

The Remnant and the Branch

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

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Few preachers can claim to have inspired new words. Fewer still want to be accused of preaching a “jeremiad.” The term has been applied to everything from the pious exhortations of seventeenth-century Puritan preachers to rantings of those contemporary moral police who populate the obscure channels of late-night TV or thousand-watt radio stations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “jeremiad” as “a lamentation; a writing or speech in a strain of grief or distress.”

Thus, reading Jeremiah’s “woes,” it’s easy to understand the roots of the noun the prophet inspired. Sadness, anger, distress, fury infuse today’s First Lection: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture...It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.”

The subject of the prophet’s lament are leaders unfaithful to their vocation. The kings forgot that they were called to be shepherds of God’s people. The names of the kings who had forsaken their duties are long forgotten, but it is clear from Jeremiah’s understanding that God has specific expectations for those who possess power. The privilege of power is always accompanied by the responsibility of attending to the people.

None of us in University Church has any sense of what it is like to possess unparalleled power, but almost all of us have power of one kind or another. Whether in the public square, in the workplace, or in the home, we all have interactions every day that involve some form of power over others.

But this text is not finally about our power. It’s about how God wields the ultimate power. The realized eschatology in Jeremiah’s preaching points to God’s final consummation of all things. It is a prophecy that points us to the already and the not-yet of God’s work among us. God will do what human power has failed to do. God will gather the people “and bring them back to their fold” (v. 3).

Walter Brueggemann observes that “Jeremiah stands midway in the history of Israel’s grief. Before him, Amos condemned those in their self-deception who were unable and unwilling to grieve (Amos 6:6). After Jeremiah comes Jesus of Nazareth, who understood grief as the ultimate criticism that had to be addressed against Jerusalem (Matthew 23:27; Luke 19:41). Jeremiah stands midway and speaks the grief of God that Israel finally must share.” Without grief there is no newness.

Arthur Herman has written a comprehensive and penetrating study, *Gandhi and Churchill*, about two leaders who shaped much of the twentieth century. Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu philosopher/holy man/lawyer/religious leader/politician who inspired the modern nation of India and Winston Churchill, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature/supreme orator/prime minister of Great Britain during the

Second World War, ardent believer in the British Empire only met once during their forty years of struggle.

When Gandhi and hundreds of other leaders of the Indian National Congress were imprisoned by the British in 1943 after launching what he called the Quit India movement, the country was wracked by riots, violence, the burning of major buildings, the beatings of prisoners and the imprisonment and death of Gandhi's secretary and best friend, Mahadev Desai, Churchill was confronted by General Jan Christian Smuts, the president of South Africa.

Churchill admired Smuts more than any other leader of the British Dominion, perhaps more than any other living man. They had been opponents in the Boer War; they had been cabinet colleagues during the First World War. They shared many values, including a deep repugnance for Nazism and to see the commonwealth safe and the war ended.

They did not, however, share the same view of Gandhi. Smuts had dealt with the Mahatma first hand. He had felt the impact of his penetrating mind and negotiating skill as well as his passionate single-mindedness. Smuts frankly cautioned Churchill against underestimating Gandhi.

"He is a man of God," the South African president said. "You and I are mundane people. Gandhi has appealed to religious motives. You never have. That is *where you have failed.*"

Churchill brushed the remark off as a joke. "I have made more bishops than anyone since St. Augustine," he said with a grin. But Smuts was not joking.

The confrontation between Churchill and Gandhi was between two different conceptions of life. "One," writes Herman, "rested on secular and humanistic traditions that had been tested by history and centuries of human conflict. The other rested on a vision of spiritual purity in which history and material things (including Gandhi's own body) counted for nothing. Churchill valued human liberty as the product of struggle, as humanity's supreme achievement. Gandhi, by contrast, valued liberty as *God's* supreme achievement. It was humanity's duty to live up to that standard. Without it, Gandhi believed, life was meaningless, including his own.

Jeremiah calls us to recognize the prophetic power of lamentation, the compelling office of uncovering God's grief. The prophet walks in sorrow among the burned-out stumps of Israel's past follies. He laments the false choices of a self-deluded people who realize too late what their decisions have cost them.

There is a story about a man who was shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean and lived alone on a desert island for decades. No passing ship, no low-flying airplane had ever spotted him or found him. Finally, after years of living alone, he was one day rescued by a passing freighter. The crew landed on the island and were amazed that the man had lived so independently and creatively for all those years. He said, "Let me show you around my island."

First, he took them to the house that he had built from washed up planks from wrecked ships, the stones he had laboriously mortared into place, the stove he had made for cooking, the bed he had carved out of native trees.

Then he took them to another building. "This is the church that I built," he declared. "See the hand-carved pews, the cross on top of the roof, the pulpit and the Communion table. I am very proud that I could do this for God."

One of the rescuers then noticed another church on the other side of the island. "Why are there two churches," he asked, "when there is only one person, you, on the island." The man replied, "Oh, I got mad at that first church, so I built another one."

Christ's Church must be open to people like that stranded man, but it must not be dominated by their anger. The church always functions somewhat as a hospital for the wounded, but it is also called by God to be a community in which sacrifice and prophetic ministry and faithful stewardship of our time, talent and money is both preached and practiced.

One of the problems with mainline churches today is that we don't want to talk about money, about sacrifice, about the need to transcend the consumer culture, about the need to teach our children that when they are called to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, they are called by God's grace to make decisions about right and wrong that will some times earn them disdain in their schools and neighborhoods.

Last Monday, President Obama named a new surgeon general of the United States. He passed over two television medical reporters, a Chicago neurologist, an Atlanta epidemiologist and a New York academic to choose a family doctor from a battered town on Alabama's Gulf Coast. A former president of the Alabama Medical Association, and the first African-American woman to be president of a state medical society, Dr. Regina M. Benjamin works in a shrimping town 25 miles south of Mobile, and she had to tell the President twice how to pronounce its name. It is spelled Bayou La Batre, but locals run all three words together and say Baylabatray. President Obama selected her because of her willingness to sacrifice.

When Hurricane George sent five feet of water surging into her clinic in 1998, she made house calls until it was rebuilt. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed the clinic again seven years later, she mortgaged her home to rebuild. And when a fire destroyed the rebuilt clinic the day before it was set to reopen, she sent out appeals across the country for help to build again. The clinic's finances have been so shaky that it has not been able to pay her for years. Bayou La Batre's mayor said, "The clinic owes her over \$300,000."

Regina Benjamin, a devout Christian, exemplifies what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a disciple who moves beyond the quotidian into the miraculous, one who believes that Jesus was serious when he linked the commandment to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength with the command to love others as much as you love yourself.

I think of a character in a Peter De Vries novel who says, 'Deep down, I'm shallow.' And I recall as well Thomas Merton's insight that it is always the individual conscience, as opposed to the mass mind, that reflects the universal conscience of humanity. The mass mind is always shallow. The mass mind is always banal. The mass mind always conforms to this world, because it reflects the mentality of those who have a greater sense of themselves when they are with others than when alone.

Aristotle was right: we should approach the world with wonder, and then with doubt. Most of us, however, begin with doubt, and doubt so atrophies our emotions that we never get to wonder. "The world," Kierkegaard said, "does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder. The greatest miracles in this world take place where people say, 'I don't see anything so miraculous about that.'"

If a sense of wonder can do wonders, so can anger. Not repressed anger—the kind that leads to depression and boredom. So lethal is repressed anger that I pass on to you William Sloane Coffin's good advice: Remember that a thought-murder a day keeps the psychiatrist away. He was drawing a very important line, the line between feelings and behavior. All feelings are valid; all behavior isn't. Remember the words of St. Paul: "Be angry, but do not sin." Jesus never tolerated the intolerable, and neither should we.

Jeremiah's anger points toward the remnant who will be gathered by God and brought home again. And that gathering brings hope, because the Messiah will be raised up as a righteous Branch, and the Messiah shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. "And this is the name by which the Messiah shall be called: God is our righteousness" (v. 6).