

September 21, 2003
Pentecost 15

"A Visit to the Dump"

JEREMIAH 19:1-15

T*his is what the LORD says: "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests ² and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, ³ and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. ⁴ For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. ⁵ They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal-- something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. ⁶ So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. ⁷ "In this place I will ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, at the hands of those who seek their lives, and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. ⁸ I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. ⁹ I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh during the stress of the siege imposed on them by the enemies who seek their lives.' ¹⁰ "Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, ¹¹ and say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. ¹² This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the LORD. I will make this city like Topheth. ¹³ The houses in Jerusalem and those of the kings of Judah will be defiled like this place, Topheth-- all the houses where they burned incense on the roofs to all the starry hosts and poured out drink offerings to other gods.'" ¹⁴ Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the LORD's temple and said to all the people, ¹⁵ "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.'"*

When I was a child I enjoyed going with my father to the family dump. The family dump was a hole on my uncle's farm, a place where gravel had been dug out of the ground and used for a road. There were no plastic containers at that time, but there were lots of glass bottles and jars. We enjoyed heaving the bottles and jars onto the large stones at the bottom of the dump and watch them break into thousands of pieces. Even my dad seemed to enjoy throwing a glass jug or two on the rocks below.

A visit to the dump, that's what we are going to be doing today with the prophet Jeremiah. We are going to watch him gather a group of people around him and raise a clay jug above

his head and send it crashing into the rocks at the dump outside of the walls of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom. The smashing of that clay jug was intended to symbolize the judgment that was coming to the city of Jerusalem. It also pictured the judgment that will someday come to the world in which we are living. Are you ready to take another walk with Jeremiah? Are you ready to walk with him, not to the front gates of the city of Jerusalem, but the back gate, the Potsherd Gate, also called the Dung Gate, that leads to the city dump?

1) The smell

As we go through the back gate to the city, what catches our attention immediately is the smell, the smell of awful things, rotting things, dead things, coming up from the dump in the valley of Hinnom. Jeremiah was told by the Lord to make that trip to the dump. But before he walked to the dump the Lord said, "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests and go out to the Valley of Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate." It's a strange sight is it not? Jeremiah carries a clay jar in his arms, followed by the elders of the people and the elders of the priests. He leads them through the Potsherd Gate to the foul smelling dump.

With the smell of the dump in their noses, the prophet tells these leaders of the people about something far more odorous and far more odious to the Lord God. It was the stinking smell of idolatry that was rising up from the Valley of Hinnom, not too far away from the garbage dump. The Lord told Jeremiah to point out where the odor was coming from with these words.

"Hear the Word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord the God of Israel says, I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers, nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent."

There was foul smell rising from the Valley of Hinnom and it was not just the odor coming from the dump. It was the smell of sacrifice, heathen sacrifices to false gods that were being offered in the ancient groves of trees in the deep valley. In Santa Barbara there is a street called Cathedral Oaks. It received its name from the large oak trees in the area that were used for outdoor revival services at the turn of the century. The valley of Hinnom had its ancient groves, a wonderful place for pilgrims to rest who came to the temple to worship the Lord. That beautiful ravine and valley took on the odor of sacrifices to gods like Baal and Molech. There was even the smell of human flesh burning, the screams of little children, the innocents being thrown into the fire as sacrifices to these hideous false gods.

The Lord could no longer stand the stench of idol sacrifices and people sacrificing their sons to the god Baal, and the women who gave their bodies to men under the spreading trees as part of the worship of Baal their fertility god. These people were so bad because they worshipped the Lord in the morning in the temple on Mount Zion, and in the evening they went down into the cool ravine of the Valley of Hinnom and worshipped false gods.

The stench that came up from that valley was too much for a holy and righteous God. Through the prophet Jeremiah he issues the warning, "So beware, the days are coming when people will not longer call this place Topheth which means burning, or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of slaughter." The bodies of the slain in Jerusalem would be dumped into this valley drawing birds of prey from miles around. The warnings that the prophet Jeremiah gave regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians would all come true.

An odor, that's what our God must smell in these last days as people give themselves over to the worship of things more than the worship of true God. And in their lust and desire to have things their way, they will even offer their innocent child on the altar of success and material prosperity. They found the body of Lacy Peterson and her unborn child floating the San Francisco Bay. What about all the other babies that were destroyed in the wombs of their mothers? Are they not crying out for judgment from a holy and righteous God, just as the screams of infants in the Valley of Hinnom called out for God's judgment.

It is easy to smell the stench from the Valley of Hinnom, or smell the rot and decay of the people prior to the great world flood, or those living in Sodom and Gomorrah. What about your life and mine, dear friends? In the words of the gospel lesson for today Jesus said, "For from within, out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean." Remember the words from MacBeth, "Something is rotten in Denmark" referring to the secret murder that had been committed. We all have our secrets, secret sins that shame hell itself, and rise as something deserving of God's eternal wrath and punishment.

But now your life has been changed, changed completely. Jesus has washed you clean, and your life is now a sweet smelling sacrifice to the Lord. The Heavenly Father only smells the perfect sacrifice and perfect life that his Son lived, and that makes us acceptable to our God in this life and for all eternity. When we die, and when we live, the sweetest smell comes to our God through Jesus.

Maybe I can illustrate this more clearly this morning with an example from ranching and farming. If a cow gives birth to a calf, and then cannot nurse that calf because of illness or even death, it would seem logical to simply have the calf nurse from another cow that just recently had a calf. The problem is that the cow will not let another calf nurse her. She smells the calf and will not only bump it away, but even hurt it. However, if her own calf is nursing, she will allow another calf to nurse on the other side. Our heavenly Father was pleased with the perfect life his Son lived and pleased with the death he died. He proved this by raising him from the dead. On the basis of who Jesus is and what he has done, your position has changed from being no different than the people sacrificing in the Valley of Hinnom, to people who are loved by God in this life for all eternity.

2) The sound of the crash

Let's change our senses from the sense of smell to the sense of hearing. We have stood next to Jeremiah and smelled the dump and the sin that came from that deep valley. And now we watch as Jeremiah takes the clay jar he has carried it with him and throws it over

the cliff to the rocks below. The Lord told Jeremiah, "Break the jar while those who go with you are watching and say to them, 'This is what the Lord almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired.'" The also relayed this message from Lord (15) "Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were a stiff necked people and would not listen to my words."

The sound of that jar crashing to the ground and breaking into hundreds of pieces preaches a powerful sermon to us this morning. The world in which we are living will be smashed and destroyed. The collapse and destruction of the trade towers on 9-11 is a tiny little glimpse of what will happen to our world on judgment day. If the Lord returns on this day, and wouldn't it be a blessing to us if he did, then there will be loud shout of an archangel, and the blast of a trumpet, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we will follow after them and meet the Lord in the air. Immediately and almost simultaneously the world in which we live will be destroyed not smashed to pieces but burnt with fire. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

Oh, before we leave the dump this morning, we need to make one more point that ties this all together. The dump outside the walls of Jerusalem often caught fire and burnt. In fact because of all the debris in the dump, it just kept burning and burning and burning. In the New Testament the word used for "hell" used by Jesus is "gehenna" an Aramaic name for the Valley of Hinnom. The constantly burning fires of that dump were a reminder that fires of hell are eternal. Jesus pleaded with people to believe in him to be spared from the judgment to come. He warned them and told them to repent, just as Jeremiah warned the people of Jerusalem about the impending conquest from the Babylonians.

Jeremiah had a job to do, and some days he really got discouraged. Read the next chapter and hear him say he wished he had never been born. We have a job to do similar to Jeremiah. Our job is to warn people about the judgment to come, and plead with them to find peace and safety in Jesus. That's what we learn from this visit to the dump. Amen.