



YOU CAN GO HOME

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 Jeremiah 3:1-4:4
 Fifth Message
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The movie *Ebony* is the story of a beautiful and talented young woman who leaves the security of her home and the man who loves her and wants to marry her, to seek fame and fortune in the world. Her journey takes her from one lover to another. To use some of the metaphors of the book of Jeremiah, she “walks after emptiness and becomes empty”; she “digs cisterns that leak and fail to satisfy.” She is successful in her quest, but her personal life goes downhill. She abandons everything good to embrace everything harmful and destructive. We wonder if she will ever be able to return home. Her long-time boyfriend visits her and she rejects him. As he is leaving, grieved and saddened, he tells her she knows where to find him when she is ready to come home. In the end, that is what happens, and the despair and darkness of her life is replaced by reunion and restoration.

We find the same thing when we encounter the God of the Bible. God is waiting for us, longing for us to return to him so that he can restore us. That is the wonderful news of the gospel: we can go home.

We continue this morning in our study in the book of Jeremiah. Our text, a powerful text of poetry and prose intermingled, chapter 3:1 through 4:4, is one unit of study. In the opening eleven verses, God exposes Judah’s idolatry and sin, but in the second part of the text he offers a marvelous invitation to both Israel and Judah to return to him. I suppose we could say that the good news of the book of Jeremiah is that not everything in it is bad news.

God begins with a chilling question to Israel, in 3:1-5:

**God says, “If a husband divorces his wife,
 And she goes from him,
 And belongs to another man,
 Will he still return to her?
 Will not that land be completely polluted?
 But you are a harlot with many lovers;
 Yet you turn to Me,” declares the LORD.
 “Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see;
 Where have you not been violated?
 By the roads you have sat for them
 Like an Arab in the desert,
 And you have polluted a land
 With your harlotry and with your wickedness.
 “Therefore the showers have been withheld,
 And there has been no spring rain.
 Yet you had a harlot’s forehead;
 You refused to be ashamed.
 “Have you not just now called to Me,
 ‘My Father, Thou art the friend of my youth?’
 ‘Will He be angry forever?
 Will He be indignant to the end?’
 Behold, you have spoken
 And have done evil things,
 And you have had your way.” (Jer. 3:1-5, NASB)**

Once again in this book we find the image of the harlot. Here is the scene, put in modern terms. A husband comes home unexpectedly and finds his wife in bed with another man. She leaves her husband for this man. There is a separation and a divorce. Can the wife ever return to her husband?

Judah is God’s adored bride, but she has sought out other lovers. The evidence is seen on the bare heights where she has committed spiritual adultery and cultic fornication. She has acted like an “Arab in the desert,” waiting on the side of the road for someone to seduce. She has been the seducer, not the seduced. As a result of her harlotry, Judah has defiled and polluted the land. Notice the strong link between Judah’s sin and the defilement of the land. The reason Judah and Israel are both exiled is that the land might be healed. Judah entered into the fertility cult so as to invoke blessing on their crops, but God has withheld the spring rain. Even though her actions have been exposed, however, she is not ashamed. She is a brazen harlot. Judah still calls God, “My Father,” and she relies on his friendship. The question chills to the bone: Can God take Judah back?

The issue revolves around the law concerning divorce. Deut. 24:

“...her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.” (Deut. 24:4)

According to Torah, the law prohibits the return of the first husband. The woman is defiled and rendered unacceptable by the second husband. No husband, so it may be assumed from social convention as well as the Torah teaching, would be so vulnerable as to take back such a fickle wife. Betrayal precludes reconciliation. According to the Torah, the answer to God’s question is an emphatic, No! There is no provision in the law for God and Judah to be reconciled.

The image of Judah’s harlotry is further intensified in verses 6-11:

Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, “Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. And I thought, ‘After she has done all these things, she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. And it came about because of the lightness of her harlotry, that she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception,” declares the LORD.

And the LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah." (Jer 3:6-11)

Here is a shocking comparison between two sisters, Israel and Judah. Israel, the northern kingdom, is called faithless; Judah, the southern kingdom, is labelled treacherous.

God recounts the history of faithless Israel. She had played the harlot on every high hill and under every green tree. Although he had wanted Israel to return to him, she would not. She was faithless. The word comes from the same root word as return. It means to turn away in the opposite direction. As a result, God judged Israel. Assyria took the northern kingdom into exile. God sent her away with a writ of divorce.

Judah observed everything that had happened to her sister. She watched her harlotry and her judgment, and yet she did not fear. She also played the harlot and polluted the land, becoming so dull that she regarded her adultery as insignificant, e.g., "the lightness of her harlotry." Not only did Judah do what her sister had done, but she also feigned allegiance to Yahweh. Judah was "treacherous," practicing fraud and deception. She acknowledged God in words but not deeds. While she expected her husband to fulfill all of his marital commitments she had no intention of fulfilling hers. So Israel played the harlot openly, but Judah did so deceitfully. Therefore, faithless Israel proved herself to be more righteous than treacherous Judah. This is a powerful indictment against Judah. Ironically, this is the same phrase that Judah, the son of Jacob, used when he compared his sin of deception to Tamar's, in Genesis 38.

Our society today is so saturated with idolatry I am not sure we are aware of how much it affects us. As Christians we are drawn into irresistible love affairs. The image of harlotry describes Judah's idolatry—and ours, too. When we pursue idols and love them, we play the harlot in our marriage relationship with God. But we do it so deceptively, just like Judah. We watch people turn away from God and pursue their idols openly and we talk about their foolishness and point out their wicked ways. When we see them suffer the consequences of their sin, one would think we would learn from their mistakes, but no, we do the same thing. We serve the same idols, but not as openly. We pretend that we are turning to the LORD and following him, while in reality we are committing adultery with "stones and trees," things like money, success, pleasure, possessions. The world serves its idols out in the open; the church does it in private, bringing anguish to God's heart. Jeremiah unveils our deception. From God's perspective the pagan can be more righteous than the fraudulent Christian.

Judah finds herself in a grave dilemma. The law prohibited the possibility of returning to God. Her sister Israel has already been judged, and she was more righteous than Judah. Was there any hope for Judah? Is there any hope for us when we have played the harlot? Can we return to God?

The rest of the text assures us that we can go home. Here we will find an extraordinary invitation from God to return to him. "Return" is the word used most often in the Old Testament to picture repentance. And here God extends his invitation to return not just once or twice, but four times. As we look at these briefly we will see that each invitation has a slightly different emphasis. Verses 12-13:

"Go, and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD; 'I will not look upon you in anger.

**For I am gracious,' declares the LORD;
'I will not be angry forever.
Only acknowledge your iniquity,
That you have transgressed against the LORD your God
And have scattered your favors to the strangers under
every green tree,
And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD."
(Jer 3:12,13)**

The first invitation is extended to Israel, the northern tribes that had already been scattered by Assyria. Perhaps this is tied to King Josiah's efforts to expand into northern Israel. The assumption is that both north and south will return from exile. Remember that the words return and faithless come from the same root word. They speak of moving in opposing directions, either towards or away from something. Literally, the text is saying, "turn to me, turning-away Israel."

God's character undergirds the basis for this call to repentance. The gracious God will not be angry forever. His essential character is based on loyal-love. He will always operate out of that quality. The reason Israel can return is not based on their becoming acceptable, but on his accepting them. However, there is one condition: Israel must acknowledge their guilt and sin. They must confess that they have wronged and sinned against the Lord. God is a yearning husband, but he will not be mocked, trivialized or used. His bride must come clean, confess her sin, and acknowledge her wrongdoing. This is what the psalmist said:

**When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of
summer.
I acknowledged my sin to Thee,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD";
And Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. (Psa 32:3-5)**

We do not have to do anything to make ourselves worthy of God's forgiveness, but we do have to be honest in confessing our sin. Sometimes this presents a huge obstacle. We can't admit that we are wrong, because we are too proud and too concerned about our reputation, so we hide our sin in the darkness. There, weighed down with guilt and shame, we are drained of all our vitality and sense of community. Our reluctance to confess is what keeps us from God's grace and forgiveness. But when we are willing to expose the darkness of our hearts, then we find the God who forgives.

The second invitation repeats the phrase, "Turn to me, O turning away sons." Verses 14-20:

**'Return, O faithless sons,' declares the LORD;
'For I am a master to you,
And I will take you one from a city and two from a family,
And I will bring you to Zion.'**

"Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding. "And it shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land," declares the LORD, "they shall say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' And it shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall it be made again. "At that time they shall call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the LORD,' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name

of the LORD; nor shall they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart. "In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance."

"Then I said,
'How I would set you among My sons,
And give you a pleasant land,
The most beautiful inheritance of the nations!'
And I said, 'You shall call Me, My Father,
And not turn away from following Me.'
Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover,
So you have dealt treacherously with Me,
O house of Israel," declares the LORD. (Jer 3:14-20)

This invitation carries with it the motivation for repentance. Here we find a great promise given by a father to his sons, one that looks to future glory for God's people: the hope of a new Jerusalem.

The word master provides a word play with Judah's idol, *Ba'al*. It is actually the same word. God is saying that he is the true *ba'al*. He will bring a remnant of Israel and Judah home to Zion, and the sons of Abraham will be joined by all the nations. God's throne will no longer be an ark, but an entire city. It will be so glorious that no one will even have a memory of the ark of the LORD. Leaders and rulers will not be unjust but will feed the people knowledge and understanding. The people will be cleansed from all idolatry. They will be sons and they will address God as "my Father." Their inheritance will be the most beautiful of all the nations. This is the same vision we find in the book of Revelation: "And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22).

We walk after idols because we seek glory. We want blessing: a good life, security, a permanent home. We think our idols will satisfy the deep yearnings of our hearts, but what we are really longing for is eternity. In the words of Tennyson, "Thou madest man, he knows not why./He thinks he was not made to die." The prophet declares that there is nothing in this world that will satisfy these longings. But when the new Jerusalem descends from the heavens, then God will gather all his sons and daughters to share in his glory. God motivates us to forsake the emptiness of this world and return to him by giving us a vision of the glory that will never end. In his book, *The Message of Jeremiah*, Derek Kidner comments: "God is not content with short-term answers to a crisis, but looks on to perfection."¹

*Lift your eyes, ye sons of light!
Zion's city is in sight;
There our endless home shall be,
There our Lord we soon shall see.*

The third invitation comes in verses 21-25:

**A voice is heard on the bare heights,
The weeping and the supplications of the sons of Israel;
Because they have perverted their way,
They have forgotten the LORD their God.
"Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness."
"Behold, we come to Thee;
For Thou art the LORD our God.
"Surely, the hills are a deception,
A tumult on the mountains.
Surely, in the LORD our God
Is the salvation of Israel.**

"But the shameful thing has consumed the labor of our fathers since our youth, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. "Let us lie down in our shame, and let our humiliation cover us; for we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, since our youth even to this day. And we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God." (Jer 3:21-25)

In these verses we see Judah weeping on the hilltops, the very places where she had committed adultery, pursued other lovers and worshipped idols. Such weeping was characteristic of Baal worship. Perhaps the hills are bare because Josiah has destroyed their idols as part of his reform. Perhaps she is weeping because she is saddened by the consequences of her sin. Or perhaps her eyes have been opened to see her sin, waywardness and depravity. She agonizes over the "years the locusts have eaten." She realizes that the tumult, the uproar which she made to Baal, is all a deception; it is all false. Filled with shame and humiliation, she realizes how much she has hurt God, her husband. She weeps over misplaced affections. She has loved wrongly and badly, and she has done so from her youth.

At times God unmasks our depravity and sin and we see how much we have hurt and grieved him. We have done this to ourselves, and we are grieved by our behavior. We are overwhelmed with a sense of loss: relationships, friendships, purity, joy. We should not be afraid of those times, however; they are part of the confession and repentance process. These are holy times when we cry holy tears. Sometimes our tears are locked inside our hearts in an inland sea. We think we are forbidden to shed them and give no outlet to our lake of grief. In the words of Pat Conroy, "we die because our faces were not watered enough." These are times when our hearts are open. In those moments we gain extraordinary intimacy with God.

As I look back on my 25-year marriage, I recognize times when I hurt my wife deeply. I have discovered that when I am willing to open up my heart and weep tears of sadness and ask for forgiveness, that our intimacy as a couple increases. I have wept before my children when I realized I did something that hurt them: a glance, a word, an unintentional thing, perhaps, that affected them deeply, and I have asked their forgiveness. I have found that this increases intimacy between us. The same thing happens when I let go before the Lord and ask his forgiveness.

In our weeping we hear the voice of the Father saying, "Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your unfaithfulness" (literally, "Turn to me, O turning away sons, I will heal your turning away"). What an amazing promise! The fundamental meaning of the word heal is to restore, to make whole. The word occurs 13 times in Jeremiah, one-fifth of all the occasions it is used in the O.T. It can mean repair, make fresh, mend, or heal, in terms of physical disease or wounds. It isn't difficult to go from figurative healing to spiritual healing. Sin is a great disease for which man has no cure. But, God heals our souls and restores us from our sin and waywardness. He says: Turn to me and I will heal your lustful eyes. Turn to me and I will heal your selfish ambition. Turn to me and I will heal your deep anger. Turn to me and I will make you whole and restore the years the locusts have eaten.

And so we say, "Behold, we come to Thee; For Thou art the Lord our God. Surely, in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel." When we weep and confess, we find a loving God who promises to heal us. Only he can heal our wayward

hearts. A repentant church is a church in the process of being healed.

The fourth invitation highlights three more things that need to accompany repentance. Chapter 4, verses 1-4:

**“If you will return, O Israel,” declares the LORD,
“Then you should return to Me.
And if you will put away your detested things from My
presence,
And will not waver,
And you will swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’
In truth, in justice, and in righteousness;
Then the nations will bless themselves in Him,
And in Him they will glory.”
For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusa-
lem,
“Break up your fallow ground,
And do not sow among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the LORD
And remove the foreskins of your heart,
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Lest My wrath go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds.” (Jer 4:1-4)**

Here is the first thing: we need to remove all idols and cast off all other loyalties. When we return to the LORD, everything that is unreal must go. We need to burn the bridges that take us into the seductive power of our idols, to let go of the things of this world that we love, the things that consume us. And we need to be harsh and ruthless when we do this.

Second, we need to swear obedience to the true, living LORD. Here, truth, justice, and righteousness, themes of covenant faith, are contrasted with falseness and deception. In Old Testament language, God is saying that we not only need to throw out our idols but also to commit ourselves to the Lordship of Jesus in our lives, to proclaim that Jesus is LORD and there is no other lord, no other god. We must confess allegiance to him and him alone.

Third, we need to make our hearts soft and receptive to God’s word. This is the point of breaking up fallow ground and circumcising our hearts. Both of these images point to the same reality. This is akin to the idea of confession, of exposing our hearts to God. Fallow ground is unploughed, hard land. The crusty earth has to be ploughed so that the seed will germinate. Breaking up the ground is equivalent to not planting among thorns, since one function of plowing is the removal of noxious weeds that inhibit a fruitful harvest.

**“Sow with a view to righteousness
Reap in accordance with kindness;
Break up your fallow ground,
For it is time to seek the LORD
Until He comes to rain righteousness on you.” (Hos 10:12)**

Jesus probably had this imagery in mind when he related the parable of the sower, in Mark 4. Our heart is the soil where God’s word takes root. The seed needs soil that has been plowed and softened, otherwise thorns will choke the life of God. Our hearts must be broken through confession and repentance so they can bear the fruit of God’s Spirit.

Circumcised hearts reflect the same truth. We are to cut away the hard exterior of our hearts, our pride and our stubbornness that keep us from being receptive and teachable. We can never find repentance when we allow our hearts to remain hard. Repentance requires a soft and submissive heart.

Just as the ground must be plowed to produce a crop, the hard heart must be broken to bear fruit. There is no short-cut. We must allow God’s Spirit to break our pride, stubbornness and self-sufficiency. Only then will be able to receive his grace, love and forgiveness. There can be no spiritual harvest from hearts that remain unploughed, and no circumcision worth the name which leaves the will untouched.

Here in the midst of God’s indictment are four extraordinary invitations to return to him. “If a husband divorces his wife, And she goes from him, and belongs to another man, will he still return to her?” The law says he can’t, but the stunning impact of the poem is that God is not like man (Hos. 11:8-9). He will take back a fickle wife. He will break his own law so that we might return to him. God’s love flies in the face of Torah. In reality, he fulfilled the law when he sent his son Jesus to die on the cross. We can come to him at any time and find forgiveness and restoration.

Even though God is a jilted lover and he is grieved over our harlotry he still yearns for us to return to him. We are special to him. Even when we are in the midst of sin, when we are in terrible darkness, he invites us to come home, to return to him. We can go home! He is waiting. We need to confess our sin and remove the hardness of our heart, to denounce our idols and declare allegiance to Jesus, but we don’t have to change ourselves, trying to get our act together. We just need to come and he will heal our unfaithfulness.

Have you been clinging to other lovers? Is God speaking to you now, asking you to turn to him and forsake all others and come home to him? Now is the acceptable time. Do not put it off any longer. Return to him and he will return to you.

1. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987) 36.

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