

September 9, 2012
Pentecost 15

"Visiting a Dump Site with a Clay Jar"

JEREMIAH 19:1-6 AND 10-13

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. 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.'"*

Last week we saw our friend Jeremiah visiting the potter's house. He watched the potter take a lump of clay and turn it into a clay pot. Today we see Jeremiah visiting the potter's house again. This time he is purchasing a clay jar that he will throw down into the Valley of Hinnom, outside the walls of Jerusalem. He invites the elders of the city to see and hear the clay jar break into pieces, symbolic of what will happen to Jerusalem if the people do not turn away from worshipping idols and return to the Lord.

As I read through these verses this week and studied them, I thought of a time my father took us along to the dump that was on my uncle's farm. It was a hole in the ground left over from excavating some gravel, maybe only fifteen feet deep and 30 feet across. In those days almost everything came in glass jars and bottles. We enjoyed throwing the glass jars and bottles against the rocks at the bottom and hearing them crash with a loud sound.

Today we invite you to stand next to your friend Jeremiah as he lifts up the clay jar and sends it crashing to the rocks below. Listen as Jeremiah describes what will happen to Jerusalem and then be reminded of what will happen someday to the world in which we are living.

The dump

The Lord told Jeremiah to buy a clay jar from the potter. "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests and go to the Valley of Ben Hinnom near the entrance of the potsherd gate." In those days clay jars were everywhere. People used them to store their food and water and wine and olive oil. If you dropped one of these jars it would easily break especially if it was dropped on hard rocky ground.

Jeremiah was told by the Lord to take the elders of the people with him to the Potsherd Gate overlooking the Valley of Ben Hinnom. The potsherd gate was a dump site where people dumped off their pieces of broken pottery. Perhaps it was also a place where children could throw broken clay jars and hear them hit the ground and see them shatter to pieces. Jeremiah is not an older man who enjoyed breaking clay jars with other older men. The Lord told him to do this to help these people understand the terrible destruction coming to Jerusalem. God's chosen people were worshipping God in the morning and worshipping Baal in the evening.

Here is what Jeremiah told the elders of the people as he held the clay jar in his hands. "Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty says: Listen 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 for foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah even knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent."

As Jeremiah speaks, he is looking out across the Valley of Ben Hinnom, also called the Valley of Topheth. This is the valley beneath the walls of Jerusalem where God's chosen people set up altars for the worship of Baal. It was also in this valley that some of them sacrificed their own children to gods with names like Baal, Molech and Chemosh. Here is how this horrible practice is described by the Lord in Jeremiah 7: "The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire." It is hard to imagine that these people would set up idols to Baal in the very temple of the Lord. It is hard to imagine that they would sacrifice their children to foreign gods beneath the very walls of Jerusalem.

There are certain places in the world which have become synonymous with wickedness and violence. Mention the name Auschwitz and you think immediately of the Jews who were killed in WW2. Mention Ground Zero in New York City and immediately you think of jet airplanes laden with fuel flying into the World Trade Center. When the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 President Roosevelt said that day would go down in infamy. So it was with the Valley of Hinnom. It became a place of infamy because of Baal worship and the sacrifice of children that took place there. God's people had totally forsaken the Lord, but the Lord had not forsaken them. He sent Jeremiah to lead them to repentance.

I am thankful that we are living at a time when people don't sacrifice their children to idols of wood and stone. Many of us here this morning can trace our ancestry back to people who worshipped false gods with names like Ties from which we get the name for Tuesday, Woden for Wednesday, Thor for Thursday, and Frige for Friday. Worship of these gods also included the sacrifice of children as evidenced by a mummified body that was recently discovered remarkably preserved in a peat bog. Our beloved land of America does not have places where parents sacrifice their children to some strange god. But we do have people who are willing to destroy the life of child in the womb for the sake of the god of convenience. The Lord wants all people to come to repentance and turn back to him before it is too late and the end comes.

The clay jar

Let's go back to our friend Jeremiah and stand next to him as he stands over the Valley of Hinnom. He is holding the clay jar in his hands. The Lord tells him, "Then 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. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.'" The Lord says he will make the city of Jerusalem like this Valley of Topheth which was later turned into a garbage dump.

The last chapter of Jeremiah gives us description of what happened to Jerusalem 600 years before Jesus was born. "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. They camped outside the city and built siege works all around it." For two years they surrounded the city. The people had no food to eat. They broke through the walls and destroyed the city, the walls and temple of the Lord. Thousands of people were taken away as slaves to the land of Babylon. Many died and were buried in the Valley of Ben Hinnom which also become known as the Valley of Slaughter.

History did repeat itself after the time of Jesus. Jesus warned the people of Jerusalem of another enemy that would surround the city. As Jesus carried his cross to Calvary, the women of Jerusalem wept for him. He told them, "Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.'" Jesus warned that prophecy in Daniel about the "abomination that causes desolation" standing in the holy place. In 70 AD the Romans under Titus broke through the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the city and magnificent temple built by King Herod. They proudly planted the Roman Eagle in the temple of the Lord. Today the site of God's holy temple in Jerusalem is now the Muslim holy place called the Dome of the Rock.

As you see Jeremiah lift up the clay pot and dash into the dump in the Valley of Hinnom, think of how the city of Jerusalem has been conquered and destroyed multiple times. Even today Iranian ayatollahs vow to wipe Israel from the face of the earth. We cannot begin to imagine the destruction that will be unleashed if Israel and Iran go to war with nuclear weapons.

As we stand next to Jeremiah and listen to the Lord announce his destruction on Jerusalem, we think of the Lord's words about the destruction that will take place on the last day. 2

Peter 3 tells us, "By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." But then it goes on to say, "the Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." What patience the Lord showed to his people who were worshipping Baal and other gods. He sent Jeremiah with numerous messages to call them to repentance. He pleaded with them to come back to his love for them. What patience the Lord shows with us as he continually brings us back to Jesus for all the times we sinned and failed to put him first in our lives.

It is a horrible thing to also look at the idolatry that exists in the human heart. Here is what the Lord says about the human heart in Jeremiah 17, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Jesus said of the human heart, "For from within, out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All of these evils come from inside and make a man unclean." Martin Luther said the human heart is an idol factory.

We don't want to end this visit to the dump by having you only think of the terrible sacrifices in the Valley of Hinnom that deserved God's full judgment. We want to remember the great sacrifice that our God made for us when he gave us the gift of his Son. Every animal that was sacrificed in Jerusalem, pointed to the sacrifice that Jesus would make at the cross for us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." 1 John 2 says He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." When Jesus died, he gave his life as a sacrifice for the sin of the world, even those sins which God's people did at the time of Jeremiah. "Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." May the Lord grant us his Holy Spirit to make us bold to confess our faith as Jeremiah once did! Amen.