

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: January 8, 2012  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“UPROOT, TEAR DOWN, BUILD, and PLANT”

Jeremiah 1:1-19

☑ **“The world is changing. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost....”** J.R.R. Tolkien put these words into the mouth of his character Galadriel in The Lord of the Rings.

These words are fiction, yet they ring true in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, do they not? Our culture’s {Epiphany Prayer} **“vision”** is “[failing].” Our economic and scientific experts are “[stumbling].” Much that **“we thought was certain cannot be found,”** much **“that...we thought was forever [is] fleeting,”** and much that **“we thought of as security [is] empty of hope.”** **“Much that once was, is lost”** – some for good, some for ill.

Where is God in all of this? What is God’s purpose, what is God’s plan, *what is God doing?*

A few, thoughtful Hebrew individuals were asking the same questions 2,600 years ago. Those who weren’t should have been: their **“world [was] changing.”** Anyone with a smidgen of sensitivity could feel it. Yet only a minority perceived that **“much that once was”** had been irretrievably **“lost”** and fewer still were willing to accept that most of what remained would soon be gone.

■ Please turn to Jeremiah 1:1: **“The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.”** Anathoth was situated 4 miles north of Jerusalem, just inside Judah’s border. In chapter 1 it is a stone’s throw from Assyrian territory.

■ Verses 2-3 function as a time stamp of Jeremiah’s ministry. Three kings of Judah are named, but there were actually five during this period:

👉 1) King Josiah ruled from 639 B.C. until July or August of 609 when he was killed in battle with the Egyptians. Jeremiah became a prophet **“in the thirteenth year”** of Josiah’s reign, which puts the start of Jeremiah’s ministry in 626 B.C.

👉 2) Josiah was succeeded by Jehoahaz. After three months the Egyptians deposed him and installed Jehoiakim in his place.

👉 3) King Jehoiakim reigned from late 609 B.C. until his death in December 598.

👉 4) Jehoiachin succeeded his father. The Babylonians deposed him 3 months later on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 597 B.C. (their records are precise). Thousands of Hebrews were sent into exile, among them {Dan 1:1-7} Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

👉 5) In March 597 Nebuchadnezzar crowned Zedekiah as Judah’s new king. Later he rebelled, and the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in the summer of 587 B.C. Judah was obliterated. Most of the survivors were forcibly relocated to strange lands in the east, but the Babylonians allowed Jeremiah to remain in Judah. However, after the Babylonian-appointed governor was assassinated the prophet was kidnapped and taken to Egypt, where he died sometime after 586 B.C.

⚙ The last phrase of verse 3: **“when the people went into exile”** introduces a principal theme of the book: disobedient history leads to catastrophic

judgment. King Josiah launches a popular religious revival, and seemingly “takes it back” for God; yet it is too little, too late. His successors alternately appease and rebel against the greater powers, seeking security in religious ritual, material wealth, and military might – all to no avail.

Judah’s last three monarchs correctly identify Babylon as the ascendant human force in geo-politics; but they fail to see that the Almighty is using that evil empire to achieve his goals. Alas, they do not discern that hope rests not in defying or outwitting the Babylonians, but in submitting to God! But what on earth is he doing?

- The LORD plainly tells us in verse 10. In commissioning Jeremiah he declares: **“today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”**

In truth, it is not the prophet who will redraw the map; Holy God is engineering these earth-shattering changes. Nevertheless, Jeremiah has the essential role of announcing and interpreting these events.

Sometimes, gentile nations are his target (6 chapters consist entirely of fire-and-brimstone sermons against Judah’s worst enemies, including Babylon). But most of the time he speaks to his own people, who are flouting their sacred covenant with YHWH.

- In verses 13-16 Jeremiah sees **“a boiling pot, tilting away from the north,”** and the Almighty explains what it means:

**“From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon**

**all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,” declares the LORD.**

**“Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance to the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah. I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.”**

The known world is ending, not *in spite of* YHWH’s governance but *because of* it. This is what God is doing.

- ⊗ That brings us to another principal theme: the sovereign word of God. Babylon is the instrument of destruction; yet it is God’s word that has called the empire into existence, directs it, and gives it success.

- Notice that verse 2 begins with: **“the word of the LORD.”** This phrase appears 59 times in the book of Jeremiah. Throw in variations like **“a word from the LORD”** and **“the word that the LORD spoke”** and the count is substantially higher.

- Skip down to verse 8 and you will see that it ends with the phrase, **“declares the LORD”** (likewise, verse 19). Jeremiah uses this verb far more frequently than any other book: 167 times to be exact. (By comparison, Ezekiel comes in a distant second with 83 repetitions.)

These statistics are significant. Not only is God's word Informative, reporting God's intent; it is also performative, in that it literally accomplishes his intent. By his word God created the world, reveals his person and his character, discloses his plan for creation, gives and sustains life, endows salvation, and by it he judges sin.

■ What God says, happens. He underscores the point in verse 11: **“What do you see, Jeremiah?’ ‘...the branch of an almond tree,’ I replied. The LORD said to me, ‘You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.’”**

The Hebrew word for **“almond”** is *shāqēd*. It sounds like the verb **“watching”** (*shōqēd*). So the almond branch (the *shāqēd*) is a sign that God will be watchful (*shōqēd*) in carrying out his promise. {Peterson} Not only so, **“Every spring for the rest of his life the sight of the almond blossom, *shāqēd*, [will] trigger the sound *shōqēd*, (“watching”) in [Jeremiah’s] memory.”**

■ {Heb 4:12} **“The word of God is living and active.”** Therefore, in verses 9-10 **“the LORD [reaches] out his hand... [touches Jeremiah’s] mouth and”** then says **“Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”**

What is God doing? He is *speaking!*

But what are his people to do as God uproots, tears down, destroys, overthrows, builds and plants? What shall we do while he redraws the map of the world, and with it our own lives?

His directions to Jeremiah are instructive here.

■ When Jeremiah protests his appointment, Holy God answers in verse 8: **“You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.”**

■ And in verse 17 YHWH orders his prophet to **“Get... ready! Stand up and say... whatever I command you.”**

Jeremiah's mission will be lonely, emotionally wrenching and physically dangerous – but he is not alone. The Sovereign LORD assures him of his presence:

■ Verse 8: **“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,’ declares the LORD.”**

■ And verses 18-19: **“Today I have made you a fortified city, and iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,’ declares the LORD.”**

Jeremiah is called to exercise swift obedience and courageous trust in God as he participates in the LORD's work by fulfilling his commission. Jeremiah obeys, but many others do not.

✧ That points to a third principle theme of Jeremiah: human responsibility. This book unwaveringly argues divine sovereignty and, in the same breath, human liberty. Jeremiah insists that the Living God is Almighty: no person or thing is able to thwart his word. Jeremiah insists with equal conviction that individuals, institutions and civilizations are free to submit to the LORD or defy him.

Submission to God is no guarantee of worldly ease and comfort. It does keep us in his presence now, create the possibility of life for our neighbors, and open up a place for us in God's eternal kingdom.

Defiance of God does not result in instant spiritual torment or material loss. It does cut us off from God now, make hell on earth for our neighbors, and trigger catastrophic eternal judgment.

Human vision is failing. Our experts are stumbling. Much that we thought was certain cannot be found, much that we thought was forever is fleeting, and much that we thought of as security is empty of hope. Much that once was, is lost.

But God is neither dead nor asleep. By his sovereign word he is uprooting and tearing down, overthrowing and destroying, building and planting.

What about us? Are we exercising obedience and trust? Are we submitting to God or defying him?

On one level, how we answer does not really matter. The LORD will accomplish his purpose with or without us, our families, our church, and our nation. Either way, God's ultimate purpose will be accomplished.

On another level, how we answer is all that matters. It determines whether we experience God's presence now or are cut off from him, whether we bring life or hell to others on earth, and whether we live with God's blessing or judgment in eternity.

This is the Word of the LORD.