

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 23  
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***Lord, save your people!***

—Jeremiah 31:7-9

So why do we even care? Why do we care about what someone wrote or said two and a half millennia ago? The stock market took a 2,000 point dive in the month of October, and we're talking today about what happened in 600 B.C. We're only a week away from elections that will determine the course of our nation for at least the next two years, and we're looking at events that took place in a little tiny kingdom in the Middle East 2,600 years ago. There are exciting technologies on the horizon, new medical breakthroughs, new products coming out, and promising things coming in the future, so why are we turning back to the past, to ancient history, to inform us today? Why is this even relevant? I'll tell you why. The man who spoke these words, a man named Jeremiah, was a prophet of God. The words he spoke are the words of God. And the people he spoke them to were the people of God. These same words speak to us today because God has not changed, God's words have not changed, and people have not changed.

The time of the Prophet Jeremiah, roughly 600 years before Christ, was a very difficult time to be a Jew. Originally there had been twelve tribes of Israel, but now they had practically been reduced to one tribe, the tribe of Judah. About 120 years before Jeremiah came onto the scene, the Assyrian Empire had invaded and had deported ten of the Israelite tribes, picked them up, took them out of Israel and scattered them all around the empire; these were the ten lost tribes of Israel. Meanwhile the Assyrians had been swallowed up by the Babylonians, and now at Jeremiah's time the Babylonians were knocking at the gates of Jerusalem threatening destruction. All this happened because of the people's sin and rebellion against God. They treated God's laws with contempt, they treated their fellow human beings with contempt, so God gave them some very painful discipline.

It's one thing for a nation to be conquered and its people and culture to be absorbed; that has happened often throughout human history all around the world. But in this case there was something much bigger at stake than just Jewish culture. The Savior of the world was promised to come from the tribe of Judah. If Judah was annihilated, it wasn't just her traditions that would be wiped out; it was the promise of the Savior that hung in the balance.

That's where the Prophet Jeremiah stepped in with a message of hope. Jeremiah is often called "the weeping prophet." He wrote the book of Lamentations after Jerusalem was destroyed. The word "jeremiad" is used today for any message of doom and gloom that mourns the decaying state of the culture and predicts the imminent downfall of society—because that's the kind of message Jeremiah preached. People didn't want to hear Jeremiah's warnings to repent, and they persecuted him harshly for his prophetic message. But in the midst of Jeremiah's message of imminent destruction, Jeremiah also had some beautiful words of promise and hope. And when his prophecies of destruction came true, it was those words of hope that people were able to cling to.

In our Scripture text today Jeremiah addresses the remnant—not only the tribe of Judah but even the lost tribes of Israel. *This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the greatest of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.' See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return."* God doesn't mess around. God's discipline upon his people had been severe, but the day of restoration was coming. The Israelites who had been deported and scattered by the Assyrians would come back to worship again at the house of the Lord. The Jews who had been exiled by the Babylonians would return home and rebuild Jerusalem. God was serious about sin, but his mercy would restore the fallen and bring back the lost. In his Word his people put their hope.

Jeremiah's promises of hope were fulfilled when the people returned to their homeland, but the more complete fulfillment was realized when the Messiah came. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who came to restore God's people and give them hope. All we have to do is look at Jesus' ministry on earth to see how he served. He ministered to the blind, the lame, to those who were harassed and helpless, oppressed, weak, to the most vulnerable of society—to people who had been victimized by their own sins and the sins of others against them. Jesus the Messiah gave them the promise of restoration—and he himself restored them. The people of Jesus' day cried out, "*O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel!*" and Jesus saved them. He not only healed their physical infirmities and restored those who had been victimized by the consequences of sin in the world; he died on the cross to remove sin forever, to restore life and immortality to all living under the shadow of death, and to bring hope.

Do you know that today it seems there is a medication you can take for just about anything? Do you feel stressed? There's a pill for that. Do you feel anxious? There are pills for that. Are you in pain? Take a painkiller and feel better. Are you depressed? There are medications that can lift your mood and help balance your emotions. Do you want to be at peace? There are medications that can give you a sense of peace, tranquility and well-being. Do you want to be happy? There are meds that can make you feel very happy. I'm not knocking this; these are blessings of modern medicine, and when they are used properly they can be very helpful for treating physical and emotional conditions.

But I don't know of any medication that can instill hope in the human heart. Hope is only found in the Lord, the God of our salvation, and in his Son Jesus Christ. Without hope a person lives a brief existence in a world of violence, loss and good-byes—punctuated with moments of happiness, to be sure—and then comes eternity. And while it's one thing to face a marauding horde of Assyrians or Babylonians trying to knock down your city walls, it's another thing altogether to die and face the horrible wrath of God against our sins. That's what's waiting for people with no hope of salvation in Jesus. We think we are in control of things. Human beings think we are in control of our lives, our health, our destiny, our future—but we are not in control. We live each day in a fragile existence that could end in an instant. We can either bury our heads in the sand and pretend it's not that way and just keep muddling on, but when we get real and wake up and realize that all the joys and dreams and laughter and fun we enjoy in this life are temporary and fleeting like the breeze, and we wake up and ask ourselves, "Is this all there is?" then the only thing that gives meaning to our lives is hope. And when it comes to hope there are only three possibilities: (1) You can find hope in Jesus, (2) you can have hope in something other than Jesus, or (3) you have no hope. Having hope in something other than Jesus is worthless, because it can't deliver salvation. Having no hope at all is a taste of hell itself, because hell is the ultimate, eternal hopelessness. Only Jesus can give real hope.

Lord, save your people! That's the prayer that God's people of every generation have prayed, from the earliest days until now. Save us not just from our decadent culture, not just from our earthly enemies. Save us from the enemies of our soul. Save us from the clutches of Satan. Save us from our sins. Save us from everlasting death and unending hopelessness. Save us from the judgment and wrath of God that is coming upon the unbelieving world. Save us from eternal darkness and the lake of fire that is never quenched. Lord, save your people!

And that's exactly what God does. That's exactly what God has done. The name Jesus, in Hebrew "Y'Shua" means, "The Lord saves." God has brought salvation to the remnant of Israel, to us, and to all the world in his Son, Jesus the Christ. The Lord promised through Jeremiah, "*They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.*" God loves us because God is love. It is God's intense, consuming desire that everyone should know his love and be saved. God wants us and all people to repent of our sins, to turn away from evil, and to walk with him, refreshed by his forgiveness, on the level path of life with him. All of God's love, all of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness, are given to the world in Jesus. God's love gave his Son to live perfectly as the substitute for our disobedience, and then to die on the cross as the payment for the world's sin. By rising from the dead he proved to all that he is the anointed Son of God, and that our sins have been removed. In Jesus, the Lord has saved you. In Jesus, the Lord has forgiven you. In Jesus, the Lord has fulfilled all his promises to give you hope, the certain hope of living in God's glory forever.

So why do we care what Jeremiah wrote 2,600 years ago? The Apostle Paul put it this way: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Lord, save your people! Give us hope for this life and for the life of the world to come. Amen.