

No Small Thing¹

This morning's second lesson brings us to Jeremiah, a prophet whose preaching spanned 40 years or so. Early on in Jeremiah's prophetic career, the southern kingdom of Judah was a vassal of the Assyrian Empire, which meant that Judah had some level of independence in exchange for paying regular taxes to the Assyrians and providing soldiers for the Assyrian military. Keeping Assyria happy meant relative protection and safety. As Dr. Kristin Swanson writes:

[They] were in a very tenuous position—any sign of rebellion (for example, non-payment of taxes, forming alliances or military coalitions against the Assyrians) would result in loss of territory and/or conquest.²

Over time Babylon grew more powerful than Assyria. Within a decade of the fall of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, Babylon had conquered all of the Assyrian Empire. Judah was now beholden to a different empire with the same expectations. Play nice or else.

Jeremiah was not a favorite among the Judean kings, in part because he dared to insist that Babylon was an agent of God's judgment on a nation who had gone astray. This prophetic witness led him to be imprisoned and barred from the Temple. [Read Jeremiah 36:1-8.]

I was a later-in-life convert to a love of history. As a high school and college student I was easily bored by all the details such as the names of ancient kings and the endless list of dates. So. Many. Dates. As an English major, I could immerse myself in Shakespeare's poetry and plays or escape to

¹ Thanks to writer, Sarah Bessey for the inspiration for the title, <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/no-small-thing>

² Kristin A. Swanson, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-promises-a-new-covenant/commentary-on-jeremiah-361-8-21-23-27-28-then-3131-34-2>

Elizabeth Bennet's walks in the English countryside. No memorization of dates required. Now in my sixth decade, I have learned to appreciate the details and the dates and even the footnotes. An annotated copy of *Pride and Prejudice*—with detailed margin notes about nineteenth century British recipes and military protocols—is now one of my favorite possessions. These details, these seemingly small things matter. They give me clues and guideposts that inform and flesh out the larger story. For example, when the narrator tells us that this word comes to Jeremiah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, we are meant to understand that this timestamp is a crucial moment in the life of the tiny kingdom of Judah. The year is 605 BCE. Assyria's power is disintegrating by the second and Babylon's is ramping up. Jehoiakim's father Josiah had pushed for religious reform while also seeking to regain political power. Jehoiakim seems determined to ignore the danger on his—or more significantly—his kingdom's doorstep. A fast has been declared, perhaps to ask for God's help fending off the Babylonian invasion. At God's leading, Jeremiah seems to sense that there is a window, a chance for God's people to hear God's word of judgment and call to repentance. Jeremiah can't go to the Temple. He needs to send Baruch in his place and Baruch needs a script to know what to say. Not only does Baruch have the daunting task of speaking Jeremiah's difficult words in the midst of what is likely to be a frightened or even hostile gathering, it is also Baruch's job to write all the words down first. He is not transcribing Jonah's 8-word sermon or one of my 2000-or-so word sermons but 22 years of prophetic words. With apologies to Taylor, I would be hard-pressed to sing giddily about feeling this kind of 22. And yet, Baruch does it. He writes and he speaks just as he is called to do. [Read Jeremiah 36: 21-23, 27-28, 32]

I am absolutely appalled at the king's utter disregard for this holy word. And, I am in awe of Baruch. "Do it again," God says. *Write it again*. And Baruch does. After learning that the king has

shredded and torched his work and God's Word, Baruch does not cry out or protest or throw up his hands in despair. After telling Jeremiah to dictate the words again, God goes on to tell Jeremiah how the king will be punished for his outrageous disdain, and then Jeremiah begins again, as does Baruch, small step by small step, little by little, inscribing word by word.

In a recent blog post, writer Sarah Bessey describes shoveling snow without the help of a snowblower, an activity I still have vivid, not-so-fond memories of. "It's no small thing to do this thing," she writes. Amen, sister! She then talks about gathering with other members of her church a few weeks back:

We cooked for hours in a local commercial kitchen, making meals for mothers without support or a family or a village nearby, the new mothers sitting in NICUs alone. We packed up the stir-fries and apple pies and burritos, we created more than 500 meals together. We tucked them in the freezers for delivery the next day. It was no small thing even though it felt like such a small thing.³

Bessey is a writer and theologian whose primary work is caring for her family these days. Her weeks are filled with the steady small work of keeping her small kingdom going while her husband travels for work. And in this season of shorter days and longer nights, of raised voices and angry headlines, she admits that she loses hope at times. "You do not get to live your life without losing hope altogether now and then," Bessey declares.⁴ She grieves the loss of her more optimistic self at times, and yet, she insists:

³ Bessey

⁴ Bessey

I am stubbornly hopeful about small things now. About soup kitchens and newspaper delivery guys and food banks and school fundraisers and knowing your neighbors and writing out Bible verses to stick on the mirrors. About shelter drop-offs of coats and meals for mothers you don't know and donations to maternity centers in Haiti for Christmas and text messages to hold vigil during scary doctor appointments...I won't give up on who I am or what I believe God loves in us, hopes for us, longs for us now.⁵

Do it again, God says to Jeremiah and Baruch. Do the next good and right small thing. Write the words. Pray the prayers. Check in on neighbors. Give and bake and listen and hug and tend. And do it again. And do it again. And again.

The book of Jeremiah spans decades of the prophet's lifetime and ministry, and it is not arranged chronologically. The book as we have it was compiled years afterwards, combining Jeremiah's proclamations mixed with a hefty dose of hindsight, a way to try and make sense of all that happened that led to the occupation of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the Babylonian Exile. The account about Jeremiah, Baruch, and the king occurs just before the conquest by Babylon and the destruction of ancient Jerusalem. The first deportation of Judeans to Babylon happens on Jeremiah's watch, as does the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. With this devastation, the people rightly wonder if God has finally given up on them, if judgment is the last word. And Jeremiah assures them it is not. [Read Jeremiah 31:31-34]

The paraments—the fabric draped on the pulpit and the lectern, as well as mine and Bryan's stoles are white this week, reflecting our observance and celebration of Christ the King Sunday or Reign

⁵ Bessey. Here is the link to the organization in Haiti she refers to: <https://www.heartlinehaiti.org/>. And our congregation has a partnership with our friends in Bayonnais as well: <https://friendsempoweringhaiti.org/>.

of Christ Sunday. This celebration is just under a century old, although its roots are much older. As you may recall, early on in 1 Samuel, the people beg God for a king like their neighbors have, and God tries to convince them, through the words of Samuel, that they already have the greatest King in God and that having a human king is a bad idea. A human king, God tells them, will take and take and take. He will take their children to be soldiers and servants. He will take the best of the peoples' fields and vineyards to share with his cronies, and the people, God warns, will wind up enslaved to the king's whims.⁶

Again, these words are written after the fact, trying to make sense of where it all went wrong. As we now know from spending a fair amount of time with multiple kings and prophets, God relents and gives the people the king they are pining for, and the rest—as my dad would say—is history. For one shining moment, everything looks golden once David is on the throne, and then the golden moment begins to unravel in spectacularly devastating fashion.

I have often downplayed the observance of Christ the King Sunday as redundant. Of course Christ is our King. And yet, we humans have a way of lavishing our deepest trust and highest hopes on rulers with feet of clay, over and over and over again. In 1925, in response to assertions by human rulers around the world that their authority stood above the authority Christ, Pope Pius XI instituted this observance as a way of reminding the church universal of the undeniable authority of Christ **THE** King:

⁶ 1 Samuel 8

As Pope Pius and other faithful Christians began to see the respect and reverence for Christ's authority diminishing, this feast was put in place to reaffirm and refocus faith and respect in the kingship of Jesus.⁷

Christ is not an everyday, run-of-the mill king seated on a gilded throne wearing a fancy crown. Christ our King is the one who walks among us as one of us, tending to the poor, challenging earthly authorities, and pressing—always pressing—God's determined agenda of love, justice, mercy, and grace. This pressing, this unwavering insistence on the reign of love, justice, mercy, and grace winds up getting him crucified on the Roman Empire's cross. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is the same determinedly faithful God who meets us in every Egypt and comforts us in every Exile. This King does not rip the promise to shreds and toss it in the flames even when his children do. Instead, the God who comes to us as a vulnerable infant is the very same God who stoops here to assume the role of a lowly scribe. Now and then and at every twist and turn along the way, the astoundingly great good news is that this God, our God remains determined to be in relationship with the people, ALL the people. So determined in fact, that God—the stubbornly faithful and ever-creative Lord of all, our only true King—does the humble and often heart-breaking work of a scribe, writing a new covenant on fickle, tender oh-so-human hearts, and writing it again, and again, word by word, heart by heart. All is not lost, because God will not let all be lost, ever. This, dear ones, is no small thing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/religious-observances/why-christians-celebrate-christ-the-king-sunday.aspx>