

WOE! Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6 Proper 11/B 7/21/24
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“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the Lord.” (Jer. 23:1) **WOE** is the operating word in today’s reading from the prophet Jeremiah. *Woe* is translated from the Hebrew word *HOY* (הוי). This word expresses dissatisfaction, pain, grief, affliction, wretchedness, calamity, or trouble. *Woe* can be used as an exclamation of judgment on others or misfortune on oneself. It can be used as a warning or an expression of sadness. In the previous chapter, Jeremiah uses this word once again as he exposes the wicked rule of the King of Judah: “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages....” (Jer. 22: 11-12)

The Book of Jeremiah reflects the ever-worsening situation in the land of Israel. In response, Jeremiah the prophet, challenges the religious hypocrisy, economic dishonesty and the oppressive practices of the kings of Judah and those who follow them. Jeremiah was the voice of warning, the watchman who brings attention to hard truths that others would rather ignore. During his time, he warned multiple kings that unless they acted with justice and righteousness, unless they protected those who were oppressed, unless they treated the alien, the orphan, and the widow with compassion, then they (the kings) would be dethroned, their houses obliterated, and the kingdom destroyed.

The role of the King (*a.k.a. shepherd*) in ancient Israel was to watch over his flock, protect them, keep them together, and to make sure that those who were hurt were taken care of. However, these responsibilities of the king toward his subjects seemed to have gotten lost in the shuffle of military endeavors, political maneuvering, self-aggrandizement, and the hoarding of luxuries at the expense of the poor.

Needless to say, there are a lot of similarities between the unrighteous rule in Jeremiah’s time and the situation in our country today. Since the 1990’s, American society and American politics have been a classic example of such manipulation of political power. Members of the court, together with the political rulers of our country, “have cut the taxes of the rich and sought to balance the national budget on the backs of children, dependent mothers, and immigrants...the contemporary equivalents of the widow, the poor, the orphan and the stranger.” And so we like Jeremiah need to expose those woes with courage and conviction.

- Woe to you judges of the court, who have given immunity to the President of the United States, opening the door to injustice and tyranny as in time of the kings of ancient Israel.
- Woe to you congressional leaders who refuse to pass legislation; you who are more interested in self-promotion than the health of the nation.
- Woe to you elected officials who have lost your moral compass, giving your allegiance to partisan politics rather than to what is just and right.
- Woe to you Republicans and woe to you Democrats who refuse to compromise and work across the aisle; you are the ones responsible for causing much of the chaos in our nation today.
- Woe to you voters, who refuse to educate yourselves, relying on media soundbites rather than using critical thinking skills and engaging in further study.
- Woe to you chauvinists who are trying to deny women full autonomy over their bodies.
- Woe to you racists who are gerrymandering the voting precincts and making access to the voting polls more difficult for people of color.
- Woe to you Health Care Industry, you who have privatized the health care system, making billions of dollars in profit for yourselves while denying the sick adequate medical treatment.
- Woe to you authors of Project 2025, who under the guise of “family values” aim to sack thousands of civil servants and replace them with political appointments, expand the power of the president, dismantle the Department of Education, and provide sweeping tax cuts for big business.
- Woe to you big business who advocate for the loosening of environmental standards, thereby promoting the heating of this planet.
- Woe to you onlookers who are reluctant to tell the bitter truth because you are afraid of pushback.
- Woe to you Christian nationalists who use the name of Christ as a banner yet care little for the plight of those on the margins of society.
- Woe to you who insist on posting the 10 commandments on the walls of public schools while teaching your children to follow a man who has broken most of them.

As you can see, there are a lot of woes going on in our country today, several having to do with our broken government and frightened voters. Many of us are on the verge of despair, bracing ourselves for the worst. So what wisdom can we rely on to move forward in a faithful manner without falling into despair? Let's take a closer look at today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah.

#1 Jeremiah used his prophetic voice. It has been said that the difference between a priest and a prophet is that a prophet rarely receives a pension plan. Such was the case with Jeremiah who was ultimately put into a pit to die from exposure, hunger, and thirst. He was finally rescued, but his life was always in danger. It was risky to be a prophet back then just as it is today. Those who speak the truth in the midst of the storm cannot expect to be treated kindly, cannot expect to be loved, cannot expect to live without being tossed by the winds.

Prophecy, speaking the truth in love, is a sign of spiritual maturity. Prophecy is nothing more than Christianity as its best. It is "making straight the way of the Lord." The prophet is one who speaks the truth to a culture of lies. A prophet is one who strives for justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being. A prophet says *yes* to alleviating suffering and *yes* to embracing those who are different. Prophets align their words, not based on partisan politics but on the will of God, even if those words are ignored. Today's faithful prophets are loud, clear, and non-violent as they expose the lies and deceitful practices around them.

Prophecy is a way of living with our eyes wide open and our hearts full of fervor for all of life. It is not an easy spiritual path and can at times be tiring, wearying, & soul-saddening. Speaking the truth is risky. You might be called agitators, extremists, and strange. You will not be applauded and you might be disowned. You will no longer be considered "nice." But if not YOU, then WHO? If not NOW, then WHEN?

I admire the people of St. Benedict's, who have taken the prophetic path seriously. You have welcomed the marginalized and rolled up your sleeves to make a difference in this part of God's kingdom. Thank you! "So how do we get out of this swamp that we are now in? By confronting it! How do we confront it? Truthfully! What will it take? Courage, commitment, and vision! And what else is needed to fix this muddled world? YOU!" (Sr. Joan Chittister) May God give each one of us the strength to work for justice and peace on earth!

#2 Jeremiah predicted the downfall of Jerusalem. It ultimately landed him in the pit, left to die. His predictions however, came true, and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Those who survived were exiled to Babylon. Any society that allows the manipulation of political power to enhance the wealth of the powerful at the expense of the poor and the weak, stands under the same indictment of future destruction as prophesied by Jeremiah. Do you remember the fall of the Roman Empire and the fall of the British Empire along with the many empires throughout the centuries? Could the same fate befall our country? I hope not. However, "kingdoms" that are based on falsehood, unrighteousness, and oppression, will ultimately fail to succeed.

Take for instance the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After WWII, East Berlin was governed by the Soviets, which caused many of its citizens to escape to the West. Drained of its best and brightest people, the East Germans built a 96-mile-long wall in 1961 to stop the flow of migration to the West. The communist government claimed that the Wall was being built to keep the fascists out of their country, which of course was a big lie. Some 28 years later, the Berlin Wall was torn down by the people. I, along with the rest of the world, were taken by surprise! I had forgotten that with God, all things are possible. It seemed surreal that such a monstrous structure could crumble overnight. But in retrospect, conditions for East Germany's survival had already vanished due to oppression, deceit, a lack of support by its citizens, as well as economic and political challenges. The seeds of demise had been planted years before and then the Wall came a tumbling down.

#3 So don't you be discouraged! Jeremiah ends today's oracle with a word of hope: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. He shall be called, "The Lord is our righteousness." Many Christians interpret "The Lord is our righteousness" as Jesus the Christ, who came to show us the way, the truth, and the life through the path of compassion. This is the anointed one, the one who filled with the power of the Holy Spirit became a healer, and a prophet who identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. This Spirit of God gave him the courage and the wisdom to challenge the destructive powers of the world that included oppression by the Roman Empire, misogyny by the patriarchy, the corruption and hypocrisy of religious officials, the degradation of the poor by the rich, the violence against the weak by the powerful, and a series of laws that dictated legalism over compassion. It is this spirit of God working through each one of us that will ultimately bring peace and unity on earth.

We are gathered here today to be reminded that with God, all things are possible. Each week, we come together in community to be strengthened in love, knowing that love is the most powerful and only force that can transform this “fallen” world. “We live in a world of outrageous pain. And the only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love.”^(Marc Gafni) The message of the gospel, and a life steeped in faith, gives us the clarity and courage needed to recognize, expose, and resist those institutions and powers that are life depleting. “The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch and do nothing.”^(Einstein) The central question of Christianity is not, “is this progressive or conservative?” The central question of Christianity is this: “Are our institutions and our lives Christlike or not?”

Despite all his trials, Jeremiah never lost sight of hope. Hope is the conviction that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present. Hope is a beacon of light that illuminates our actions and shows us the way of Jesus. And in that hope, we continue to pray for grace and insight: O God our Refuge and Strength: “In times of uncertainty and unease, show us the ferocity of peace. In the eye of the storm, show us the restlessness of hope. In the face of despair, show us the audacity of truth. In the swirl of lies, show us the persistence of courage in the maelstrom of fear. All for your Love’s sake. Amen.”^(Prayer by Bishop Leon Johnson)