323 BC.

<sup>14</sup> There is no call for Jewish revolution against Babylon, only the assurance that Babylon will receive retribution for her own evil.

<sup>15</sup> There is even a bit of "smack" associated with how the message was delivered. Jeremiah told Seraiah to take the message to Babylon, read it out loud and then throw it into the Euphrates River as a signal that as the scroll sank, so would Babylon sink!

What a message for 2020. There are scary things all around us today and Jeremiah points the way forward. The way forward is the way of faith.

Be careful to not place your faith in something that God hasn't promised He will do. Don't step out on the shaky limb of presuming that God will do what you want Him to do regarding your physical health, our nation's politics, or your economic well-being.

Do put the whole weight of your trust in God to do what He says He will do. He will give you eternal life when you believe in Jesus. He will never leave you. He listens to your prayers. His Spirit abides within you to strengthen you to love and to give and to serve.

And do trust God. Period. Not even for any particular outcome. But as opposed to trusting in anyone or anything else, trust God. No matter what.

Let's consider the oracles one more time. We've seen Jeremiah's engagement with his world and his confidence in God. This time through let's notice Jeremiah's heart for the world.

First, listen to the careful attentiveness Jeremiah brought to his work of writing oracles to the nations.

## **Loving the World**

### **Attentiveness**

The messages Jeremiah prepared for the nations are thoughtful, as in "filled with thought." He took the nations and their fates seriously.

He never resorted to clichés or slogans. He never referred to them dismissively or assaulted them with a stereotyped formula.

He could have lumped together all the nations and made one blast of an oracle against them. He could have just thrown something together, thinking,

*"After all, they're just Ammonites/Edomites/Elamites..."*

He didn't do that.

He was as careful in putting these messages together as he was in preparing messages for his own people.

He took pains to acquire thorough and detailed knowledge about these nations. He carefully crafted nine separate messages, each one uniquely addressed to the situation of one of the nations. They weren't interchangeable oracles.

Jeremiah named them specifically, described them attentively, and addressed them seriously.

We expect Jeremiah to take God seriously. And we have learned that because he took God seriously, he also took the nations seriously. We can learn from Jeremiah in this.

You and I hear about other nations, sometimes about nations with whom the United States is at odds. Often, news about other nations is negative news.

There are negative things going on in our own nation and in every other nation on earth. The ability to see these problems is a cheap gift. I have long been impatient with the cheap gift of seeing problems.

The more valuable gift is the grace to see the people in these nations as people for whom Jesus died. They are each precious in God's sight and are deserving of our love, help, and attentiveness.

One tool Kathy and I use to increase our serious attentiveness to the nations of the world is the Voice of the Martyrs Prayer App.

It's easy to install on a phone (I did it) and will provide a prayer request for a different country each day, with more background information on that country that will help you pray more intelligently.

Look into this helpful tool. It will help you have a heart that beats with God's attentive heart for the world.

Determine to not be dismissive toward the nations. Learn to see the people of the world with God's eyes of compassion. Practice praying for them.

Something else that strikes us as we look at these messages is the presence of mercy.

### **Mercy**

Sure, there is a lot of judgment in these oracles.<sup>16</sup> But there is also **mercy** and there is **hope**.

The relatively few lines of mercy tell us that the prophecies are not just the rantings of a vengeful prophet or of a vengeful God. Some of the nations received an explicit message of hope and salvation.<sup>17</sup>

Some didn't. And those who didn't hear words of mercy could have heard the words of judgment as calls to turn to God, as Nineveh did at the preaching of Jonah.

When wicked Nineveh repented, God relented. Perhaps He would have relented at the repentance of Philistia, Edom, and Damascus?

Attentiveness. Mercy. And finally, these nine oracles give us a world-sized vision of God Himself.

### **Good News: A God for the Whole World**

Jeremiah was called by God to be a **[Jeremiah 1:5] prophet to the nations**. That call to a thoroughly Jewish man proved that God was not to be identified with a single nation or with a particular culture.

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<sup>16</sup> When speaking about Israel, God recounts the people's rebelliousness and declares that it is only right that He should judge a nation like this (5:9, 29; 9:9) The same thing holds true for the nations.

<sup>17</sup> There is hope for Egypt at 46:26 (see also Isaiah 19:19-25 and Psalm 87:4). No word of hope for Philistia, or Edom or Damascus. Hope for Moab (48:47) and Ammon (49:6). Elam will receive mercy (49:39).

It tells us that if we understand our God or our faith as an American thing, a western thing, or "*our thing*" - we have misunderstood Him and His ways.

The Gospel of Jesus has no native country. There are no Gospel insiders. It is the message of God to and for the whole world.

And these are the words that keep ringing in our ears: **[John 3:16] "For God so loved the WORLD..."**

### **APPLICATION POINT FOR 2020 FOLLOWERS OF JESUS:**

He loved the world so much that He gave Jeremiah to speak to it. Two thousand years later He gave His only Son, Jesus, to save all who trust Him.

Today, He loves the world so much that He has given a people to tell the Good News that Jesus saves. You and I, together, make up that people.

The image of the Christian and of the church today is, sadly, an image of an anti-Jeremiah.

We are often seen as those who huddle together and retreat from interaction with the world; who ignore or even despise outsiders; who collect only friends who look and think like we do; who barricade ourselves from anything that would challenge our worldview.

So, to ensure that we don't fall into those traps, God gave us Jeremiah and those like him who explore other cultures and nations, who brave hostility and misunderstanding.

Many of them have the scars to prove that the life of faith lived in every place and among all people can be dicey.

But they would all say, "*It's worth it to trust and obey Jesus in this shrinking world by leading an expansive life.*"