

“JEREMIAH” A Homily
by Bishop John Thornton
For St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR
Sunday, July 5, 2020 ~ 5th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah was trouble. Oh, God, that man was trouble. Trouble for politicians. Trouble for religious leaders. Trouble for everyone who sucked up to them, as if they were saviors, not the servants of the servants of God. And the trouble he made was in the name of the Lord. He was sure of it. Deep down, they were too. They hated him for it.

(I'm talking about Jeremiah, the prophet, toward the end of the 7th Century B.C., at the beginning of the 6th, during the reigns of Josiah and Zedekiah, right up to the Exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. That was twenty-six or more centuries ago. The whole world has changed since *and* nothing has. There's still this human race, still these wonderful, still these wicked, still these both in the same beings.)

The beautiful people of Judea couldn't have their peace – that is, the lie they had settled in – while there were people like Jeremiah around. They had to be rid of him. They simply got goons to take him, arms and legs, to an abandoned cistern and drop him in. That cistern was wide and it was deep and, at the bottom, it was muck up to Jeremiah's knees; and unless he sprouted wings, he'd rot there, slowly, from hunger and thirst. But Jerusalem would have its “peace.” Luckily, Jeremiah had friends in low places, whose delight was to frustrate authorities. Merry pranksters say. They gathered up some old clothes and a lot of rope; and, on a moonless night, hoisted the half-dead prophet back into the world.

You'd think that Jeremiah would have learned his lesson. Would have shut up. Think again. When the Lord shuts up, I'll shut up, he said, in effect. He went right on prophesying; and the people of Jerusalem went right on hating it – and hating him – and, by extension, hating his “Lord,” who happened to be their Lord too (though, with better things to do, like making money and living richly, they'd put him out of mind).

I'll give an example.

In the 34th chapter of Jeremiah, it's recorded that, during the reign of King Zedekiah, the people emancipated their slaves. Hebrew men and women who had bought and sold other Hebrew men and women just set them free, as an act of obedience to the covenant their ancestors had made. They were so pleased with themselves, so full of righteousness – for a while. But the work wasn't getting done. And they started yapping, The work isn't getting done. Somebody's got to do it. Who's going to do it? Well, we're not! We don't even know how to do it. We've got to have help again. Just don't call

them slaves; call them “the help.” So those same Hebrew men and women enslaved other Hebrew men and women all over again. The work got done. And the enslavers got happy. And Jeremiah got mad.

You hypocrites! The Lord delivered your ancestors from slavery in Egypt. And your ancestors determined – made a sacred covenant – never to enslave other people, buy and sell them as if they were chattel. You profane the name of the Lord. You hypocrites! Don't think you're going to escape judgment. (Not long after, those same beautiful people of Jerusalem were marched off to exile in Babylon and their city leveled.)

In the 7th chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah goes to “the gate of the Lord's house” (the Temple). He addresses the people of Jerusalem:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts...Amend your ways...and let me dwell with you in this place. This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord...For if you truly amend your ways...if you truly act justly...if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place...if you do not go after other gods...then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever.”

“The Temple” is where a holy God waits for enfleshment, waits for the just society, waits for the tender and joyful embrace of all human beings, black, brown, white; so waits for the amendment of our ways.

On June 1st, the President of the United States went to the gate of the Lord's house. It was a church. It was our church. It was St. John's Episcopal Church on Lafayette Square, across from the White House. The President led his Chief of Staff and his Attorney General and his Secretary of Defense and a dozen or so other White House officials – and, oh, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, dressed in fatigues for battle and, yes, Ivanka, the only woman in the troop (and the only one with sense enough to wear a face mask). The President stood in front of the church sign and hoisted a Bible, upside down, in the air and had his picture taken.

(The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was the only one with the grace of humiliation. A week later, he apologized.)

Out of context, it seemed comical, like a scene from a Monte Python film.

But, in context, it was not comical. It was brutal. For that “triumphal entry,” palm branches did not pave the way. The way was cleared with tear gas and pepper spray and flash/bang grenades and rubber bullets, against American citizens who were protesting the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis policemen and who had every right under

our Constitution to do so. But that photo-shoot was of the utmost importance for p.r. and politics; so the protesters had to be dispersed, running away in terror, dousing and mopping their stinging eyes – and weeping the death of decency.

That's the thing about unchecked power. It has no deference; it has no courtesy; it has no respect for boundaries; it has no ethic that restrains behavior and is predictable. It is wild. It is heartless. And it will kill democracy.

The President and his people went to St. John's Episcopal Church uninvited, unannounced, and unwanted, as any President, Republican or Democrat, would be under similar circumstances. No one should stand on that holy ground and proclaim an anti-Gospel: Blessed are the powerful, for they shall dominate the streets. When you stand on holy ground, you stand in stocking feet; you stand softly; you stand quietly; you stand humbly. You're there to encounter God, whose judgments can be terrible, whose love is more terrible yet, as from the cross of Christ. It's the place of transformation, head, heart, gut. The church is not a backdrop, the Bible merely a prop. We trivialize either to our shame and an exile from blessing and peace.

No wonder the Bishop of Washington, D.C., Marianne Budde, and the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, were outraged. For lack of learning, for lack of understanding, for lack of giving a hoot, the White House would allow all of America to think, to believe, that some Episcopalians, in the name of us all, might have endorsed that violation of space and of persons. After all the effort of living up to our Baptismal Covenant, of “seeking justice and peace among all people,” “of respecting the dignity of every human being” over the decades – and at some cost, let me tell you – for the White House to suggest that, for publicity, we could care less about a just society and the worth of every person. No wonder Bishop Budde and Bishop Curry were outraged. No wonder I'm daring this today.

My loves, you may think that I've crossed a line. You may think I'm doing politics. Of course I am. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the ordering of our hearts – and it's about the ordering of our lives wherever we live them, home, neighborhood, city, county, state, nation, world. There's never a place and never a time when that ordering isn't as urgent as a heartbeat and just as necessary.

A month after the murder of George Floyd, the protests still go on. So where are we in all of this? I mean, *who* are we in all of this? In all of this, we're the baptized.

When we were baptized, the priest, with Chrism and the sign of the cross, said to us:

“I bless your eyes, that may see God's image in everyone.”

“I bless your ears, that you may hear the cry of the poor.”

“I bless your lips, that you may speak nothing but the Gospel of Jesus.”

“I bless your hands, that everything you receive and everything you give may be a sacrament.”

“I bless your feet, that you may run to those who need you.”

So we can't turn off the TV and close the drapes and lock the doors and sit in the half-light feeling above it all. We're the baptized. We have to *do* who we are. We have to walk out into the world, to be sages or to be fools, sages in the eyes of some, fools in the eyes of others. We can get hung on what feels like the Cross of Christ – or we can be gifted with that ineffable joy, that stupendous freedom of loving and “not counting the cost.” We have to take our chances.

Piers the Ploughman is a 15th Century poem by an English cleric, likely William Langland. I quote these lines:

“Our joy and our healing, Christ Jesus of Heaven, always pursues us in a poor man's apparel...searching us as we pass with looks of love, and forever seeking to know us by our kindness of heart; and he sees which way we cast our eyes, and whether we love the lords of this earth before the Lord of Heaven.”

Which will it be for us, some lord of this earth or the Lord of Heaven? Which will it be?

+John S. Thornton
St. Martin's Episcopal Church
Lebanon, Oregon
July 5, 2020