

GOD'S WORD IN TIMES OF CRISIS

An Exposition of Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah is in some ways a very difficult book, and it contains an even more difficult message. On the other hand its message is clear, perhaps all too clear, damningly clear. The Prophet Jeremiah was chosen and impelled, through more than 40 years of controversy, threats, torture, and at times overwhelming inner agony, to proclaim God's word as his people faced the deepest crisis of their entire history. Through his faithfulness God's word endured, and his people survived what, humanly speaking, should have been their annihilation.

Let's see what we can learn from Jeremiah's experience.

JEREMIAH'S CALL (AND OURS): TO PROCLAIM GOD'S WORD

The Lord's word came to Jeremiah saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

These are powerful words: formed, knew, consecrated, appointed. Jeremiah's sovereign Lord told him that he was being set apart for a divine mission, to be a prophet not only to his little home town of Anathoth, not just to the great city of Jerusalem, but to the nations. So Jeremiah trembled; he made excuses; he tried to say no. But the Lord set aside his excuses and reinforced his call:

God said, "Whatever I command you you shall speak." God touched Jeremiah's mouth and said, "I have put my words in your mouth. I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms."

Then the Lord explained to Jeremiah the nature of his calling: first, to pluck up, break down, destroy, and overthrow; second, to build and to plant. Clearly Jeremiah had to denounce the apostasy of his people. As time went on and the people, their rulers, and even their religious leaders persisted in their evil ways, Jeremiah's call to repentance became a deep lamentation for the terrible destruction that was approaching. But Jeremiah was also called to announce God's sovereign rule, to remind Judah that God created this people by liberating them from Egypt and bringing them through the wilderness to the promised land. And in the face of cataclysmic defeat and exile Jeremiah announced a future return, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and -- one day -- a New Covenant written in the hearts of God's people.

Jeremiah could only begin to fulfill this calling because he knew it came from God and because God promised to accompany him and protect him. In verse 8 the Lord says to Jeremiah, "Be not afraid...for I am with you to deliver you." And at the end of Chapter 1, "Behold, I make you [Jeremiah] a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you."

Presbyterians feel a particular affinity to Jeremiah because of our tradition's primary focus on the sovereignty of God. We affirm that God rules over all of life

and that all our life is to be given in service to God, as a divine vocation, by God's grace -- which is not to fall into the logical traps of predestination. By the same token Presbyterians feel compelled to speak out against evil wherever it is found, because God's word stands above all human words. This may not be easy; it may be very unpopular; in some situations it means to risk life itself. So we, like Jeremiah, must be prophets to our nation and to all nations. Separation of church and state means, to us, not silence but the right, the obligation, to speak to the state on every issue that affects human wellbeing and divine sovereignty.

So our task today is to proclaim God's word, to confront and denounce evil, to build and announce God's reign at the personal, national, and global levels. The General Assembly of our church has over the years demonstrated extraordinary leadership in this sense, speaking out and taking biblically based positions on issues that are complex, controversial, and often unpopular. It seems, however, that this prophetic stance is far more difficult to maintain at the local congregational level. Perhaps we have failed to inculcate that higher loyalty, to teach that no sphere of life is beyond the reach of God's calling, to explain that to denounce evil and error is neither harmful nor disloyal to one's community or nation; on the contrary, this is what every state needs.

In our nation and world and even in our faith communities we are likely to face criticism and opposition. In Central America, as you well know, dozens of priests, scores of pastors, hundreds of catechists, and thousands of members of Christian base communities have made their witness for truth and justice and peace and lost their lives. Yet God's promise remains: "I am with you to deliver you."

JEREMIAH'S CRISIS (AND OURS): GLOBAL, NATIONAL, PERSONAL

Leafing through the book of Jeremiah, one quickly sees that it is concerned not only with the spiritual wellbeing of Judah but also with the clash of empires and threats to national security. The opening verses of Chapter 1 and the final chapter provide a precise historical context for our understanding of Jeremiah's message, and this can be complemented by turning to relevant portions of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles.

During that period of world history the Fertile Crescent was being pulled in three directions by three major empires: Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt. You will recall that tiny Judah occupied a portion of the main travel and trade routes between the Nile valley to the Southwest and the Euphrates and Tigris valleys to the Northeast. In fact, with the Mediterranean Sea to the West and the Arabian Desert to the East, Judah was inevitably at the mercy of the superpowers whenever they engaged in war games.

According to Jeremiah 1:1-3 Jeremiah's prophetic ministry covered the last 40 years of Judah's life as a nation, ending with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The ascendancy of Assyria was waning, and its capital city, Nineveh, fell to Babylonia in 612 B.C. This triggered the move by Egypt to pick up pieces of the fallen giant's empire. Pharaoh Neco led his armies through Judah, killing King Josiah and defeating his forces at Megiddo in 609 B.C. This led to the history-making battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., far to the North, between Egypt and Babylonia. The latter's victory, which determined the future course of history, was followed by successive Babylonian attacks on Judah.

It was in this context of global struggle and national crisis that God called Jeremiah to denounce his people's three-dimensional sins and call them to repentance.

Judah was guilty of creating and trusting in false political alliances (instead of trusting in Jahve), of adopting and worshiping the false gods of her neighbors (betraying the true God of their fathers and mothers), and even of presuming on God's protection by maintaining Temple worship while abandoning God's laws of justice and concern for the powerless. The gravity of Judah's apostasy was underlined by reminding her people that Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had already been destroyed, led captive, and virtually erased from history in 722 B.C., less than 100 years before Jeremiah began his ministry.

If Jeremiah were here today, he would analyze the clash of empires during the 20th Century. The waning British Empire was eclipsed by the rise and fall of the Third Reich in the West and of Imperialist Japan in the East, followed by global polarization between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. As in his own time, Jeremiah would today hear many speak of peace and prosperity, but he would no doubt note that the superpowers, each trying to defend and extend its sphere of influence in the name of high principles, have been engaged in seemingly endless surrogate wars through overt and covert interventions throughout the Third World. He would help us to see and to face the massive threats to life on our planet today, and call us to repentance for the actual destruction of life, such as the 50,000 people who die daily in our world for lack of sufficient food.

If today's Jeremiah were a Central American, he would have to denounce the 1954 coup in Guatemala, planned and directed by the great northern empire, which reinstated military dictatorship and has during the last 35 years left at least 100,000 innocent people dead and 38,000 disappeared in that small nation. He would lament the oppression in El Salvador, which is marked by death squads and torture and which continues to be supported at the rate of \$2 million a day by the great northern empire. And he would not overlook the war against Nicaragua, the military occupation of Honduras, or the economic blockade against Panama, because in each case it is the common people, the vast majority who are poor, especially the women and children, who suffer most.

We do hear Jeremiah's voice today, of course, denouncing the false alliances that perpetuate death and destruction, the false loyalties that appeal to the gods of our time, the false religion that promotes a so-called spiritual salvation while accepting or even supporting a status quo that is inhuman and unconscionable. Our contemporary Jeremiahs not only lament the immense suffering of the peoples of Central America; they bring to bear sharp tools of social and economic analysis of the roots and causes of this suffering as well as powerful biblical and theological judgment on those who are directly and indirectly responsible. They are deeply concerned for the moral and spiritual well-being of our people and our churches in this country, because we are willing or unwilling, aware or indifferent, accomplices in the sins of our nation.

JEREMIAH'S STRUGGLE (AND OURS): TO BE FAITHFUL

The record of Jeremiah's faithfulness is spread across the pages of the book of his prophecies. Read the following portions in light of the historical setting and the calling we have described. The message is clear; the literary figures are very powerful.

DENOUNCING EVIL

Jeremiah 2:4-13
 Jeremiah 2:17-19
 Jeremiah 2:20-22
 Jeremiah 2:32-35
 Jeremiah 3:16-2

CALLING TO REPENTANCE

Jeremiah 3:12-14
 Jeremiah 4:1-4

That this was no easy task can be illustrated by turning to Jeremiah's Temple Sermon. Chapter 26 describes this event as taking place at a time of national celebration, when people came from all over Judah to worship in Jerusalem. God told Jeremiah to stand at the entrance of the Temple and proclaim God's word. Chapter 7 contains a summary of his message that day. Read verses 1 to 15. Again the message is clear and powerful. In response, according to Chapter 26, the priests, the other prophets, and the crowds threatened to kill Jeremiah, accusing him of blasphemy against the Temple and against the Holy City. The disturbance caught the attention of the princes of Judah, who came up to the Temple and heard the arguments of both Jeremiah and his accusers and eventually decided to let him go.

At times Jeremiah's struggle to be faithful led to deep inner anguish, despair bordering on suicide. In Jeremiah 14:11-12 the Lord tells him to stop interceding for the people. In Jeremiah 14:17-18 he faces a besieged city, and in v. 19 he articulates the pitiful plea of a defeated people. In 15:5-6 he speaks the Lord's word of judgment against them. In v. 10 he berates himself as a man of strife and contention. In Chapter 20 he carries this theme further, ending with a cry for vengeance against his enemies. Read v. 7-12.

Even at such a moment the Lord does not abandon Jeremiah but rather calls him to repentance. At this very moment God reiterates Jeremiah's call, using language that echoes his original call. Read 15:19-21. The Lord says, "If you return, Jeremiah, I will restore you...and you shall be as my mouth. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you."

Jeremiah's calling and struggle have been passed on through the prophetic tradition...to Jesus...to Paul...to the church fathers and mothers...to martyrs known and unknown...to the Reformers of the 16th Century and many other reformers...to our own time. It is said that more saints have sealed their witness with their lives in the 20th Century than throughout the previous 2500 years since Jeremiah.

I would like to conclude with the anguishing yet victorious cry of one of our contemporary prophets, a Guatemalan woman, who gives us a poetic and intensely personal rereading of Jeremiah 20:7-12. The title is "Confession." As we hear her witness, let us consider our calling, as disciples of Jesus Christ and members of his body, to proclaim God's word in times of crisis. We who are heirs of the New Covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 are also heirs, individually and corporately, of Jeremiah's prophetic call. So, too, we are heirs to God's promise, incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord, "I am with you to save you and deliver you."

F. Ross Kinsler

Confession

You seduced me, Lord,
and I was seduced.
Your defenseless child's eyes
dug like claws
into my guts.

You appeared to me
in the pregnancy
of that anemic girl
who was impregnated by a soldier
before the still warm blood
of her murdered father.

You grasped my heart firmly
with the outstretched hand
of the old Indian
who has been dying for centuries
without a roof,
without medicines,
without a doctor,
asking for the bread of justice,
at the door of a Locked Church.

You seduced me, Lord.
and I let myself be seduced.
You have conquered me,
you have been stronger than I.

This is why those who were my friends
are retreating in fear
and close their doors to me.
Because each time
I hear your Word
I must cry out:
Violence and ruin
to those who manufacture
orphans,
misery
and death!

How many times
did I wish to close my ears
to your voice,
to harden my heart,
to seal my lips,
to forget forever
the pain of the persecuted,
the helplessness of the outcast,
and the agony of the tortured,
but your pain
was my own
and your love
burned in my heart!

* * * * *

I saw your tears
stream down the eyes of thousands of women
at the funerals of the martyrs,
I heard your command
not to kill
at the final homily
of a pastor
who like you
gave his life for the people;

and you conquered me,
because you continue
to be stronger than I . . .

* * * * *

I have brought
my cause before you,
and I know that you will free
the flesh of the poor
from the hand of the oppressor.
As a brave warrior
you defend the cause
of the persecuted,
and open up paths for us
in the darkness . . .

* * * * *

The thirst for your truth
has made me a pilgrim
from city to city,
until the day your Word
is fulfilled,
and we are reborn
in your Image and Likeness.

Captivate me, Lord.
Till the last of my days,
wring out my heart
with your hands
of a wise old Indian,
so that I will not forget
your Justice
nor cease proclaiming
the urgent need
for humankind
to live in harmony.

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