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Dialogue with Jeremiah: Deep in the World of 31

DAVID FLEER

The most interesting introductions are the ones not spoken, the unusual detail, the interesting tidbit. Like this:

I was born in 1953. One of my first visits was from an older neighbor, who held infant me in her elderly lap. This woman, when she was young, married an older man who was very much alive in 1853, and lived in Virginia during Alexander Campbell's last two decades of ministry. Which makes me something of an historical novelty—to have been held by a woman married to a man who may have heard Alexander Campbell preach.

This autobiographical oddity came to mind two weeks ago, when as a visiting preacher in Middle Tennessee, I stood in the yard outside the Fourth Avenue Church of Christ in Franklin, in front of a state of Tennessee historical marker, which says, "Alexander Campbell preached a meeting on these grounds in 1833 after which a congregation was organized."

"Soon after," the history continues, "an elegantly furnished brick building was erected with two entry doors, one for men and one for women." Such information fills a person with . . . historical energy.

So after staring at the assigned text for this evening, I soon found myself in one of our great libraries with a helpful librarian, and I asked him, "Might you have in your collection anything from Alexander Campbell preaching or writing on Jeremiah 31?"

Without a word he turned and led me deep into the stacks and we stood before a tall shelf full of old books and he reached up and pulled down a dark volume and thumbed through it until we hit pay dirt—Campbell's exhortation from Jeremiah 31. Struck gold, I thought. What better place to mine the depths than with Alexander Campbell!

Before I read a word, I imagined this moment; I imagined saying to you, "It is altogether fit and proper to gather here to conclude these Bible lectures with a sermon from Alexander Campbell." And then I would read Campbell's sermon.

A great idea until I began to plod through Campbell's Jeremiah 31 lecture, finding his vocabulary cumbersome, so 1830-ish, and his content caught up in religious disputes of the mid-nineteenth century.

Disappointed, I was tempted to log on to heresyoursermon.com and find something lively on the Internet, a popular activity these days. For:

A stolen sermon
can sparkle
as bright as
a stolen diamond.

But my conscience got the better of me, and while the Internet offers alluring delicacies and sermons begging to be borrowed, they do not have in mind *this* place or *this hour*, or "*us*."

So, instead, I decided to ask you to travel with me into the world imagined in Jeremiah—not an easy or

pleasant task—and see if we might find, as we read Jeremiah 31.27–34, an image or a word from the Lord, for us, for today, from *the Prophet* Jeremiah.

It's not easy to walk into the world imagined in scripture. So quickly distracted. For example, just the word *Prophet*. What comes to mind? So much to choose from!

Prophet: Like the current VDub commercial with a forlorn man on the street corner holding a large cardboard sign, "The End is Near." When a bevy of low priced Volkswagens drive by, the man walks to the trash bin to deposit his "The End is Near" sign. The commercial features an "American *economic* Prophet"—not a real popular commercial in Detroit.

Prophet: Even the biblical image gets a little confusing. Hollywood's TV miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*, starring a very young Michael York as John the Baptist, wild haired and wild-eyed, out in the desert shouting in his thick British accent, "re-pEnt."

I thought I saw a *Prophet* in the opening chapter of *In His Steps*.¹ A homeless, dusty, shabby tramp, thirty to thirty-three years old, walks into the church building full of the best dressed and most comfortable and ignites a social revolution with his question, "What would Jesus do?" And a century later sports stars are wearing blue wrist bands, WWJD?

Prophet. With options like these, Jeremiah, the weeping prophet with no converts, who gets it said but doesn't get it heard. This loser, with declining numbers . . . It's not that I'm distracted, just not altogether interested.

I'm far more intrigued by the prophet, however, than by his message. I've driven by Jeremiah, I don't know how many times. The "City of Jeremiah" with its fifty-two chapters, fifty-two off-ramps, way too many to explore, especially when we're on our way somewhere else. Driving in the express lane, (as fast as we can) right by Jeremiah, heading to the Psalms, traveling to narratives in Genesis, down the road to the New Testament.

"Daddy, can we pull over?"

"Sorry, children we have reservations in Hebrews, don't have time to stop."

We sail past Jeremiah thinking about what's ahead, what's down the road.

"If we don't stop we'll be in the New Testament real soon."

So, I've never lived in Jeremiah. Never spent much time in Jeremiah. Usually racing by, an occasional pit stop to re-fuel.

First time was not a pleasant experience. Driving along the expressway, low on gas, needing something for Sunday, I pull into Jeremiah at Exit 19 . . . Chapter 19.

Oh my! Tough part of town. Boarded up shops, rod iron bars cover windows, Lucky's Market & Liquor. Not the kind of neighborhood I frequent. Cracked sidewalks, trash against fences, weeds, broken glass. I could hear "broken people, broken city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel" (Jer 19.11).

Finally I locate a gas station. At the pump sits an early model car, cardboard and gray duct tape in place of a back seat window. Man wearing gray sweats and a black T-shirt, heavy and tired.

"What a desolate, wasted, ghetto," I think as I step out of the car. Before I swipe the credit card, I hear a child crying, sobbing. I look around and don't see anyone, only a police car parked outside the liquor store. They don't seem aware.

This doesn't play well where I live. Where I live, we don't re-fuel in Jeremiah.

We don't get a blessed thing from, "You will die, you and your people, by the sword, famine and pestilence" (Jer 27.13). We don't like to hear God talk to his people like that. That doesn't encourage us, at all. Or this, "I am beginning to work calamity in this city which bears my name . . . I am summoning a sword against the inhabitants" (Jer 25.29).

1. Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*, (1935; repr. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1982).

Not for me and my crowd. We prefer successful stories of conversions and growth, trim people with manicured yards who work in well lit buildings, own summer cottages, enjoy winter get-aways. We find our energy *outside* Jeremiah, from books on health, *How to Build Your Nest Egg*, *Seven Habits of Successful Retirees*. Who needs Jeremiah? Next time, I promise myself, I'll have enough gas to skip Jeremiah altogether.

And, skip it I did, until one day I heard about Exit 31. Someone said, "If you're driving east from the New Testament, you *have to* stop at Exit 31," well known for its familiar restaurants. And so one day, I wasn't heading *to* the NT, I was traveling *from* the NT, to Jeremiah 31 for a sound bite—a few tasty words.

Like chain restaurants that serve up familiar dishes, you see them all at Exit 31: Cracker Barrel, Macaroni Grill, TGI Fridays. So convenient, right off the expressway. Heading straight to Exit 31, looking for Lord's Supper words, hunting for language like "new covenant" or that winsome phrase, "written on your hearts."

So, I take Exit 31, pull into a familiar restaurant, sit in a booth with a window view, waitress takes the order, hardly need to see the menu (I know what I want), and look out across the parking lot. So familiar . . . not home, but reminds you of home. Trimmed shrubs, new cars, upscale offices and shops. Kind of an oasis. So pleasant, here at Exit 31. And as I wait for the order a sermon comes to me, served up like a delicious entrée. I know what it meant, know what it means, and it works like this:

Start in Hebrews, to Jeremiah for the sound bites, off to Paul for a little back-up, add Pacific blue bullets on the PowerPoint, end with a Mel Gibson clip, Jesus on the cross ushering in the new covenant. If you can't preach that you can't preach. That's the sermon I came to Jeremiah looking for, and that's what I found at Exit 31.

We have a problem here: we haven't yet walked into the world imagined in Jeremiah. We plug our nose and close our eyes in 19; try to get a free meal in 31, making Jeremiah distant and obsolete. Translating, "Behold the days are coming" as "Behold the days came" and God's future is God's past.

We have a problem because Jeremiah imagines a world and invites us to enter, not as tourists in the Holy Land, standing outside the walls of Old Jerusalem admiring the "Beautiful Gate," but by moving through the barriers into the world Jeremiah envisions.

If we move into this world *Jeremiah preaches to us today*. If we listen to Jeremiah's preaching, if we participate and engage the world Jeremiah imagines, then God is real and present. Expect to be frightened, because Jeremiah won't *supplement* our current vision. Jeremiah casts a new vision. This is no sound bite. This is a new way of living. And, if we move into the world Jeremiah envisions, we'll be challenged and rebuked and in the process find ourselves re-shaped and transformed.

"What if we asked Jeremiah to preach? What would he say to us?" That's exactly what I was thinking, when walking on the outskirts of 31, moving along the parameters of the city. Thinking and walking, walking and thinking, when suddenly and unexpectedly I tripped, in Jeremiah 31.33–34. Tripped over two little words: "them" right next to "they." They reached up and grabbed me by my feet, "they" and "them" did.

The reason I stumbled is that I've always read "them" and "they" as *us, you and me*. "The new covenant is *ours*," and, "The new covenant belongs to *us*." That's why I tripped. It doesn't say *us*. It says "them" and "they."

So I found the trip wire and followed the antecedent, which led straight to verse 31, where my troubles really began. At verse 31, much to my surprise, I discovered that "them" and "they" is the house of Judah, "them" and "they" is the house of Israel. Don't know if I want to enter this world, because I know *their* story. I've been listening this week.

What if we ask Jeremiah to preach? Wait—don't know if I want to hear Jeremiah preach. I'm not afraid that his vocabulary will be cumbersome. Worse! I'm afraid he'll be honest and threatening. I'm not afraid he'll be caught up in religious disputes of the mid-nineteenth century. I'm afraid his message will touch our lives.

So, one afternoon I decide I'll walk into the city, find Jeremiah's church and sit in the back pew and listen. So, I move into the city. But I don't find him in a church. He's on the street and as he does in so many of his sermons, he's giving an account of our current apostasy.

He preaches, "I speak not about the odd and peculiar doctrinal vices often mentioned in the same breath as Church of Christ, such as praise teams, music, and women standing behind the communion table."

That grabs the attention, when he says, "Church of Christ." We're all ears. But what he says next is absolutely captivating. Jeremiah says, "I speak of the elephant in the room, which is as nefarious as it is obvious. You are in collusion with the powers of this world, in love with the splendors of wealth. Setting your sights on executive privileges, longing for distinctive elegance, acquainted with the amenities of the privileged."

Captivating, indeed. He's telling the truth. This man is right!

We've walked up our winding staircase to the cupola to enjoy a panoramic view of the pristine landscape below and a lifestyle beyond, a lifestyle our mothers and grandfathers in the faith warned against, associating such opulence with a kind of compromise, causing us to ignore the important and essential.

It's true. We're still singing the old Stamps Baxter classic, subtly re-worded,

I've got a mansion just over the hilltop,
in this bright land where I'll never grow old
And, as I move to the upper echelon
get an ocean cottage with all my gold.

Jeremiah interrupts, "Those who assume opulence is a mark of entitlement, build their spacious homes with laborers who don't make a living wage, who panel their luxurious homes with cedar and exotic paints" (22.13-15).

When he says "laborers not making a living wage" I think of the lawn service team in our subdivision. I think of the Molly Maids. I think of last Easter Sunday, before sunrise, making one more Kroger run to top off the extras for our Easter banquet. I'm standing before the cash register, the only customer in the store at that early hour and my clerk is agitated. She's talking to another clerk and now she's talking to me. What's upset her is that when she got gas earlier that night her pump started tabulating the price before the gas was out of the hose. Over a dollar rung up before a drop hit the tank. To help transition her attention to my check out needs, I say, "What's a few dollars between us and the oil companies?" To which she says, "A lot, when you're poor."

It is hard for us to move past the threshold of Jeremiah in these times, because for decades now, up to a full generation or two, we have made peace with this world. Our triumphal hymns of progress, sung in the church foyer and at Starbucks,

This world is *now* our home
we're *not* just passin' thru
our treasures are stored up
good life for me and you.

Jeremiah is preaching out on the street corner and I'm growing nervous. Will Jeremiah mention the irony of our mortgage payments, our consumption, not lost on others across the world? Will he mention that we moved out of the city when it was becoming Exit 19 thinking we could avoid the punishment if we relocated in the suburbs, an oasis like Exit 31?

And I turn my back on Jeremiah. I've heard enough and I walk away.

But, Jeremiah is still preaching, "Your affluence is eating you alive."

I start to jog.

He says, "The end is coming. Your addictions, your anxieties, your depression should be alarming signs."

I turn the corner and can hear him no more. As if a violin were playing through this scene, one long note

held at the beginning and the end, our essential sorrow, the thread of sadness in this city.²

Jeremiah isn't Volkswagen's ad man. Jeremiah weeps because for so long we have been moving into gated communities, fake worlds that hide the reality of poverty and consumption.

I know Jeremiah's prophetic imagination turns out to be reality for Israel. The city falls, the temple is torn down, kings plucked up while Jerusalem pretends everything's fine, times are good. Babylon camps on the horizon.

I know we can't strip mine Jeremiah's world, grabbing the delicacies and running off, all the while recreating the very conditions against which Jeremiah preaches.

That's what I thought about all afternoon. And, when the sun had set, I go Nicodemus-like, at night, back into the city to find Jeremiah and talk with him.

This time he isn't at the street corner where I'd heard him preaching. I walk deeper into the city where he sits on the steps outside an old elaborate brick church building, alone.

I walk up to him, kneel next to him, and say, "Tell me about the exile, the punishment. How bad will it be?"

Jeremiah says, "Do you know that you have these characters and plot in common?"³

I say, "I know."

Jeremiah says, "Do you understand that you are Israel and this is your story?"

I say, "I understand."

Jeremiah says, "This is your condition today and this is your future . . . there will come a reckoning. All that you have built by your power and in your likeness will deteriorate and break down, plucked up, destroyed, overthrown and God will watch over the ruining with powerful concern."

I say, "Is there any hope?"

Jeremiah says, "Anguish is the door to life. Acknowledging your sin opens the future. Only those who mourn will be comforted. Only those who die will be born again."

That's what he says. That's what Jesus says, what Campbell says, and all who ask us to live in the world scripture imagines.

"I heard a child crying," I say. "Is there hope?"

And he reaches back behind him and picks up a book. A book, he says, he's created from the images in chapter 31.⁴ And, he hands it to me. I open it up. This book is full of colorful pictures, gorgeous images.

On the first page are vineyards, blossoming plants, it's the Garden of Eden, no wonder people are dancing.

Jeremiah says, "Look at the faces of the merry-makers, the joy on the face of the planters." I look.

I turn the page to streams of clear water, red wine, healthy flocks, luxurious gardens, a land of plenty, milk and honey.

Jeremiah says, "Look at the faces." I look.

I turn the page and see people dancing, young and old, women and men. Through the wrinkles and wonder I see their smiling faces.

I turn the page. Children running and jumping, laughing and playing. I see the joy and hope on their young faces.

As we move deeper into this world in Jeremiah 31, Jeremiah's dream in this world he imagines, so appealing, so inviting, so full of hope. It is like walking with Lucy into the wardrobe, pushing aside the soft folds of the fur coats, until we can feel something crunching beneath our feet, and instead of the feel of the wardrobe's woodwork, something soft and powdery, moving the branches of trees then seeing snowflakes we enter the world Jeremiah imagines.

2. This phrase has been adapted from a line in Beverly Rollwagen's poem, "Essential," *She Just Wants* (Minneapolis, MN: Nodin Press, 2004).

3. Some of Jeremiah's language in this exchange comes from Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 281-295.

4. All these images are lifted from Jeremiah 31.3-17.

“When will this happen?” I ask. “What will be the sign of the new covenant?”

Jeremiah’s answer surprises me. He says, “When you practice obedience because it is your character, when your inclination to resist and refuse and disobey evaporates, this will be a good sign. In the new covenant you will be transformed people, forgiven and forgiving.

“It will happen,” he says, “when your spirituality is displayed in physical action.

“Look at God,” he says, “God walks with the poor, cares for the children. Knowing God happens when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when the healthy support the ill, when hope conquers fear.”

That was quite an experience, to live in the world Jeremiah imagines. I can hardly tell you about it. And since that night of transformation, I’ve been finding prophets and witnessing God’s careful planting.

I heard a prophet just last month, a man about thirty years old, on the campus of Rochester College speaking to students and faculty. He said, “Jesus did not seek out the rich and powerful in order to trickle down his kingdom. He joined those at the bottom, the outcasts and undesirables, and everyone was attracted to his love for people on the margins.”⁵ I know he’s a prophet, doing this very thing in Philadelphia’s inner city.

I see God’s planting in our young people, planting themselves, being missional, learning to “hang out with the poor.” And as they embody the new covenant, we stand with them, support them, realizing “This is God’s work.”

And, I’ve seen prophetic churches. They don’t have two entry doors, one for women and one for men. And in this world of fast food and empty calories, they are churches where we learn to train our appetites, re-learn a healthy hunger, working with the cookbook of imaginative language, learning to speak and hear Bible words like “I forgive you” and “You are forgiven.” Where we are reminded, “I have written my law on your heart.” And are provided fresh meaning to the words of our Lord who says, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

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5. Shane Claiborne visited Rochester in the spring of 2007. These quotes, from his speech, are found in full context in his recent volume, *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).