

## **“WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS”**

Jeremiahs 5:1-3, 20-25; 32:31-34

July 6, 2025

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The prophet Jeremiah had a long, and some might say not particularly successful, career as a prophet in and around Jerusalem in the 40 or so years before the Babylonians overran the kingdom of Judah, destroyed the temple, and exiled a significant part of the population... and in the aftermath of that upheaval. Some might say he was not a very successful prophet because despite all that he did and said to warn his fellow citizens – and leaders – that they were on a path to destruction, they did not heed his message. And disastrous consequences ensued.

Now, with the perspective of history, we might conclude that the far-more-powerful Babylonian empire would have prevailed over the little country of Judah no matter if they *had* changed their ways ... but the perspective of the prophet, of the text, and of those who preserved the text is that the people’s disobedience to God both collapsed the fabric of their society and brought God’s wrath down on them. So we have to understand Jeremiah in that context.

This morning we’re going to look at a couple pieces art that I believe help us think about Jeremiah’s prophetic calling. They’re by artists who are very different but who have in common the fact that they witnessed and were affected by some of the terrible events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



The first is by Marc Chagall, one of several Jeremiah “portraits” he painted. It shows the prophet hugging a scroll to his chest, to his heart, perhaps - a gesture of cherishing that illustrates Jeremiah’s commitment to God’s law, in contrast to his people’s willful neglect of it.

Jeremiah has quite a lot to say about this. We heard just a little taste of that in the first reading from chapter 5, but there is much more. In a variety of ways, the people of Judah have failed to live out their identity as the people of God: Worshipping idols and false gods. Listening to the lies of false prophets. Corruption on the part of religious and political leaders. Greed and excess. Ignoring the needs of orphans, widows, and the poor.

Eventually it's clear: the covenant relationship between God and God's people has been broken, with dire consequences: suffering, violence and division, bad leadership, and eventually the destruction of the temple, overthrow by enemies, leaders sent into exile, and the loss of power, freedom, and security.

After all that – and after having his message ignored (when he wasn't experiencing outright persecution for it) Jeremiah is still there. He was a stubborn guy. Because of his not-exactly-upbeat message and because he's also traditionally thought to be the author of the book of Lamentations, he's sometimes referred to as "the weeping prophet." Not exactly a fun guest to have over for a casual cookout. But I learned something really interesting about Jeremiah as I was researching for this sermon. He talks about the heart a lot. The book of Jeremiah uses the word heart 40 times – far more than any other book of the Bible except for Proverbs and Psalms.

I found that kind of curious, because to talk about the heart usually means focusing on tender feelings, on love, or perhaps on a very personal, inward sense of devotion to God. Not exactly the sort of thing Jeremiah is known for. I would have said that he mainly wants his people's actions to be in accord with God's laws. But Jeremiah is very, very concerned about what is in the hearts of his people.

This is very much not the religious perspective that says things like "it isn't about what you do, it's what you feel in your heart." For Jeremiah, this language is not sentimental but fundamental. He's using the idea of the heart to talk about what's at the core of a person – the loves, desires, commitments that really define and direct one's life. How you live your life, what you do, what you pursue reflects the genuine state of your heart... no matter how you feel at any moment, no matter what you claim to care about. Jesus said some similar things, about how words and actions proceed from the heart. About how you know a person by the fruit their life bears. About how what you treasure shows where your heart is.

Long before Jesus, Jeremiah saw that his fellow citizens' hearts held little appreciation for God's goodness, little regard for the truth, little interest in the commandments they paid lip service to, little care for each other, little concern for who they were meant to be as a people. They did not "love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength," and they certainly did not love their neighbors as much as themselves.

Jeremiah understands that a little tinkering around the edges is not an answer. More generous charity. A new social program. Different leadership. Billboards promoting kindness. Harder work. Stronger emphasis on following the law. Those things might be good, but what's really needed is a collective change of heart.

We can relate. We can see around us - and in ourselves as well – evidence of *hearts* in need of changing.

Like Jeremiah's people we have heard prophets and disregarded them.

Hannah Arendt warned us that eroding the distinction between truth and lies opens the door to tyranny. Dwight Eisenhower warned that a military industrial complex posed grave dangers and

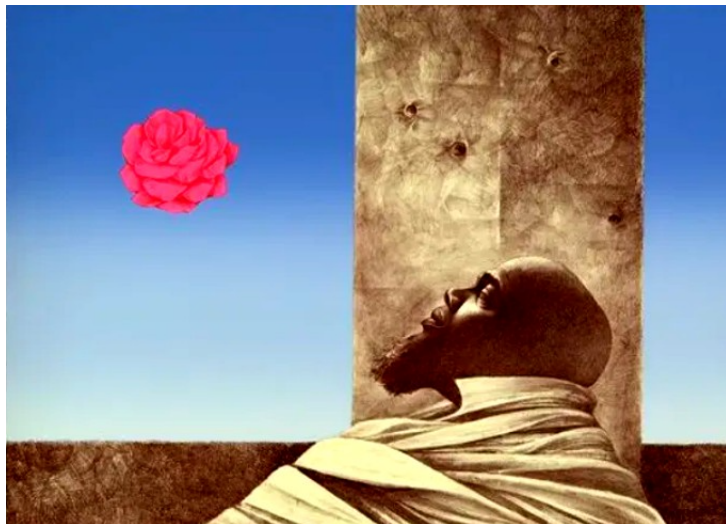
would take resources away from human needs. Martin Luther King Jr. warned us about the need to address not just civil rights but economic inequalities. Environmentalists have been warning us for years about the climate crisis we are now in.

We can relate to the sorrow you can see in Chagall's painting - which I think reflects his own sorrow. He was born, to a Jewish family in what's now Belarus, in the late 1800's and his long life spanned most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He lived in Moscow at the time of the Russian Revolution and in France when the German occupation of that country began during World War II. They loved France, and his family did not recognize the extent of the danger they were in until they saw that other well-known Jewish artists and intellectuals were being arrested; by that time there were few options for escape. They eventually were able to come to the United States with forged visas. So much of Chagall's work reflects the upheaval of those times, and the sense of unrepairable brokenness and loss. Yet Chagall's art doesn't ever lose a sense of faith, humanity, and truth, which he holds to, much as his Jeremiah holds to the scroll that represents God's law and truth.

That belief means that despite everything, Jeremiah is not all about judgement. His role as a prophet is rooted in confidence in God's goodness and holiness, more enduring than any people's faithlessness.

In chapter 31 Jeremiah envisions the remaking of the covenant between God and the people. Only this time, he says, God will write the law on their hearts. When will it happen? How exactly? Do we have to be willing? Jeremiah doesn't say. But the point is this: It won't be 'out there' but a part of them, a part of us. An agreement or a law written on a stone tablet, on a scroll, in a book, in a temple is something you can leave behind. But a law of love written on your heart you carry with you wherever you go. It's important to note that Jeremiah speaks of a communal experience here, a shared recognition of a common identity, inclusive of all "from the greatest to the least."

If Chagall's picture shows us the challenge and frequent disappointment of the prophet's role, this image shows us this other part of the prophet's task: a vision of hope.



He's not nearly so well known as Chagall but Charles White is another artist, a Chicago-born African-American, whose life spanned much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his life, he experienced poverty and discrimination, but also the solidarity and resilience of black communities working hard for change. White hated the fact that African-American history was so little taught or known, and honoring that history became central to his art. One of his most famous works is a mural called *The Contribution of the Negro to American Democracy*. His portraits show people's love, hope, courage, freedom, and dignity – as you see in this print “The Prophet #1.” White may even have seen himself as a prophet of sorts; in an interview he said, “Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent.”

When we look at this particular image, our eye is drawn to the pink rose, a symbol, obviously – maybe of love, or truth, or hope. Perhaps of something new unfolding or blossoming. It seems to be a vision, perhaps a little beyond reach but compelling. There's a sense of connection between the man and this vision that feels powerful, spiritual, ... of the heart. It makes me think of the phrase “eyes on the prize” – often used in connection with the struggle for civil rights, and echoing words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians about “pressing on toward the prize” of God's calling. (Philippians 3:14) We can see here an inner conviction, purpose, and strength that does not give up hope for our world, our community, our society. There's a stillness about this image; a *listening*. But White's title lets us know that this is not a moment of private spirituality; it's a calling that's written on the heart, truth about who we are as God's children, in the beloved community.

Like Jeremiah's words, Charles White's picture challenges us to attend to what God has written on our hearts and live out of that truth and love.

Today Jeremiah reminds us of how necessary it is to listen to the voices of prophets. He speaks a powerful if uncomfortable word to our culture's unwillingness to reckon with deeply ingrained sins of idolatry and pride and injustice ... prodding us perhaps to ask how we can contribute to the healing.

We're also reminded that the prophet's tasks are our tasks: speaking and living out a dedication to God's ways and truth and love, even in times of distress; **and** lifting up the hope that rests in God's enduring goodness. Both these artists, and this one prophet, challenge us to take up this calling, and to use whatever means, whatever gifts, whatever tools we have at hand to fulfill it. May God grant us the broken-heartedness, the courage, the conviction, the wisdom, the words, the love, the hope we need.

#### Resources:

Wikipedia articles on Marc Chagall (1887-1985) and Charles W. White, Jr. (1918-1979).