

WHAT THEY DID NOT SAY
Jeremiah 2:6-8
(Based upon Texts That Linger, Words That Explode
by Walter Brueggemann)

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Amarillo, Texas
August 27, 2023

A little boy went to a birthday party, and when he came home his mother asked, “Did you thank Mrs. Johnson for the party?”

We’re all like that, aren’t we? We want our children to be polite and respectful and show gratitude in such a way as we really look good because of their graceful manners.

So she asked, “Did you thank Mrs. Johnson for the party?”

“No,” he answered. “I was standing in line when the boy in front of me thanked her and she said, ‘Don’t mention it.’ So I didn’t.”

But it’s hard to leave an act of kindness unthanked. Recently, someone gave me a gift. And as she gave me the gift she said, “Now, a thank you note is not necessary.” I’m trying not to write one, because when I tell people not to write one I mean it. And I know she meant it. But because I haven’t written a thank you, when I really am grateful, I feel like something is incomplete about the gift. I’ve received it, but I have not expressed my thankfulness for it – at least not in writing.

In Jeremiah 2, we come to an undated collection of poetic utterances from the prophet. It’s something of a sampler of the topics taken up again and again in this book. The people of Judah and Jerusalem were the real audience for this prophetic poetry. Let’s begin in chapter 2:1-3.

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
“Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying ‘Thus says the Lord,
“I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.
“Israel was holy to the Lord,
The first of His harvest;
All who ate of it became guilty;
Evil came upon them,” declares the Lord.””

There are two distinct metaphors used by the prophet Jeremiah. In the first, Judah’s relation to Yahweh is like a marriage. Yahweh, with a very gracious memory, forgets the difficulties of the wilderness period with His people and depicts it like a honeymoon, the honeymoon of a marriage,

a celebrated time. We hear covenant words, words that remind us of a marriage – words like “devotion” (v. 2), “love” (v. 2), “following after” (v. 2).

In those days, when manna rained down from heaven, Israel was totally dependent upon her Lord, and glad to be so – like a new young bride. In this image of marriage, the partners have sworn fidelity and loyalty to each other. And one who has taken a marriage vow is not free to disregard it or pervert it.

Judah, in this honeymoon period, was like a bride trusting her husband – leaving the security of Egypt and going into the harsh wilderness.

In verse 3, the metaphor changes. It’s similar language. Like a wife is holy and set apart, so was the first fruit. The image is that of a harvest offering. The first produce of the season, the most tender, is offered to the Lord as acknowledgment that the land really does belong to the Lord after all. This is all about land. The land belongs to the Lord, and the Lord is giving it to His people. Yahweh is entitled to the early produce. He is entitled to Israel because Israel belongs to Yahweh.

The overarching word here is “holy.” Israel was completely devoted to Yahweh. The people of God exist for no other reason than to be available to God.

You think about that sentence for a moment. The people of God then and the people of God now exist for no other reason than to be available to God. Wow. As wife to her husband and as first fruits to the priestly family, Israel belongs exclusively to the Lord. They exist for no other purpose.

We have these positive metaphors of the honeymoon period between husband and wife and the first fruit of the harvest offering given to God because they provide a context for the harsh and unexpected turn that happens in the second half of verse 3. “Whoever eats this produce is guilty and receives evil.”

“To eat,” that is, to use what belongs only to the Lord, is to pervert its proper use and distort the relationship between God and His people. The first fruits were set apart for the priest and his family. Any other person who partook was guilty of trespass (Leviticus 22). And, likewise, the Lord assured the Patriarchs that the one who harmed Israel would, in effect, curse himself (Genesis 2:3).

In the present situation, this wayward people who were worshiping other gods are not devoted, but fickle. They are not holy, but profane. They are not whole, but broken. This present sorry situation is nothing like what has been and what could be. Not only is the honeymoon over, but the whole relationship is deeply distorted. What had been a happy marriage and a joyous offering is now deeply perverted, seemingly almost beyond recall.

In verse 4 and those that follow, we have something of a prophetic lawsuit. Maybe divorce hearings between Yahweh and His people. And in these hearings we see the disastrous incongruity between faithful God and fickle people. God is like a hurt and wounded lover. He starts out with a question in verse 5, “What wrong did your fathers find in Me?”

“Come and listen to the word of the Lord,” He says in verse 4, and then “What injustice did your fathers find in Me?” If there is nothing wrong with Yahweh, if the answer is they couldn’t find anything wrong with God, then the fault must be – in this case – not with the groom but with the bride. The fault lies with Israel.

What was meant to be intimate now has become distant. “They have gone far from Me” (v. 5). “They have walked after emptiness and become empty.”

I want you to listen carefully to what I am about to say. Look at verse 5 again. “They walked after emptiness and became empty.”

Are you ready? Here it is: You will become like the god you worship. You and I will take on the character of the god that we follow.

Israel went after nothing, and Israel thus became no thing.

Look at Psalm 115:5-8. Here we have a contrast between the heathen idols and the Lord. These idols the people have turned to have mouths (v. 5), but they cannot speak. They have eyes, but they cannot see. They have ears, but they cannot hear. They have noses, but they cannot smell. They have hands, but they cannot touch. They have feet, but they cannot walk.

And look at verse 8. “Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.”

In Hosea 9:10, it says that the people of God came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame. And they became as detestable as that which they loved.

Translated plainly, you’d better be careful what or whom you choose to worship because you will find yourself like that which you worship. They walked after emptiness and became empty.

The loyalty one has toward any god is decisive for the shaping of human life. We become like the god we serve.

Jeremiah 2:6 is where we pick up our sermon title.
“And they did not say, ‘Where is the Lord.’”

They no longer recited the story of the Lord on their lips. The Lord was no longer on their lips.

Skip down to verse 8.
“The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’”

I don’t want to talk to you about what you have said. I want to talk to you about what you have not said.

In fact, Israel is indicted, not for what she did not do as much as for what she did not say. The people of God were a community that speaks, a community of utterance. When Israel ceased to utter rightly, the community was jeopardized.

In the first indictment, the whole community is accused (v. 6). “And the people of God did not say...” It’s an indictment against the past generations of Israel, from Moses to the time of Jeremiah. They are all in trouble because they did not say. They forgot to say.

What is it they forgot to say? They forgot to say thank you. They forgot to say thank you to the Lord for His deliverance from Egypt and for His safe leadership in the wilderness.

Look at verse 6

“And they did not say, ‘Where is the Lord
Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
Who led us through the wilderness,
Through a land of deserts and of pits,
Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,
Through a land that no one crossed
And where no man dwelt?’
“And I brought you into the fruitful land,
To eat its fruit and its good things.”

They didn’t say anything about all that the Lord had done for them.

It’s interesting here that there is no indirect object. It isn’t “They didn’t say to their children,” which is probably implied. Or, “They did not say to their pagan, nonbelieving neighbors” – they didn’t witness. But the whole point here is not so much to whom they did not speak, but the fact that they did not speak. It is the speaking that keeps the speakers inside the story of God. And saying keeps the Lord at the center of the community.

The next group that is targeted is the priests. The people didn’t speak and the priests didn’t say (v. 8).

The priests did not name the name of the Lord. They did not make available out loud, publicly speaking, the name of the Lord who is at the center of His people.

It’s an ongoing recital of thankfulness at the Lord’s deliverance and involvement in their lives.

Of all the things the Lord may speak of this, His people, I hope He will never proclaim about us, “They did not say,” and about the leaders of worship (your priests, if you will), “They did not say.”

We need to be a people of gratitude.

Gratefulness, Henry Nouwen argued, cannot be manufactured. It is a grace, a gift that God bestows and not anything we can create in our own hearts. True gratitude bears little resemblance to the forced optimism underlying the admonition to count your blessings. Gratitude is not a denial of real pain and loss in your lives. It is not a stoic effort to concentrate on the good things in life. It isn’t the power of positive thinking. It is really not attained by presenting God with a list of things we think we should be grateful for. Rather,

we need to present our selves to God. (Kris Haig, “Grateful Hearts,” *Presbyterians Today*, Nov. 1999, p. 7)

From our innermost being, we are thankful to God for what He has done for us.

The truth of the matter is that if you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75 percent of the people in this world.

If you have money in the bank, cash in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace at home, you are among the top 8 percent of the world’s wealthiest people.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, if you are more well than you are sick, you are more fortunate than the million who will not survive this very week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you have the freedom to attend this worship service this morning without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death – well, billions of people in the world this morning cannot.

A wise man once wrote that the hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings. One of the tragic commentaries on God’s people is that we tend to count our blessings on our fingertips and our complaints on calculators. We spend so much time complaining to God that we rarely take time to express our gratitude for His blessings.

They did not say....

They did not speak of God’s redemption. For the Old Testament people of God, that was the Exodus, the delivery. For the New Testament people of God, the new covenant is delivery from the power of sin and death that enslave us, as the Egyptians had enslaved ancient Israel. It is to fail to speak of Christ and Calvary, the cross of compassion, the grace of a great God.

Will our lips be silent? Will God ever indict us?

They did not say....

May we always say, may we always speak with our lips – both leaders and people – of the wondrous works of God.

May we never disregard our shaping memory.

Luke 19

The Triumphal Entry – Jesus the King enters Jerusalem to reign from his unlikely throne, the cross.

– Colt of a donkey

–Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.

–Pharisees say, “Teacher, silence your disciples.”

–He answers, “If my followers are silent, the stones will cry out.”

We live in a culture of intimidation. Like ancient Israel, we now dwell in a land where people worship their own idols – man-made gods, made with their own hands, presented with their own pens. We are threatened, hushed, intimidated, and bullied to be silent.

So we, too, “don’t say.” We forget to tell our story, His story – that we, too, were in bondage to sin and death. That our God put on skin, came down from His glory and died – beaten, bruised – died. Thorns, fists, spit, Calvary, and a cross. He died. Then, as the prophet predicted, He rose on the third day.

And so, we must say – every day in every way – we have a deliverer. We have a story. We have gratitude for our God, and we will say – with boldness and with love, in truth and in tenderness – we have been rescued from death itself, for our God has an empty tomb. He did for us and with us what we could not do for ourselves. We will say He is our God, our only God, and we are His people!