

I

When I was a seminary student, I served an internship at the Conyers Presbyterian Church in Rockdale County. The church has a beautiful, historic sanctuary, and a large bible adorns the pulpit, much like this one adorns ours.

One day, a longtime member related a story to me about a former pastor who had served the church long ago. It seems that one Sunday, when it was time for the sermon, the pastor closed the pulpit bible, set it upon the floor next to the pulpit, and then he proceeded to preach his entire sermon *while literally standing on the bible!*

I asked the storyteller if he could remember any of the content of that sermon, and he said, “No, all I can recall is that old preacher *standing* on that bible!”

II

The bible still occupies a place of importance in our national consciousness. It remains the best-selling book of all time. Copies can be found in hotel and hospital rooms from coast to coast. And since the days of George Washington, on Inauguration Day, Presidents have taken the oath of office while placing a hand on the bible.

But our story today paints quite a different picture. In our story today, the King of Judah is not standing on the bible. He’s not taking an oath of office with his hand upon it. He’s not diligently and faithfully searching the

Word of God for inspiration and guidance.

No, in our story for today, as the Word of God is read aloud before him, the king takes out a knife, cuts it to ribbons, and then throws the scraps into the fire!

III

It’s 605 years before the birth of Christ, and world superpowers continue to fight for political, economic, and military control of the Land of Promise. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has fallen to the Assyrian Empire, and the people of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom have either died off or been assimilated into the Assyrian regime, never to be heard from again. But in the meantime, the Assyrians have been defeated by the Babylonians, and now the Egyptians and Babylonians are locked in a struggle for dominance in the region, with the two remaining tribes of Israel – Judah and Benjamin, caught in the middle.

Judah is ruled from the capital city of Jerusalem by a king named Jehoiaikim. Jehoiakim is more interested in preserving his own power, lining his own pockets, and saving his own skin than anything else, so he cozies up to both the Egyptians and the Babylonians, depending on which foreign empire seems to have the upper hand at the moment. Jehoiakim taxes the people of God heavily and even takes furnishings out of the Temple in order to pay tribute to foreign kings. His administration is not at all concerned

about justice or care of the poor and outcast in the Land of Promise, and the king Jehoiakim pays only the barest of lip service to the worship of God.

As we've been reading through the prophets in recent weeks, we've noted that the basic job description of a prophet is to call people back to following God's ways when they've gone astray. In this case, God sends a prophet named Jeremiah to warn Judah that they have strayed from the path of God and to admonish them to turn back to following God's ways before it's too late. But Jeohaikim doesn't listen, and he has Jeremiah ejected from the Temple. Nevertheless, Jeremiah continues to serve as God's prophet in Judah, with his friend Baruch serving as his mouthpiece.

So now listen for a Word from God from the prophet Jeremiah, selected verses from chapter 36.

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. ³ It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

⁴ Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to

him. ⁵ And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, "I am prevented from entering the house of the LORD; ⁶ so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in the LORD's house you shall read the words of the LORD from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the people of Judah who come up from their towns. ⁷ It may be that their plea will come before the LORD, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that the LORD has pronounced against this people." ⁸ And Baruch son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the LORD in the LORD's house.

²¹ Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary; and Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. ²² Now the king was sitting in his winter apartment (it was the ninth month), and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. ²³ As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king^[a] would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier.

²⁷ Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ²⁸ Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first

scroll, which King Jehoiakim of Judah has burned.

It's quite a picture, isn't it? The King of Judah, hunkered down in his winter quarters, sitting next to the blazing fire, cutting up the scroll piece by piece and tossing it into the fire, while his people suffer and the foreign armies threaten at the gates. It's a picture of failure – failure of leadership. Failure of obedience. And most of all, failure of faith.

But did you notice the last bit of the story? The Word of the Lord came again to Jeremiah, and God said, "Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll." In other words, God said, "Write it again."

God's Word will not be deterred by failed kings. God's Word will not be deterred by the designs of foreign adversaries. Though the seas may roar, though the mountains may fall, though the nations may rage, the Word of the Lord will not be stopped. "Write it again," said God, and Jeremiah did.

IV

And here's the gospel news, my friend. I know that the world seems like it's spinning out of control right now. I know that the news and your social media feeds are full of stories about the designs and schemes of people in high places. I know all kinds of people are saying all kinds of things about God's Word and God's will and making all kinds of scary predictions about the

future. I know it seems like basic things like kindness and empathy and patience and gentleness and self-control are scarce as hen's teeth these days. I know it seems like the powers that be in this world are taking the basic biblical commands to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God and just shredding them to pieces and burning them in their blazing fireplaces.

But the Word of the Lord will not be stopped, my friend. It won't be stopped by kings. It won't be stopped by empires. It won't be stopped by anything or anyone.

Because, my friend, every time you do justice, every time you show kindness, every time you make an effort to walk humbly with your God, you write the scroll again.

Every time you refuse to meet hatred with hatred, every time you do the hard work of forgiveness, every time you practice true thanksgiving and gratitude, you write the scroll again.

Every time you lower yourself so that someone else might rise, every time you use some of your privilege to bring to the center a voice that has been left on the margins, every time you make a conscious choice to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus, come what may, you write the scroll again, and again, and again.

V

And here's the good news. You aren't alone, and you don't have to write the scroll by yourself. God has placed us

together into this thing we call the church, and God has knit us together in this place called the First Presbyterian Church of Athens.

And God has sent us a king. But this king does not rule with scepter and spear. He rules with a towel and a washbasin. This king does not rule by imperial decree with an iron rod, but by an invitation to come and follow him, for his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. This king does not deal with us according to our sins, but according to the measure of his steadfast love.

His name is Jesus. On the day he was crucified, above his cross, Pontius Pilate wrote "The King of the Jews." He wrote it in three languages, so that there would be no doubt about what happens to those who would challenge the powers and principalities of this fallen world.

But the Word of God cannot be silenced. And three days later, the world was put on notice that not even the grave can contain the Word of God.

Jesus is our king. Crucified. Buried. And risen.

And every time we listen to his voice, every time we follow him, every time we refuse to give into fear, every time we look into the face of a stranger and search it for the very image of God, every time we give so much as a cup of cold water to someone in need, we are writing the scroll again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.