

Sermon – September 4, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
Jeremiah 18:1-11

A couple of pastors from churches in town were standing by the road, pounding a sign into the ground. The sign read, “THE END IS NEAR! TURN YOURSELF AROUND NOW BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE!” As a car sped past them, the driver yelled out the window, “Leave us alone, Bible-thumpers!” A few moments later, the pastors heard the *screech* of tires and a *big* splash. One pastor turns to the other and says, “You think the sign should just say, BRIDGE OUT?”

Why do you think people try to be prophets? Some do it for credibility: “I predicted the 2008 recession, so you should buy my seminar on the next big stock that’ll make us all billionaires!” Some—like the Westboro Baptist Church—do it for the explicit reason of getting a preemptive I-told-you-so in, so that everyone they think is destined to go to hell will feel just *awful* when they finally end up there. But some... some prophesy the future to *change* the future. People like that see what’s coming down the pike, and try to tell people about it so that they might make a change—a change in themselves, a change in their society—and in doing so, avert the oncoming train of catastrophe.

It’s this kind of predicting we see from many of the prophets in the Bible, not the least of whom is Jeremiah.

My Old Testament professor in seminary often said that he believed ancient prophets had *insight* rather than *foresight*. That is, they had an uncanny ability to see and recognize what was going on in the world and in the people around them, and diagnose a society to such a degree that they could tell *where* they were going, and what they might be able to *do*—if anything—to change their fates. This insight—this ability to X-Ray Vision the world and read between the lines—was God-given in the most literal sense, so whether you believe that they were *foretelling* the future or just *predicting* it, it’s still a gift of God. And *from* God, Jeremiah had a *lot* to relay to the people.

As was often true with the people of ancient Judah and ancient Israel and ancient Samaria, a grim fate lay on the horizon. In 597 BC, the armies of Babylon would conquer Judah, destroy the great temple of the Jewish people, and exile the Jews from their home. In the years leading up to this tragedy, Jeremiah was very active, warning God’s people of an impending calamity and calling on them to change their ways.

Jeremiah saw the *cause* of this terrible fate as the people having for too long turned *away* from godliness and *towards* selfishness, injustice, theft, and oppression. If they could mend their ways, he told them, God would change the fate that awaited them.

As Jeremiah saw it, God was a potter. God created us—all of humanity—gathered us as if from clay, and God had high hopes for how we would turn out. God could *see* the

beautiful pottery we can become. But just like clay on a potter's wheel, sometimes we're imperfect. Sometimes we don't come together just right. There's bubbles, there's... drooping; we don't hold the form God is coaxing us into. And from the pottery's perspective, that's not a great position to be in.

If you've ever worked with pottery—or if, like me, you never graduated past Play-Doh—you know that there comes a point sometimes where you just have to take your malformed creation and ball it up, roll it up in your hands, add some water, and slap that bad boy back down on the table and try again. And from the clay's perspective, that's a pretty traumatic turn of events, right?

“Then the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?’ says the Lord. ‘Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.’”

Unfortunately, the people didn't heed Jeremiah's warnings—in fact they ended up eventually locking him in the bottom of a well—and sure enough, the future came. Their whole way of life was torn down; their very lives—their entire culture—given a decades-long, *generations*-long reset.

Jeremiah and many other prophets of the Bible *were* filled with prophecies like that. Prophecies of coming destruction, which the people were ultimately unable to avoid. Our *modern* life is full of many such prophecies too. Epidemiologists have long predicted pandemics that will hobble our nations if we don't prepare for them. Climate scientists predict the widespread suffering that will result from man-made climate change. Religions predict the fall of an increasingly godless world. The Right predicts the Left will usher in a totalitarian regime, while that's exactly what the Left predicts the Right will do. And in the words of Warren Zevon, “if California slides into the ocean, like the mystics and statistics say it will, *I* predict this *motel* will be standing until I pay my bill.”

But the prophecies of the Bible aren't like the prophecies you see in the movies or novels where the future's already written and no matter how hard you try to avoid it the plot will just twist you back into your unavoidable fate. Scripture does not show us a world where God hit the cue ball and just walked away from the pool table, letting the balls fall into the pockets they were always going to fall into. No matter how all-knowing God is, again and again we see in God not *only* a prime mover, but a living Spirit. Again and again, the Bible tells us, a change in behavior from the *people* can *lead* to a change in *God's* course of action. As accurate as a prophecy or a prediction might be, the universe is not immutable. Our fate is not set in stone *or* ceramic.

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”

There’s something very specific that Jeremiah did *not* say. He did *not* say that the potter took the clay, put it in the kiln, fired it, painted it, and looked upon its ugliness, then tossed it to the ground where it shattered into useless pieces.

Once clay is fired, it dries and hardens into a permanent structure. You can’t rework a fired pot any more than you can put ink back into a marker or un-cook a scrambled egg, and it is *very* breakable.

Un-fired clay, on the other hand, is malleable. A lump of clay can be reshaped as many times as you need. Un-fired clay represents infinite possibility. The message of God that Jeremiah gave to the people of ancient Israel, a message that God has for *us* today, is that you—all of us—are like clay that has not yet been fired. A dark future may await us, but it has not yet *set*. If you will allow God to coax you into a new shape, and if—like the people *Jeremiah* called upon—we as a people can turn *away* from selfishness, injustice, theft, and oppression... we are *not* destined for destruction. Our fate, like that of the finest pottery, will be *beautiful*.

That is the *hope* of the potter. That is the promise of a *living* God *even* in the face of an all-seeing God. Let us *listen* to the prophecies that show true insight into this tumultuous world of ours, let us *heed* their warnings... and let us *change* our *fate*.

It’s what God *wants* for us. What potter doesn’t seek *beauty*?

Amen? Amen.