

George Orwell’s book *1984* is the extremely grim portrayal of a world ruled by Big Brother. The insanity of that dystopian world is depressing. But I can appreciate the Afterword by personality theorist Eric Fromm. He points out that the Enlightenment brought a new literary genre into the world, the utopian novel filled with hope for a new world created by human effort. However, the horrors of WW I and II resulted in the reversal of utopian hopes and the creation of dystopian novels. The leading examples are Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *1984* and his *Animal Farm*. Fromm points out that even as the Enlightenment brought a hope rooted in a resurgent humanism, the near destruction of civilization because of world-wide war spawned a hopelessness rooted in human evil. That hopelessness is now the dominant mood of our time, says Eric Fromm. And that gives us Christians a powerful connecting point for seemingly hopeless Scriptures such as Jeremiah 4. Remember that last Sunday’s reading from Jeremiah 18 offered the slightest sign of hope in the repetition of the little word “if.” There seems to be absolutely no hope in today’s Scripture! Which I’ll admit makes it a very tough message to digest.

But rather than only explaining what Jeremiah says to God’s people in the 6th century BC, I want to apply Jeremiah’s message to the life of God’s people today, as we face major challenges in our world. In fact, there is precious little in these words that gives even a hint of grace. But let’s not be too glum. Let’s examine Jeremiah to ascertain what he says, to whom, and why. Then let’s wrestle with how this message speaks to 21st century believers and seekers.

Verses 11&12 clearly convey a word of prophecy addressed to God’s people in Judah and Jerusalem sometime between 626 and 587 BC, probably just before the first or second Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. In other words, it was addressed to people who lived in a world very different from ours. How can we bridge the gap between them and us, so that God’s word is relevant to us?

I’ll admit that it is difficult if we take the nature of God’s word to Judah at face value. **It is a word of unmistakable gloom and doom.** And we already hear

plenty of that on the daily news. Today's passage begins with a description of a scorching wind from the desert, a *sirocco*, in verses 11&12. The prevailing winds in Israel come from the west off the Mediterranean and though they might bring the occasional severe thunderstorm, they are for the most part gentle, refreshing, moisture filled, and therefore essential to a semi-arid region. But this threatening wind comes from the blazing desert and it is not intended to bring comfort or even correction. It is too strong for those positive purposes. This is not merely a severe thunderstorm that might break off a few branches or blow off some shingles, or an EF 1 tornado that will take off a few roofs and flip over camping trailers, or even a Category 3 hurricane that will flatten whole villages and flood entire counties. This wind, clearly a symbol for the ferocious might of the armies from the north, will utterly destroy all of Judah and especially Jerusalem.

Jeremiah conveys the devastation this sirocco brings in verse 13 by saying “*Look*,” at the undoing of creation itself! Specifically, “*He says he advances like the clouds, his chariots come like a whirlwind, his horses are swifter than eagles. Woe to us! We are ruined!*” Then, in a series of 4 visions beginning in verse 22, he says, “*I looked.*” A careful reading shows this is a reversal of Genesis 1&2. In verse 23 the created world returns to the *chaos* of Genesis 1:2, “*formless and empty.*” The celestial bodies that brought light to creation are gone and all is darkness. In verse 24 the mountains that cannot be moved are “*quaking and swaying.*” In verse 25, all humanity has disappeared, and even the numberless birds “*had flown away.*” Verse 26 shows that all signs of civilization are gone. Cultivated fields, “*the fruitful land,*” has become desert and all homes have been levelled—“*all its towns lay in ruins.*”

Lest we think that Jeremiah's visions are a figment of the prophet's vivid imagination, the Lord himself utters a final word: “*The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. Therefore, the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark...*” It sounds like the funeral of the world. Doesn't it? And it's all because of God's judgment, says Jeremiah. Make no mistake. All this devastation comes not from the power of nature or the might

of nations, though God may use those means. No, this all comes from God. This will happen, as the Lord says, “*because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back*” (v. 28). This prophecy is as stern and strong a word of judgment as we will find anywhere in Scripture.

Why on earth would God send such a ferocious wind upon his beloved people? Note that God still calls them “my people” in verses 11 and 22, and he offers that mysterious and incongruous qualification in verse 27, “*though I will not destroy [them] completely.*” But apart from tiny notes of improvement, God seems absolutely determined to punish his people.

Why would a covenant God do this? Because his covenant people have completely broken the covenant with their Lord. They have brought this on themselves, says a verse between the two parts of our reading: “*Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!*” (v 18). Perhaps it is God’s heart that it truly pierces!

What sin could warrant such punishment? Verse 22 is very clear. “*My people are fools*” in the deepest sense of that biblical word, “*they do not know me*” and therefore “*they do not know how to do good.*” It’s not just that they had lost all intellectual knowledge of God’s existence and nature. They still prayed and offered sacrifices to and “believed” in their God.

But in their day to day behavior they demonstrated that they had no close relationship with Yahweh and no understanding of what God wanted of them. They were like senseless, brutal children whose only skill was doing evil (think of the British school boys in *Lord of the Flies* or Chucky from the horror movies). Though they still talked about God occasionally, they lived utterly godless lives, except when they turned to the false gods of the nations. Over the centuries they have *unmade* themselves as God’s people. Therefore God will now unmake them.

And that’s exactly what happened. After years and years of cajoling and promising and warning and threatening, **God finally did it**, in stages, until the

Promised Land looked exactly like the visions of Jeremiah. **God did what God said.**

I've always believed that a sermon should present God's grace as so beautiful that everybody wants it. A sermon should present God's kingdom as being such a joyful prospect that we all want to get in on it. So, what is God saying to us today through Jeremiah's prophecy? I can think of three things...

First, we can hear in Jeremiah 4 that God judges his people's sins in the midst of history by the use of both natural and national forces. Now, let's be careful **not to do** what a certain TV preacher did a while back, when he "prophesied" that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment upon America's tolerance of homosexuality. Identifying a particular disaster as God's direct judgment upon a particular sin or particular people is highly dangerous.

Yet Jeremiah reminds us in a powerful way that God does know, and God does care, and God will act against human sin. History does not just roll along as a closed system of cause and effect. The message of the Bible is that God does intervene in various ways, including judgment. And that is good news, because it means that the inmates are not in charge. God will not let human sin finally destroy God's world and his people. He will stop it by acts of judgment, including the Final Judgment. So, it is, in fact, an act of mercy, even grace, to warn people of God's judgment.

Second, we shouldn't ignore judgment. In fact, a dark prophecy like this gives us the opportunity to seek God's grace in all its beauty, **because grace saves us from judgment**. A deep look at sin and judgment in Jeremiah shows us exactly what grace saves us from—our self-destroying folly and God's unstoppable judgment. "Sin" is such a general word that it's almost indefinable, but God's description of sin in verse 22 gives color and texture to sin, so we can easily recognize it in ourselves. We are "*skilled in doing evil.*" And "judgment" is such a common word that it often carries little threat. But Jeremiah's vision of the results of God's fierce judgment should capture the attention of a generation raised on dystopian novels and movies. Once we let our imagination of

Jeremiah's vivid images and his piercing analysis capture our attention, **we can see the grace of God in Christ in all its redeeming and stunning beauty.**

In other words, if we were to connect Jeremiah 4 with several Scriptures, like Exodus 32, or Psalm 51, or Luke 15, in all of them we would see that **grace triumphs over sin and judgment.** We have a Mediator and the sincere confession of sin results in heaven rejoicing over every lost person who is found. The New Testament shows us that even the “chief of sinners” can become the most important missionary the world has ever seen.

Third, we can take the apocalyptic language of this passage to see a contrasting message of **apocalyptic hope.** Jeremiah's vision of a world ruined by sin and judgment presents an opportunity to paint a brighter picture of the new creation that God will usher in with the second coming of Christ. Our world seems to be heading toward ruin, even as we gather here for worship, whether it's international tensions or partisan politics or racial divisions or incurable diseases. In many ways the world already resembles the visions of Jeremiah 4. But the Bible has an alternative vision of a world in which **there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain** because the groaning of a fallen creation has been replaced by the joy of a new heaven and earth and people from every nation and tribe and people and language are gathered around the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 7).

Earlier I skipped over the phrase from verse 13 that became the title of this sermon. Jeremiah says, **“Look, he advances like the clouds...”** On the face of it this probably doesn't sound very threatening, *like the clouds*. But you may not know this about clouds: “An average cumulus cloud weighs approximately 1.1 million pounds, which is roughly the weight of 100 elephants. Clouds float because the weight is distributed over a vast volume, making them less dense than the surrounding air.” **Clouds are incredibly heavy.** This means that God's judgment has a weight that would crush us all if it were not for God's grace and God's love. Reach out to God today; to our God who is full of grace and truth.

Lord have mercy! Lord have mercy on us all! Amen.

(Thanks to Stan Mast for sermon suggestions)