



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 8A, JULY 2, 2023
JEREMIAH 28:5-9; PSALM 89:1-4, 15-18; ROMANS 6:12-23; MATTHEW 10:40-42

THREE TASKS



Marc Chagall, *The Prophet Jeremiah*

About a month ago, I got a new email address for my financial advisory work, and ever since then I've been intrigued by spam. Not the canned meat. The unsolicited junk emails. Somehow this change in email address released a torrent of spam with several consistent themes.

First -- money. You've won money, you've inherited money, you can earn more money, you can borrow money for free. Second -- status. You're invited to join Who's Who, you're invited to an elite political gathering (for money), you're invited to an exclusive resort (for more money.) And third -- power through

information. You must read this blog, this sub stack, follow this op-ed writer, this Instagram page, to know what others are thinking. And when you know what everyone else is thinking, then you know what to think, too.

Most of these emails are designed to look like legitimate communication, and because they're scattered among emails from my clients and team, I end up reading at least the subject line if not a couple sentences. I've realized that taken all together, they are a mirror of a prevailing narrative in our culture. The one that says, to be successful, safe, and highly esteemed, you must have wealth, status, and power over others. This is a false narrative, of course, but it has thrived in dominant cultures for millennia and is fully operative in our own society today.

Which is why when I studied the first reading today, I felt a real kinship with the 6th C BCE prophet Jeremiah. He and Hananiah are competing prophets in Jerusalem at a crucial time. The Babylonians have invaded the city and sent the king into exile, leaving the people helpless and afraid.

As they wonder what to do, Jeremiah steps up and declares, "Judah you've lost your protected status because you have broken your covenant with YHWH. You worship false gods and allow the corrupt elite to enrich themselves while ignoring the suffering of others. Therefore,

Jeremiah says, "You *will* be conquered by the Babylonians, and you will only survive if you submit and enter your own time of exile."

You can imagine this news does not make Jeremiah popular. He is vilified and imprisoned, but he continues to speak the truth to people who only want good news. Enter Hananiah, a prophet who knows how to deliver what people want. He says, "No worries, Judah will prevail, all will be restored, no need to change anything." The reading today is Jeremiah's response to Hananiah, and it is pure sarcasm.

"Amen! May God help us and may all be well. But remember – the prophets who came before us proclaimed that only strife comes from breaking our covenant with YHWH. If you prophecy peace *without reconciliation*, I'll believe God sent you when we see peace ourselves."¹ Jeremiah calls out his culture's illusion of comfort and peace at a time when the powerful are mocking God, the powerless are suffering, and their enemy is at their doorstep, ready to conquer.

Walter Brueggemann writes about the three tasks of the Biblical prophets – ancient and modern -- and this insistence on facing reality is the first one. Living among people convinced of their chosenness, the prophets expose that narrative by shining a light on the reality of the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, 15.

lived world, a reality that in no way conforms to the dominant narrative.

Prophets name the religious hypocrisy, injustice, and greed that lie underneath the phony reassurances of well-being, and they give urgency to the needs of the marginalized and the vulnerable. Jeremiah says, “*The wicked have grown fat and sleek, they do not judge the cause of the orphan with justice, and they do not defend the right of the needy.*”² A prophet gives an unrelenting wake-up call: “Look here at the truth of our situation! It’s not good and it’s going to get worse if you ignore it!”

Some listeners do wake up, but others can’t bear the bad news, so they hit the snooze button of denial. And that’s where a prophet’s second task comes in. They counter this denial with the public practice of grief – grief that details what is lost and vividly describes the pain, bewilderment, and rage that comes with full understanding of the loss. Jeremiah cries, “*My anguish . . . I writhe in pain! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent. . . Disaster overtakes disaster; the whole land is laid waste.*”³ This is lament, where a prophet uses their skills, courage, and force of presence to get their community to fully experience their loss.⁴

And when the people do finally embrace their sorrow, an acute sense of vulnerability and

abandonment can set in. “Where is God in all this death and destruction?” they wonder. This is when a prophet is most needed. Their third task amid this despair is to declare and embody hope for a resilient future held securely in God’s grasp.⁵ Jeremiah proclaims, “*This is the word of the Lord. Do not fear nor be panicked, Israel. For I am about to rescue you from afar and once more you shall be quiet and tranquil. Do not fear, for I am with you.*”⁶

A prophet articulates hope not based on an imagined better future or because of their confidence in the skill or intelligence of humanity. A prophet names hope based on the power and faithfulness of God – right now.

Reality, grief and hope -- those are the three tasks of the prophet. In the gospel today, Jesus connects discipleship with welcoming prophets and those who act in love and service. So, who are the prophets today? Who are the ones who challenge our dominant narrative about wealth and status, and reground us in the truth of relationship and love of God and neighbor as the foundation of a safe and abundant life? Prophets don’t have to be religious or famous. For me, I think of the Rev. William Barber, co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign, Maria Ressa, co-founder of Rappler, and the musician Bruce Springsteen.

But, I’m not sure all prophets are human. What about creation? Consider the health of our air

² Jeremiah 5:28.

³ Jeremiah 4:19-20.

⁴ Ibid, 63.

⁵ Ibid, 101.

⁶ Jeremiah 46:27 (Robert Alter trans.)

and water, the extreme weather resulting in wildfires and floods. Maybe this is Earth's wake-up call to the reality of hyper-consumption and economic inequity. And even if we deny it, Earth points us to what is lost and urges us to grieve: for climate refugees, for declining salmon populations, for disappearing glaciers.

And when the pain of it all tempts us to despair, Earth shows reasons to hope. Like during the pandemic, when human activity was constrained, we saw the return of clean air to polluted cities and animals to their natural habitats. And each day, we see Earth's beauty and resilience so clearly reflect the creativity and power of God. Earth is a prophet, too.

Jeremiah 28:5-9 [*The prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."*]

Matthew 10:40-42 [*Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*]

If we are to follow Jesus, we must take the prophet's vocation seriously. While there are some individuals who have the gifts, courage and presence of Jeremiah, I wonder if this vocation of reality, grief, and hope is best lived in community. Because to see the full contours of reality, to endure the rawness of anguished lament, and to draw from the deep wells of God's abiding presence, we need the gifts of everyone – scientists, artists, teachers, healers, and wisdom-bearers of all ages.

Where will you take your place in this holy vocation?



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