

Take this Job and Love It
Rev. Jonathan Morgan
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Jeremiah 4:11-28
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The Book of Jeremiah is a book full of dark prophecies of doom and gloom. Jeremiah is a heartbroken prophet with a heartbreaking message. Namely, that God was so disgusted, and so fed up, with the people of Judah, he was going to teach them a lesson by allowing the hated Babylonians to conquer them—their arch enemy from the North. A message that would have its equivalent today if the Prophet were to tell this community that the Cardinals of the South would defeat our brave Ducks... or that the people of this nation would be taught a very painful lesson at the hands of ISIS.

Frankly, this is not an easy passage to read or contemplate or even preach on to be honest. So, let us prayerfully look into the depth of our faith for some light and hope in the midst of these words.

Jeremiah 4:11-28

“At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: ‘A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse— a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.’ Look! He comes up like clouds, his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles— woe to us, for we are ruined! O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness so that you may be saved. How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you? For a voice declares from Dan and proclaims disaster from Mount Ephraim. ‘Tell the nations, Here they are! Proclaim against Jerusalem, Besiegers come from a distant land; they shout against the cities of Judah.¹⁷ They have closed in around her like watchers of a field, because she has rebelled against me,’ says the Lord. Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart.”

“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet? ‘For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.’ I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.”

Let us pray...

In the heart of our hearts. In the place where we are ourselves. In the space that we protect the most and share the least. We invite you now O Loving One.

Teach us to move with your wisdom, to open the doors that will draw us deeper still, to live in the truth that you desire; let us open the windows wide so that those who pass by will see you looking out.

Let us be people of your love and grace so that more may know you and live into your embrace. We pray this in the name of Jesus who showed us the way. Amen.

SERMON

Have you ever had a job you really hated? Where the money you earned wasn't worth the burden of the effort? Perhaps a job that was impossible to do, carried little or no meaning, or was one tarnished by the presence of an unreasonable boss.

My college days working as a Maintenance Agreement Telephone Salesman for a major department store was a job of that ilk for me. I really hated that job...partially, because I stunk at it. It was not infrequent when a would-be-buyer convinced me there were better ways to spend hard earned money. Truth is... I didn't believe in my product. Plus, there wasn't much in that profession to aspire to either... I still remember the day when Doris, one of the star salespeople, convinced an elderly woman, through numerous tactics of sales built on generating enough fear to overcome logic, to renew the maintenance agreements on her ancient appliances to the tune of almost \$3000. I felt like grabbing the phone and yelling, "Ma'am don't do it! You could buy brand new machines with that money."

Yes, I really hated that job! Maybe you have had similar experiences at some point of our life... maybe its sting is still fresh.

Well, the Prophet Jeremiah didn't exactly love his job either... in fact, I think it would be safe to say he rather despised it! He didn't want to proclaim such awful news to the people he loved! It was painful being a prophet of such doom and gloom. The sting of rejection was very real for him.

Listen again to the Text from this morning:

"My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war..." and no one will listen! These are words of a person who has the curse of watching his beloved people, an entire nation, wander down the path of their ultimate destruction and the agony of having no one listen to his call for change and repentance. The people did not want to listen to Jeremiah and instead followed the advice of false prophets who proclaimed everything is fine.

Being a prophet in such times was hard!

Later in the book, Jeremiah basically calls out God as an unreasonable boss by saying: "O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me.... I preached what you told me to preach and like a lamb I was led to the slaughter. My own family, and the people of my home town seek my life."

And then the full measure of his anguish spills over when he proclaims, "Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?"

Carrying the weight of a prophet in society is burdensome...offering words no one wants to hear, but you are compelled to give anyway, knowing you will suffer greatly for being the messenger is hard. Being a prophet of God is very difficult and frequently painful, this is true today as much as it was in the past. Let me lift up a more modern day example of a prophet named Jeremiah.

You may not remember this, but President Obama was a member of a UCC church in Chicago. (Before he was a Muslim I presume) Trinity Church in South Chicago, the largest UCC church in the country, with over 6000 members, was where he felt at home spiritually. He and Michelle were married there. Their beautiful daughters were baptized there. His book, *The Audacity of Hope*, was inspired by a sermon he heard in that Sanctuary. Did you know that?

Well, what you might remember is that his pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, got into quite a bit of trouble during the 2008 campaign because of a prophetic message he preached to his flock right after 9/11.

It was a message that stated clearly that we should not fall into the temptation of believing that our hands as a nation were clean when considering that horrible attack that felt unprovoked.

In that sermon Pastor Jeremiah quoted US Ambassador, Edward Peck as saying, "Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. And terrorism begets terrorism." Pastor Jeremiah then offered, "A white ambassador said that, y'all. Not a black militant. Not a reverend who preaches about racism. An ambassador whose eyes are wide open and who is trying to get us to wake up and move away from this dangerous precipice upon which we are now poised. The ambassador said the people that we have wounded don't have the military capability we have. But they do have individuals who are willing to die and take thousands with them. And we need to come to grips with that." Pastor Jeremiah then quoted Malcolm X by saying, "America's chickens are coming home to roost."

Needless to say there was quite an uproar about all this, segments of Jeremiah's sermon were played on the air over and over again with commentators proclaiming that such a message didn't sound Christian to them, and eventually President Obama had to distance himself from his pastor and friend... the political cost was too high to remain affiliated with that ministry.

Here is the thing, no one likes to look at his or her self and consider the ways in which we have participated in destruction and harm. It is far more palatable to look outward and at the sins of others with the hope of placing the full blame at their feet.

But, we need to hear the prophetic voice of Jeremiah who says it is important to look at ourselves first when we address the ills of this world. Think of it, when our forbearers were assembling the Hebrew Bible as we know it today they had the option of leaving out the words of the prophets. They could have expunged the painfully personal prophetic passages of Isaiah, Elijah, Ezekiel, Amos, Joel, and Jeremiah and all the others. I am sure they were tempted, but they didn't because they knew how important it is to be reflective, honestly prayerfully reflective, on our journey of faith. By leaving their prophetic words in our scriptures they chose not to silence the moral conscience of our faith.

So, what about our ministry in Eugene? As we consider our job here at First Congregational, how shall we hear the words of Jeremiah, and in what ways, are we called to be God's prophetic voice?

There is Good News here, because from the beginning of our ministry we have tried our best to address injustice. To be a prophetic voice in this community

I will lift up again the remarkable and quite rare witness this congregation made at the very start while drafting our original Bylaws making it clear that when we chose the Trustees, our three main lay leaders, at least one of them had to be a woman. The first leaders of this church wanted to address the blight of sexism... that sadly still exists in our world. It was a powerfully prophetic statement, which no doubt came with some cost.

Later, when we invited the Black Panthers to hold their Breakfast Meetings here in our church back in the seventies we did so with the full knowledge that our actions, though controversial, were faithfully reflective of our need to address racism in our nation and community. I am sure that this was not an easy decision for our Board to make and I know they were aware that some would leave this church because of it.

It was that powerful a prophetic statement.

When we held our Sacred Conversations on Race last January, we did so with the knowledge that merely talking about the obvious prejudices of others, that bigoted relative no one wants to invite to Thanksgiving gatherings, was not enough. So, during the course of our 6 week sessions, we took the courageous and necessary steps of turning the mirror back toward ourselves to consider how we may enjoy the manifestations of white privilege in our own lives and how we are called to more effectively address the very real problem of racism in our society today.

It wasn't easy.

It is never easy to consider the ways in which we fall short of God's hope for our lives. It is never easy to consider how we may not be doing the will of God despite our best intentions. It is never easy to recognize our own frailty and failures in a world that does not tolerate such imperfections. Where deflection of blame and not ownership is the norm.

However, to be effective, all ministries mustn't give into the temptation of silencing the prophetic voices that rise up in our midst, as hard as they are to hear, because we will lose our way without the moral compass they provide.

So, as a congregation we are called to consider our ways first (that log in one's own eye rather than the speck perceived in another's) and if found wanting, to dedicate our efforts to, "Turn a Turning," as the prophet Jeremiah instructed so long ago.

That's part of our job we must embrace. Which, honestly, is hard to do, and is not always pleasurable.

But, there is more Good News here my friends.

For the central message of Christianity is that we have a God who embraces us fully and completely—faults and all. We need not measure up to know God's love and experience God's blessings. We speak of Grace that is boundless and undeserved.

While it is true that this passage in Jeremiah was the main Lectionary reading for this morning, paired with this difficult and challenging passage was the Gospel reading of Luke 15, The Parable of the Lost Sheep. The keepers of the Lectionary did this for a reason...

Consider again the main message of that parable. The shepherd's compassion and love for his sheep is so great he would do everything possible to bring back the one who has gone farthest astray. It is a beautiful image, and one that we hold dear as we consider the ways of Jesus, who was constantly going to the side of the ones who were lost and alone, the ones that were pushed out of the fold by others who laid blame at their feet. The woman at the well who was shamed by her community, the hated Samaritans who were considered unfaithful to their Jewish heritage, the tax collectors who were despised by all... Jesus searched for them everywhere he went and brought them back into the fold of God's love through his grace-filled actions.

And so...given all of this to consider, may we, "be of good courage" knowing that God's love is assured.

May we, in our lives, both personal and corporate, have the faith to practice the courage of deep, insightful examination in all that we do, in the decisions we make hour to hour, day to day.

May we, "hold fast to that which is good" and may we find the strength and fortitude to walk through times of pain and remorse knowing that God will be with us, knowing that this place, this church can be a place of support in times of deep and sometimes painful discernment. And, in so doing, may we practice healing in the broken places of our lives and our world.

So, as people of faith, let us answer the call of our Prophet Jeremiah and prayerfully consider ways in which we may have gone astray. And let us always listen carefully for the voice of Jesus who longs to lead us back into God's loving embrace again.

People of God...

Be of good courage
Hold fast to that which is good
Render to no one evil for evil
Support the weak
Help the afflicted
And rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit.