

Good morning — hope you are well. The text we will be covering comes from Jeremiah chapter 24, if you'd like to turn to the passage in advance.

Our text this morning is technically not a parable, it's a prophetic, pictorial, vision — none the less, it's a story used to make the point that things aren't always what you expect.

Here's what I mean by that, ever watch a movie, and you think you know how it's going to end, or what's going to happen, and then it surprises, something unexpected occurs, and reverses everything you thought you knew about the story.

That happens a lot in scripture, especially in the parables — the children's message this morning covers one of those unexpected reversals, the Pharisee looks righteous, but it's really tax collector who is righteous because he recognizes he's a sinner (Luke 18: .

We hear it Matthew 20, when Jesus tells the parable of the land owner who hires people throughout the day — the earlier hires are expecting to get more money than what was promised them, but they don't and get mad. That parable ends with Jesus saying, "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

And there are numerous old testament examples as well — Jacob and Esau, the older serves the younger; King David is the youngest brother whom his father thought so little of, that he didn't even bother bringing him before Samuel. Unexpected reversals.

The point is our expectations and perceptions of the world are not always reality or maybe to nuance it a bit — **they may not be the spiritual reality.** This is why we must constantly be listening to God's word, while humbling and submitting ourselves to that word.

Jeremiah chapter 24 and we'll get started. (Read Text)

Let's start with some technical details and historical context.

Depending on what English translation of the bible you are reading, you read, verse 1 — Jehoichin son of Jehoiakim OR you read Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim. Don't let that throw you, it's the same guy, it's a variation of his name. Jehoiachin/Jeconiah same person, grandson of the great reforming King, Josiah.

What happens in this passage takes place some time after the exile in 597 BC.

Jehoichin or Jeconiah (don't let it throw you) was 18 years old when he took the throne, and he reigned for a whopping 100 days. Then Babylon invaded. Jehoichin gives himself up and is taken captive to Babylon. And not just him, but his mother

surrenders, the men of valor, the craftsmen, 10,000 plus captives are taken into exile. Including one who would become a prophet in the future, Ezekiel.

The king of Babylon then appoints Mattaniah king over Judah, this is Jehoiachin/Jehoniah's uncle. And in order to assert his power over the nation and its people, gives Mattaniah the name Zedekiah.

In other words, there's kind of puppet king on the throne, when Jeremiah delivers this message, but not exactly.

What you eventually begin to observe in Jeremiah is an increasing form of optimism among the people of Judah; it will grow such that eventually Zedekiah feels as if he can shake off the shackles of Babylon, so he becomes involved with a conspiracy against them (Jer. 27); false prophets appear claiming that the exile won't be long lived, and that those living in exile will return soon (Jer. 28) — optimism, optimism, optimism, but the visions Jeremiah receives from the Lord are not that optimistic.

The Lord comes to Jeremiah and shows him two baskets of figs in front of the temple of the Lord — one good, one bad. He observes that in one basket the figs are very good, like those that ripen early; the other basket, those figs are so bad they can't be eaten.

The vision basically has three objects: good figs, bad figs and the temple. It is often suggested that because these baskets of figs are located in front of the temple that they are to be seen as a kind of first fruits to the Lord.

While that is not an absolute certainty — it seems right based upon passages from Numbers and elsewhere, but especially in Deuteronomy 26, which describes a process of the priest taking a basket of first fruits from an individual, and as they place it before the Lord, the person recounts the story of Israel, from Abraham through the Exodus, with a declaration at the end that the individual is bringing the “first fruits” of the soil that the Lord has given. And all rejoice because of God's goodness to his people.

Thus, whatever else these baskets of figs are meant to image, they are also meant to image a “first fruits” offering to God.

God asks Jeremiah what he sees — and apparently the good figs are able to be identified as “very good” just by looking at them; I don't get that, it's understandable that the “bad ones” are able to be identified as “so bad they can't be eaten” but I don't know how a fig can be identified as “very good” from sight alone. Maybe I don't know enough about figs. None the less — the good figs are very good, like the ones that ripen early, the bad figs are so bad they can't be eaten — God explains the vision:

The Lord says that like the good figs, he “regards as good the exiles from Judah.”

That should be a shock. For many of us it's probably not but it should be! Here's why, culturally, if something bad happens to you, oh, let's say you're exiled, you were thought to be under God's curse. That is part of what Job's friends argue — something bad happens to you, you're under God's curse. **And when it comes to exile, put an exclamation point on it** — for God promised in Deuteronomy that he would exile those who broke the covenant they made with him. The Babylonians took the King, his mom, the officials, the men of valor, the craftsmen, into exile, thus, they must be under punishment, under God's curse, right?

No, says the Lord, and he turns the whole idea upside down — verse 5, he says that like the figs, the exiles are regarded as good, and that it was by his hand that they went from Judah into Babylon.

In other words, the exile by God's hand was “for their good”. In still other words, judgement was necessary in order to bring about repentance.

The first unexpected turn is that those in exile, God regards as good.

Which brings us to the second surprising turn: from verses 4 through 7 — It is not just that he regards them as good, but also that he promises to bless them, and not just a toss up, “eh, I'm going to bless you”. The language is grand, it's with an abundance of blessings, notice how it all builds and builds:

Verse 6 — The Lord says he will **watch over them** and **bring them back** to the land; but more than just bring them back **he will build them up**, not tear them down; and beyond building them up **he will plant** and not uproot, one blessing flows into the next and thus, we're meant to see a picture of prosperity in these blessings. But it is the final line (verse 7) that holds so much promise:

he says I will give them a heart to know me,
That they will be my people, and I will be their God,
And all this will take place, because they will return to me with all their heart.

Taken together, this is the language of renewal — in other words, the hope for the nation and for spiritual revival resides with those in exile.

Think about how strange a thought that is — it would be like saying that the future of the Armenian people as a nation resided with those of us in America, Australia, France, Canada and not with the Armenians in Armenia.

The Lord says, those in exile, they will be my people, I will be their God — Jeremiah 24 is the first time that statement occurs in scripture. They will be my people, I will be their God, and it's said about those living in exile.

Take note of something else: Verse seven begins with the heart, and ends with the heart — to be more clear, this idea of them being his people, and he being their God is bookended by the word heart:

A couple of side notes here:

the heart is not our emotions. I know we say I love you with all my heart, and by that we usually mean with all our good feelings and emotions; and we tend to carry that into our spiritual life as well, love the Lord with all you heart — and we think emotional life.

But in scripture the heart is not our emotions, it's not happy feelings and good, good, good, good vibrations. In scripture, the heart is the core of our being, the seat of our personality. Got that? In scripture the heart the essence of our being. Thus, when God says "I will give them a heart to know me" — he's saying far more than *they will have fond feelings for me*. He's saying these people, within and from the depths of their being, these people will have a close, intimate relationship with him (because that's what it means to KNOW him).

It's weird for me when people say something like, "Yeah, I know whoever." And when asked how often they hang out they'll say we've hung out like twice. That's not knowing someone — knowing someone means being, to steal an album title, "Closer than together." And God says he will give them a heart to know him. That's one bookend.

The other bookend s that God says that they will return to him with all their heart. And what is taking place blossoms even more, because that phrase "return to me" is Jeremiah's way of saying, "repent" — you can trace it through this prophetic book that bears his name — in other words, they will be a repentant people, from the very depths of their being.

Is the picture starting to get a bit clearer of what's going on? Read it backward, as those in exile repent (it's why that last phrase in verse 7 begins with the word "for" or more literally, "with reference to the preceding") he will be their God, they will be his people, with a new heart to know him.

Let's expand our circle a little wider: The next time we hear words similar to "they will be my people, I will be their God" is in Jeremiah chapter 31 — where God promises to make **a new covenant with his people**, and that he will be their God, they will be his people. The order is reversed, but the idea is the same.

Here we have the addition of the phrase, "new covenant". And that should raise some eyebrows, Jeremiah 31 is the only time that phrase "new covenant" occurs. The next time we hear someone say the words "new covenant" is at the last supper, when Jesus says this is the "new covenant in my blood".

With the only reference to a new covenant being in Jeremiah 31, and connected to “I will be their God, they will be my people” there is no doubt about what Jesus is speaking. And we begin to understand that we have more than a simple prediction about a remanent people, who’ve been exiled to Babylon returning home. For while that is true in the small sense — there is a larger fulfillment as well. And ultimately, as one reads through all of Jeremiah one finds that this vision pushes us toward what will ultimately be accomplished in Christ

While those who were carried away into exile were thought of as cursed by God from those residing in Judah, they may even have thought of themselves that way — none the less, God says it’s just the opposite — hope, for the people, and even Messianic hope, resides with them, one could even argue that in their repentance and return they become a kind of first fruits acceptable to the Lord.

But Jeremiah doesn’t live among the exiles, he still resides in Judah — so, while his message may have eventually made it’s way to those in exile, predominately it’s not to them that he is preaching, it is to those who remain. And hearing what he says, one can understand why he wasn’t embraced with loving arms by the king and the people.

The word God gives him to deliver to “the bad figs” to “King Zedekiah, his officials, and the survivors from Jerusalem” is stark — God says that he will make them “abhorrent” an “offense to all the kingdoms of the earth”, “a reproach and a byword” even more God says they will be “a curse and an object of ridicule”. Those are some very stern words — made all the more terrifying in that God says it matters not where you reside. End of verse 8, this is the message to those who’ve remained in the land, and to those who’ve fled to Egypt.

Contrast that with those thought to be cursed and living in exile.

The point is that God’s not going to tolerate wickedness, rebellion and sin from his people, and they can’t flee from him. These folk assumed that because they weren’t exiled, “I’m okay, you’re okay.” Truth of the situation is that none of us are okay — it’s why we need a savior, and as soon as any of us start thinking we are okay, we need to take a big step back and probe our motives and attitudes.

When harsh words like this are spoken from God, what’s our response supposed to be? Because God’s not saying it only to them — I think we could argue that just as the “Good Figs” eventually bring us to the feet of the messiah, the “bad figs” eventually bring us a picture of the end of the age. So what should our response be when we hear such harsh words from God? Should we be thinking that God wants to destroy them - us? Should we be thinking all hope is lost? Is that why God says such harsh words? NO! These words are said that they and we might be humbled, and return to God; that we might repent, to openly admit our sin and call upon the God who saves. When God speaks destructive words they are not to be an end in themselves — they are a warning that the path being taken leads to destruction, repent.

Let me close with these words from Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, which oddly enough bring us to Jesus: “Man is unable to redeem himself, to cure the sickness of the heart. What hurts the soul, the soul adores. Can man be remade? A prophet can give man a new word, but not a new heart. It is God who must give man a heart to know that He is God (24:7). Prophecy is not God’s only instrument. What prophecy fails to bring about, the new covenant will accomplish: the complete transformation of every individual.”