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January 8th: Jeremiah 7 & 1 Thessalonians 1

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Jeremiah's temple sermon. Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 7. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah, who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say,

We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer. Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven. And they pour out drink-offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.

Is it I whom they provoke? declares the Lord. Is it not themselves to their own shame? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground. It will burn and not be quenched.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.

But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffen their neck.

They did worse than their fathers. So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.

And you shall say to them, This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline. Truth has perished, it is cut off from their lips. Cut off your hair and cast it away.

Raise lamentation on the bare heights, for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath. For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to

defile it.

And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. For they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere.

And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. And I will silence in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of Mirth, and the voice of Gladness, the voice of the Brigham, and the voice of the Bride, for the land shall become a waste. Jeremiah chapter 7 is one of the most famous and important chapters in the whole book.

Within it, Jeremiah challenges the prevailing temple ideology which has come to legitimate the oppression and injustice of the society. Jerusalem and its leaders believe that their possession of the temple grants them immunity from God's judgement. Jeremiah challenges this in no uncertain terms, making clear that there is no future for Jerusalem apart from obedience.

The Lord's challenge to Jerusalem through Jeremiah identifies the way that the temple and its worship have been rendered integral to the injustice of the entire system. The temple is presumed to suggest that the Lord underwrites the regime, that the boiling pot of oppression that Jerusalem has become basks in the Lord's good favour. One could argue that the temple has started to function as a sort of idol.

People look to and trust in it rather than the Lord. The temple has become a symbol of national superiority, attachment to its cult the safe higher ground from which all other peoples and nations and sinners can be judged. Judah believes that as it looks to the grandeur of the building and as it goes through the motions of the sacrifices, it can manipulate God, that it has some sort of claim upon God that is granted through this building.

Jeremiah exposes the deceptive words of the prophets, This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, perhaps a threefold repetition as a means of parody. The underlying question is one of trust. Where is trust being placed? Trust is here being placed in the building itself, in a way that disregards and dishonours the God who placed his name there.

In the starkest of possible terms the Lord describes the way that they have come to regard his house as a den of robbers. The house of the Lord, the place of worship for all nations, has become a place that malefactors can flee to for refuge, a place of supposed asylum from their crimes and their sins. Jeremiah catalogues the sins of the people in a way that recalls the Ten Commandments, steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,

make offerings to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known, rather than coming to the house of the Lord to have serious dealings with him.

Coming to the house of the Lord has become a way to escape reckoning with him. However, those who treat the temple in this manner are in for a nasty surprise. Jeremiah directs their attention to Shiloh, where a temple complex had previously arisen around the tabernacle.

That sanctuary had been destroyed in the battle of Aphek, as the Ark of the Covenant was removed from it and the worship of Israel was torn apart. Its priests suffered the most severe of judgements, Eli the high priest and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, dying on the same day. In the books of Samuel, the destruction of Shiloh for the wickedness of the people is historical background for the rise of the Davidic dynasty.

The temple was built by David's son Solomon and it would have been very easy to take the narrative form of the books of Samuel as an invitation to contrast the unfaithfulness of that former sanctuary with the faithfulness of the new sanctuary set up by David and Solomon. Yet Jeremiah's prophecy invites comparison. The presumption that underlies the prevailing ideology of the temple is punctured.

If God judged Shiloh for its sins, why should he not judge Jerusalem? Their persistent disregard for the word of the Lord, their failure to pay attention to the many warnings that he has given them, has doomed them to a similar fate to the northern tribes, the nation of Israel. The temple will not save them from their fate. If Jeremiah hoped that he might save the people from destruction by his prayers and intercessions, that hope is dispelled in the verses that follow.

The Lord specifically forbids Jeremiah from praying for the people. Their fate is sealed. God is past hearing any prayer on their behalf.

The catastrophe about to befall them will not be mitigated. If Jeremiah were to question the Lord's judgement on this point, the Lord directs him to the activity of the people in Judah and Jerusalem. An entire network of activity has grown up around the worship of the Queen of Heaven, children gathering wood, fathers kindling fire, women kneading dough, idolatry conscripting the united efforts of the household.

The worship in view here is likely the worship of Ishtar, an Assyrian and Babylonian idolatry that was imported into the land under the reign of Ahaz, reaching its height during the reign of Manasseh. Through this idolatrous practice the people are bringing shame upon themselves. While it might rightly seem that they are provoking the Lord to anger, they are also acting to their own dishonour and ruin.

In verses 21-28 we see a theme that is common throughout the prophets, the contrast between obedience and sacrifice. What was most important in the covenant was always

obedience. They were to hear the word of the Lord and obey.

God wanted the ear of his people, a circumcised ear. He wanted their hearts more than he wanted any number of sacrifices. Sacrifice was not the foundational covenant reality.

This is something that we see in Amos chapter 5 verses 21-25. I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. To the melody of your harps I will not listen, but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Micah chapter 6 verses 6-8 With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? The same challenge is given to King Saul by Samuel. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king. For all of their sacrifices Judah is failing in the most fundamental covenant task, which is that of hearing the Lord and obeying him.

They have rejected his law, they have also failed to listen to his prophets. The Lord has persistently sent messengers to them from the day that they went out from Egypt, and they have repeatedly rejected him. And the Lord tells Jeremiah that his message will face the same deaf ears and stiffened necks.

They will not accept discipline. They cannot hear, they cannot obey the word of the Lord. And now as a result truth has been cut off from the land.

They have given themselves over purely to the lie, to the deceptive and comforting truths of the false prophets, who assure them that there is peace when there is no peace, who give them the false assurance of the temple cult, when they have been rebelling against the word of the Lord and face his catastrophic judgement. The final verses of the chapter describe massive defilement of the land. The people of Judah have

done evil before God's sight.

They have polluted the land with their idolatries, and with the blood of their sons and daughters which they have offered to their false gods. In the poetic justice of the Lord's judgement their bodies will litter the valley within which they once offered the lives of their children. As they have dishonoured the land of the Lord, their bodies will be dishonoured.

They will not even be buried, but will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. The city of Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah will be silenced, the voices of joy and celebration being cut off from them. The defiled land will become a wasteland.

A question to consider. The word of the Lord through Jeremiah in this chapter is a direct assault to the way that the building and the sacrificial worship of the temple have been perverted into props for the endemic and pervasive injustice and spiritual infidelity of the society of Judah. The very divine appointment of the temple and the technical orthodoxy of its sacrificial worship rendered them apt for a form of idolatry.

What are some of the signs by which we might recognise were something similar occurring to our religious buildings and practices? 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake, and you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1 Thessalonians, commonly regarded as likely Paul's first letter, begins with a typical Pauline greeting. The greeting is a more standard greeting for letters of the period.

It declares or introduces the writer or the writers, it identifies the addressees, on this occasion the Thessalonians, the Christians in the church at Thessalonica. This is followed

by greetings, and as most letters followed this with a wish for the health of the addressees, Paul's epistles typically have a thanksgiving or prayer at this point. Paul includes Silas, Silvanus is an alternative form of the name Silas, and Timothy with him as those sending the letter.

However, in verse 18 of chapter 2, where he writes I Paul, we have a suggestion that Paul is the one writing the letter in all of their names. While it is sent under all their names then, Paul is the true author. Silas was one of Paul's missionary companions in his second missionary journey, during which they had visited Thessalonica.

Their visit there had been short and abortive, which helps us better to appreciate Paul's joy and wonder in the lasting fruit that it had produced. In Acts chapter 17 verses 1-10 we read of this period. Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women.

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things, and when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Timothy had joined Paul and Silas back in Lystra, at the beginning of Acts chapter 16. In verses 1-5 of that chapter we read, Paul addresses his letter to the church of the Thessalonians.

The church was a way of referring to the communal assembly of a body of people. It is not unlikely that they had various smaller groups within the city, but the whole body of believers in that city are termed a church. They are described as being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a very unusual reference to a church being in God, something that is associated in the closest way to the church being in Christ. As Gordon Fee notes, this is probably an indication of the very high Christology, or the strong doctrine of the divinity of Christ that Paul holds. It is not unlikely that the Shema can be heard behind such a formula.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. The term God is related to the Father, the term Lord to Christ. Both Christ and the Father are related to the one God.

Where a typical letter of the time would begin with the salutation, Greetings, Paul opens his letter as he often does, Grace to you and peace. The source of the grace is God and

the consequence of this grace is the peace of Christ. The thanksgiving that follows situates the gratitude that Paul expresses within the context of the continual prayers of Paul and his missionary companions.

They recall the initial response of the Thessalonians to the gospel message that they brought. This remembrance is before God. It is probably not merely a subjective bringing of these details to their minds and thankfulness for the memory.

It is also a declaration of these things in their prayers to the Lord, constantly calling for his attention to these things, calling for him to complete what he has started in the Thessalonians. They were distinguished by their work of faith, their labour of love and their steadfastness of hope. Their work of faith was likely the way that they acted out of confidence in the word of Christ, producing the fruit of righteousness in their community.

Their labour of love could have been the efforts manifesting their hearts of devotion for Christ and the Father. And their steadfastness of hope might have been their unwavering assurance of and living in terms of the Lord's promise. The Thessalonians' initial response to the gospel message, the message of the Lordship of Jesus, the Messiah of Nazareth, was a demonstration of their election, of the fact that God had chosen them.

The Christian virtues with which they answered the message revealed that they had first been lovingly chosen by God, their eyes being opened to see Christ. That is why faith, hope and love were the fruit that sprang up. The gospel came to them with a bang, not just as words but with signs of the Spirit's power accompanying it.

The conviction with which it came to the Thessalonians was also proof of the Spirit's power. It wasn't just words of Paul the Apostle, the gifted rhetorician. It was an effective communication of the Spirit that broke open hard hearts and produced new life where death had once reigned, resulting in remarkable and manifest transformation.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries were among them, setting an example for the Thessalonians which they had followed. As the Thessalonians followed the example of Paul and his companions, they themselves became examples to other churches. Indeed, their reputation has spread abroad among the churches.

Paul and his companions don't even need to say anything about the Thessalonians to churches elsewhere, because those other churches have already heard and are talking about the news from Thessalonica. Their response to the good news of Christ's reign in Thessalonica had itself started to function as good news of Christ's reign. The word of the Lord had sounded forth from them.

What is this word of the Lord that Paul refers to here? It is the news of what God had done among them, which is also the message of their answering faith, an answering faith

that is proof of the Lord's power in and among them. They have abandoned idols to serve the true and living God. They are waiting for the risen Son from heaven, the one who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Both the final judgment and the condemnation of the present age awaited incoming judgment upon Jerusalem and other places. A question to consider. The news of what the Lord had done in the hearts and lives of the Thessalonians itself became a word of the Lord and a gospel message.

What are some of the ways in which the sharing of our testimonies of what the Lord has done in our lives and the lives of others can function as an extension of the fundamental message of the gospel?