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February 6th: Jeremiah 36 & 2 Corinthians 4

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Baruch reads Jeremiah's scroll. Treasure in earthen vessels.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah 36. In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah, and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today.

It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that they may forgive their iniquity and their sin. Then Jeremiah called Beruk the son of Noriah. And Beruk wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him.

And Jeremiah ordered Beruk, saying, I am banned from going to the house of the LORD, so you are to go. And on a day of fasting, in the hearing of all the people in the LORD's house, you shall read the words of the LORD from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the men of Judah who come out

of their cities.

It may be that their plea for mercy will come before the LORD, and that everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and wrath that the LORD has pronounced against this people. And Beruk the son of Noriah did all that Jeremiah the prophet ordered him, about reading from the scroll the words of the LORD in the LORD's house. In the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, all the people in Jerusalem, and all the people who came from the cities of Judah to Jerusalem, proclaimed a fast before the LORD.

Then in the hearing of all the people, Beruk read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll in the house of the LORD, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper court, at the entry of the new gate of the LORD's house. When Micaiah the son of Gemariah son of Shaphan heard all the words of the LORD from the scroll, he went down to the king's house, into the secretary's chamber, and all the officials were sitting there, Elishema the secretary, Deliah the son of Shimea, Elnathan the son of Akbor, Gemariah the son of Shaphan, Zedekiah the son of Hananiah, and all the officials. And Micaiah told them all the words that he had heard, when Beruk read the scroll in the hearing of the people.

Then all the officials sent Jehudai the son of Nethaniah, son of Shalamiah, son of Qushai, to say to Beruk, take in your hand the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come. So Beruk the son of Nariah took the scroll in his hand and came to them. And they said to him, sit down and read it.

So Beruk read it to them. When they heard all the words, they turned one to another in fear. They said to Beruk, we must report all these words to the king.

Then they asked Beruk, tell us, please, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation? Beruk answered them, he dictated all these words to me, while I wrote them with ink on the scroll. Then the officials said to Beruk, go and hide, you and Jeremiah, and let no one know where you are. So they went into the court to the king, having put the scroll in the chamber of Elishamah the secretary, and they reported all the words to the king.

Then the king sent Jehudai to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishamah the secretary. And Jehudai read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him.

As Jehudai read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire in the fire pot, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the fire pot. Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments. Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and

Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them.

And the king commanded Jeremiel the king's son, and Saraiah the son of Asriel, and Shalamiah the son of Abdeel, to seize Beruk the secretary, and Jeremiah the prophet. But the Lord hid them. Now after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Beruk wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned. And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, you shall say, Thus says the Lord, you have burned this scroll, saying, Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land and will cut off from it man and beast? Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity.

I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear. Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Beruk the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them.

Chapter 36 of Jeremiah begins with a reference to the fourth year of King Jehoiakim. This is a key date in the book of Jeremiah and also for the Near Eastern region's history. It was the year in which Jeremiah delivered the prophecy of chapter 25 and in chapter 45 we have a reference to Beruk's writing of Jeremiah's prophecies in a book in that year.

Beyond Jeremiah's ministry however, the fourth year of Jehoiakim was Nebuchadnezzar's first year as king of Babylon. It was the year in which he defeated the Egyptians at Carcamesh and changed the regional political situation. From this point onwards, Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon would start to dominate over Syria and later Judah.

The presence of Beruk and the writing of a scroll in this chapter and then again in chapter 45 has led many to regard the section of Jeremiah that they bracket as the Beruk document. By this point, Jeremiah was already facing increasing opposition. He doesn't seem to have had the freedom to pronounce his message in the temple himself and so he is instructed to write a scroll for Beruk which he can read in the temple.

From the Lord's first instruction to Jeremiah, to Jeremiah's dictation, to the movement of the scroll by stages into the very presence of the king himself, this chapter recounts the effectiveness of the written word of scripture. The scroll was likely written on papyrus. Beruk may have been a scribe of note and he becomes very strongly associated with the character of Jeremiah from this point.

The written scroll or book provides a way in which the words of Jeremiah can be uttered in the precincts of the temple itself. Although Jeremiah himself is not permitted access, the scroll can represent Jeremiah's message and Beruk can be his mouthpiece. The contents of this initial scroll have been debated.

Some have suggested that it contained the material of chapters 1 to 6, which seems unlikely. Others that it contained the material from the beginning of chapter 1 to the first half of verse 13 of chapter 25. Jack Lumbum disputes this and suggests that it was most likely chapters 1 to 20, at least in some initial form.

The scroll is an important actor within this chapter. Walter Brueggemann writes, From now on establishment leadership must face a book which relentlessly places established power in jeopardy. The scroll is so much more difficult to resist because it cannot, like a person, be intimidated, banished or destroyed.

It keeps reappearing. John Goldingame makes a similar point. That closing note makes one shiver, not least for Jehoiakim.

The written word will find fulfillment. This book will later be part of a larger gathering of the scriptures themselves. Like this scroll of Jeremiah, it matters that the scriptures are written down.

There being in writing, scriptures gives them a character more independent from the prophets and others who first delivered their words. The scroll is delivered in the hope that people will be receptive to the word, that they will repent and as a result be spared the disaster that the Lord would otherwise bring upon them. The day chosen for its reading seems to have been chosen for this end.

This was not one of the regular feasts but was an occasional day of fasting, presumably because the nation was facing some peculiar peril. In this context, where a large number of the people had gathered together and they were in a penitential state of mind, they might be in the best state of mind to hear such a challenging prophecy. As large numbers of the people of Judah are gathered together for this particular fast, Baruch reads out the scroll in their hearing, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the secretary.

Shaphan the secretary was an important figure during the reign of Jeziel and various members of his family appear on several occasions during the story of the book of Jeremiah, often helping Jeremiah at key points. Back at the end of chapter 26, Ahicham, one of Shaphan's sons, helps to deliver Jeremiah from death. We don't know the exact manner of this reading, whether Baruch just stood up and read the scroll or whether there was a scheduled, officially authorised reading at a particular point.

Gemariah himself wasn't present to hear the reading of the scroll, but his son, Micaiah,

was. Hearing the words of the scroll, he knew that it was important for the leaders of the people to hear, so he brought word of it to the king's house, to the high officials in the secretary's chamber. Gemariah the son of Shaphan is a person for whom we have independent archaeological evidence in the form of an inscription on a seal impression.

Micaiah reported the words of Jeremiah's scroll to them, the words that he had heard Baruch reading. Having heard about the contents of the scroll, the officials then send Jehudai to summon Baruch to their company. Surprisingly, we are given three generations of Jehudai's ancestry.

This reveals that he is a descendant of an Ethiopian. Having summoned Baruch to them, they instruct him to sit down and read the scroll. When he reads the scroll, their response is one of fear.

They take the word seriously and believe that it should be reported to the king. However, before they do so, they want to be clear about the origin of the scroll, that it is not a hoax or otherwise some document purporting to be something more than it actually is. Baruch confirms that he received the word from Jeremiah, that the words were directly dictated to him and he wrote them down with ink on the scroll.

The officials, presumably knowing that Jehoiakim will not hear the words favorably, instruct Baruch and Jeremiah to hide themselves and not tell anyone where they are. The fact that the officials themselves do not know where Baruch and Jeremiah will hide will also help to protect them from the king. To understand their concern to hide Baruch and Jeremiah, we might think back to chapter 26 where Uriah, the prophet from Kiriath-Jerim, had to flee from Jehoiakim into Egypt and then Jehoiakim sent men to kill him there.

In that account, we are told that the words of Uriah were very much like those of Jeremiah. The officials know how dangerous it is to be a faithful prophet in this sort of situation. All the evidence, however, suggests that they are on the side of Jeremiah and Baruch.

They might also be thankful for the presence of this scroll. The scroll has an independent character to it. It is not a prophet that can be killed in the same way and it declares warnings and judgments that perhaps even they as high officials have tried to bring to the king in their own capacity.

Now they have a further testimony that they can draw upon. They don't bring the scroll to the king but leave it in the chamber of Elishema the secretary and then report the words upon it to the king. Much as the officials had done with the message of Micaiah, however, the king sends Jehudi to bring the scroll to him.

Perhaps the officials intentionally preferred a situation where the king had to summon the scroll to himself rather than their bringing it to him. As Jehudi reads the scroll to the

king, however, the king cuts off bits that he has finished reading and throws them into the fire. After Jehudi has finished reading, the entirety of Jeremiah's scroll has been committed to the flames.

Gemariah and a number of the other leading officials try to urge the king not to destroy the scroll but he doesn't listen to them. The king's response contrasts with that of his officials. He is not fearful, as they were, and he does not tear his clothes.

Rather he tears the document. The king then sends men to seize Baruch and Jeremiah but the Lord protects them. Jehoiakim's attempt to silence the word of the Lord is entirely in vain.

After the first scroll has been burnt, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah again and he is instructed to take another scroll and write all the words upon it again. Perhaps here we might recall another significant document that we read of in scripture, the tablets of stone. The first tablets of stone were broken by Moses as a result of the people's sin with the golden calf and then another set were given.

Here once again the rejected covenant word leads to judgement. The initial document had been given with the hope that there would be repentance and that the Lord would relent from the judgement that he was going to bring. Now however, the declaration of judgement is strengthened.

Jeremiah takes the other scroll and at his dictation Baruch writes down all of the words of the previous scroll and many more like them. The initial judgement is not only made more sure, it is intensified. A question to consider, where else in the scriptures do we read of very specific documents containing part of the biblical text? What are some of the various ways in which these specific copies of parts of the scripture function? 2 Corinthians chapter 4 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

But we have renounced disgraceful underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. But by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair,

persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, I believed and so I spoke, we also believe and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. The first part of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 closely relates with the argument of the chapter that preceded it, exploring the nature of the new covenant ministry and the way that it both contrasts with that of the old and was anticipated within it, Paul giving the example of Moses' veiled face.

Paul also discussed the contrasting responses to his ministry back in chapter 2 verses 14-17. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved, and among those who are perishing.

To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity as commissioned by God in the sight of God we speak in Christ. This began Paul's discussion of the nature of the new covenant ministry, and now Paul reintroduces some of the threads of thought from the first two chapters, not least in his discussion of the importance of candour and frankness as those in the service of the Lord.

He discusses their comportment in their ministry. He connects his discussion here with that which immediately preceded it also, beginning with a therefore. What renders Paul and his companions sufficient for their ministry? They have been granted it by God's mercy.

The ministry of the new covenant is a ministry of unveiling, and a ministry of faithfulness and truth. This informs the way that Paul comports himself, not as someone manipulating or misleading others, but as someone presenting the truth openly. Although some might claim that Paul's message is veiled, it is only veiled to those who

are perishing.

Satan, described here as the god of this world, is the one who shuts their eyes to the truth. Satan is spoken of as the god of this world, as he has a dominion and servants. He is not a god in the same way as God is God.

Any veiling of the gospel does not arise from the way that Paul communicates it. He communicates it with clarity, candour and truth, but to those whose eyes have been darkened by the evil one, they do not see. To others, however, it is a ministry of glory and unveiling.

The gospel displays the glorious illumination of Christ, who is the image of God. The description of Christ as the image of God is also seen in Colossians 1.15. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For Paul, Christ is the archetypal image of God.

We are created in the image, and are transformed into the image of Christ as he enlightens us. As we look upon the face and the life of Christ, we see the glory of God therein. Paul routinely identifies closely with his gospel, which sets the terms for everything that he does.

However, the content of the gospel is not Paul himself, but the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. Just as Paul isn't communicating the gospel with deceit or with obfuscation, he is very clear about the content of the gospel, and doesn't want it to be admixed with some proclamation of himself. Paul is not the master of his message, as if the gospel gave him license to focus on all of his personal hobby horses.

Faithful presentation of the gospel requires a certain modesty and self-effacement of the messenger, to ensure that their personal fixations are never allowed to take the place of an unadulterated and unvarnished presentation of the truth of Christ and his lordship. As a slave of Christ, beholden to him, Paul's position as a gospel minister is the humblest and most unassuming one. And as a slave of Christ, he is also a slave of the Corinthians for Jesus' sake.

Once again, Paul's ministry is not about him. He is a slave. He is, as he described it in chapter 2, like someone led as a captive in a triumphal procession behind Christ.

As a minister of the gospel, Paul does not lord it over those to whom he ministers. Rather, he serves them as the slave of Jesus. While he does represent the authority of his master to the Corinthians, he does so as the slave who is charged to serve the guests of his master.

Paul has spoken of a new covenant, and now he brings in themes of new creation. Just as God spoke into darkness in the first creation, so God brings dazzling light into the new creation. Paul acts in the way that he does because God has initiated a work of new

creation in his heart, bringing the radiance of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It's possible that Paul is alluding to Isaiah chapter 9 verses 1-2 here as well. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

The light out of darkness is not just the light of creation, but the eschatological light, the long-awaited light that God brings into the world in Christ. This is a theme that surfaces on various occasions in Paul's writings and also in the New Testament. For instance, Ephesians chapter 5 verses 6-14, where Paul speaks of Christians as children of the light, brought to life by the light, and now radiating that light themselves.

Paul explores paradoxes throughout this epistle. Here it is that of the life of Jesus being revealed as his ministers are delivered over to death. Paul had discussed the afflictions of the apostles to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 9-13.

There he presented himself as an example of faithful suffering and true spiritual life, in contrast to the puffed up and arrogant spirituality of the Corinthians, which was no true spirituality at all. Here his point is somewhat different. He is trying to show that the apostles' nearness to death, their sufferings and their weakness, actually testifies more effectively to the surpassing strength of God, which works powerfully through their limitations, being more powerfully seen on account of them.

Paul is here expressing in a more general manner what he already spoke about in chapter 1 verses 8-9. Paul compares his weakness to that of an earthen vessel, a fragile and inglorious container that could easily be broken and would readily be discarded. This sharpens the contrast between Paul and the power of God that is at work within him.

The vessel is not a delicate piece of precious pottery, but a cheap and expendable container. The value is entirely the contents. Such humble and unassuming vessels are by far the most appropriate vessels for bearing God's word, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 27-29.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Such an earthen vessel is a vessel of God's creation, and a vessel that is completely at his disposal. In Jeremiah chapter 19 verses 1-2 and 10-11, Israel is compared to a potter's vessel, which the Lord will break. How will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended? A final possible allusion is to the story of Gideon and his 300 men in Judges chapter 7, who held torches inside

earthen jars that they broke.

On the outside, what people see when they see Paul and his companions, are people afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and near to death. However, there is the power of a new life contained within them, so that their afflictions, sufferings, difficulties, and struggles are not the full picture. In all of these trying situations, they are not crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, and not destroyed.

They are carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that Christ's life might also be made manifest in them. Paul quotes Psalm 116 verse 10, words of confident faith declared by the psalmist, even when in the greatest affliction. Paul has the same sort of faith, confident in the resurrection power that will one day raise them up.

Death will not be the final word. They will one day be presented with the Corinthians in the Lord's presence. Paul's entire purpose in undergoing suffering is to bring glory to God and to minister to the people of Christ.

As Christ's glory reaches more and more people, the result will be increased thanksgiving to God and greater glorification of Him. Paul began this chapter by saying that they do not lose heart, and he concludes it by underlining that same point, repeating the same expression. He draws a succession of contrasts between the inner and the outer self, between the self that is visible, temporary, and to be stripped off Him in time, and the enduring, invisible, and inner life that comes from the illuminating work of God within.

The inner self-outer self opposition is not based upon a soul-body dichotomy. Rather, the inner self is the self in the sight of God. The outer self is the self in the presence of other human persons.

Paul draws a succession of contrasts here. Outer self, inner self, wasting away, being renewed day by day, light affliction, weighty glory, momentary affliction, eternal glory, things that are seen, things that are unseen, transient things, eternal things. Paul is teaching the Corinthians a new way of perceiving reality and their situation here.

And he isn't just drawing a contrast between these two states. There is also a paradoxical connection. The light momentary affliction is exactly what is preparing us for the eternal weight of glory.

The two states are bound up with each other. Philippians 3, verses 10-11 That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Being conformed to Christ's death prepares us for resurrection.

The inner self is daily being renewed. Just as the outer self is wasting away, the inner self is having its youth continually restored. Recognising all of this, we must get our values

straight.

We must think about time differently, measuring the difference between that which is momentary and transient and that which is eternal, the difference between that which endures and that which wastes away. We must have a sense of gravity, discerning the difference between those things that are light and those things that truly have weight. And as the things that really matter the most are things that are unseen, we must learn to walk by faith rather than by sight.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways that the experience of Paul as he describes it in this chapter connects him with Christ?